

DIVIDED WE STAND

Bewailing Alien-nation in Esiaba Irobi's
Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin

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Abstract

Genuine euphoria, which accompanied the birth of multi-ethnic Nigeria nation-state in 1960, has been regrettably deflated and more than offset by the onrush of political tension that has ravaged its polity in recent times. Hence, the deforming pressure of inequity in contemporary Nigeria logically stands out as a corollary of political tyranny. From the standpoint of inequity, political marginality ostensibly poses a contentious decoding as it often raises poignant questions in the philosophy of meanings embedded in Esiaba Irobi's *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. In connection to this, the historical referencing of the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria in the poetry collection provides a test-case for the thematic quest for Biafra republic's self-determination. Agonized by a perceived marginality, retreat to nationalism offers Irobi a convenient platform to affirm the predatory and ruthless suppression of the Igbo ethnic group during and after the Nigerian civil war (between 1967 and 1970). This paper asserts that Irobi takes power imbalance for his subject matter in order to build on these contrariety and contradictions. This build-up facilitates the exploration of tension between public duty and personal affections. Remarkably, the paper concludes that Irobi's poetic thrust of marginality in the collection espouses a fury which verges on resentment at the lopsided Nigeria nation-state.

Keywords

bewailing alien-nation; Biafra; divided we stand; Esiaba Irobi; marginality; Nigeria

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

It is unfortunate that Esiaba Irobi, one of the most colorful contemporary African poets, is paradoxically neglected by critics.¹ His published plays include *Hangmen Also Die* (1989), *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* (1989), *The Colour of Rusting Gold* (1989), *Nwokedi* (1991), *The Other Side of the Mask* (1999), *The Fronded Circle* (1999), *Cemetery Road* (2009), and *Sycorax* (2013). Correspondingly, his poetry collections include *Cotyledons* (1988), *Inflorescence* (1989) and *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin & Other Poems* (2005). With the publication of eight plays and three poetry collections, Irobi deserves recognition as an established literary artist in the covetous African literary circle. Curiously, *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* is a poetry collection with a title derived from Irobi's satirization of the oblique racist tendencies which verge on the racial sensibilities of Jews and Africans in the poetry of Philip Larkin. It is paradoxical, however, that Irobi somewhat ostensibly shares the whimsical gab of Larkin, the British writer, especially if one considers the oscillation between range of moods discernible in the poetry of the two writers.

It is significant to recall that Irobi's dramaturgy² exudes a theatrical form that somewhat duplicates Wole Soyinka's trajectory. In the same vein, his poetry betrays an adoption of political exuberance that is slightly different from the former. Like Soyinka, Irobi's obsession with oral tradition and mythopoesis is often pursued with eccentric rigour.³ However, where Soyinka adopts *Ogun* (God of war and creativity) as his personal god, Irobi settles for *Amadioha* (God of thunder and destruction). In spite of the similarities in the artistic productions of Soyinka and Irobi, there are also discernible structural areas of difference in the dramaturgy of the two writers. Yet, it bears remarking that the stylistic of Irobi's plays derives from the eclectic influences of his family background, his Ngwa-Igbo cultural tradition, Wole Soyinka, and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's dramaturgy (Ajumeze 93-102). Apparently, Irobi's dedication to the Umuakwu Progressive Union in *Nwokedi*'s introduction underlines a fervent acknowledgement of an enduring influence appropriated from his Ngwa-Igbo's cultural heritage. This appreciation is enthusiastically expressed thus: "to all the members of the Umuakwu Progressive Union / who not only initiated me into the metaphysics / and ecstasies of the *EKPE* festival, / but have also stubbornly sustained a dying Igbo tradition" (*Nwokedi* iii). Essentially, Irobi's dramaturgy owes much to a brilliant experimentation with varied dramatic appurtenances which incorporate the Ngwa-Igbo's indigenous dramatic forms, the Yoruba theatrical proclivity, African-wide aesthetics, and the Western dramatic tropes. This view is further underscored in Isidore Diala's edited book, *Syncretic Arenas*, where he argues that "Irobi's art exemplifies *his* theatre, being an audacious amalgam of the indigenous heritage of his Igbo culture and dramatic paradigms of other cultures he knew, African and Western. His response

to the postcolonial situation, moreover, derived from a distinguished Nigerian tradition" (xviii). Nevertheless, Irobi's poetic confrontational stance owes much to Soyinka's frontal political activism. Although Isidore Diala has produced the most complete and up-to-date bibliography of his plays, there has not been a corresponding compilation on Irobi's poetry. It is also interesting to note that in spite of his prodigious literary works, Irobi has not received considerable attention from critics. The plausible reason for this has been articulated by Isidore Diala in his book, *Esiaba Irobi's Drama and the Postcolony*: "Irobi has not always received the attention that he deserves from compatriot critics because he is considered too combative and his work too violent and inclined to the melodramatic" (278).

A hangover from bric-a-brac of tempestuous disposition aside, Irobi's literary visibility has long been somewhat obscured by the local publication outlets that published most of his plays and poetry collections. For instance, bulk of his works were published by ABIC Books, a rundown outlet in the eastern Nigerian town of Aba. Correspondingly, thematic trajectories of Irobi's plays, similar to his poetry, are foregrounded in a tapestry of ribald jokes and slanderous anecdotes that are garnished with frightening historical asides, a striking valor he shares with Zimbabwe's Dambudzo Marechera.⁴ For instance, Irobi's poem, "Fourth and Final Draft" indubitably attests to this:

...So, concubine, we must unite now, black and white and fuck! Or fight!

But, love, there is too much bloodshed already. Too many bodies under the floor boards. So, let us go, you and I, while the evening is spread out like

Edwina upon a waterbed, with a pair of nothing underneath, and peep through the keyhole of her Drowning Street for a reconciliatory ménage à trios...

(*Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 8)

I argue in this paper that the political inequity in the postcolonial Nigeria nation-state imbedded in *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* has often poised a witty encapsulation of poetics of not just discontent but also anger. Such anger represents an intensification of despair, which is largely a counterfoil of calls for the Nigerian nation-state's dismembering.⁵ In addition, *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* has been chosen in this paper because it is perhaps Irobi's only poetry collection where the Biafran nationalism framework is firmly established. Again, Biafra's revivalism⁶ in the collection serves as a counterweight to a scandalous marginality suffered by the Igbo in the inequitable Nigerian nation-state.⁷ Hence, *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* strives to establish that the worsening plight of the Igbo nation in postcolonial Nigeria is restricted to ideological tension where statement of conviction is set against reprehensible horror of marginality.

When Esiaba Irobi began to delineate political inequity of postcolonial Nigeria in his poetry, he also began to illustrate what he felt has orchestrated it. Moreover, the armistice that shattered the realization of a sovereign Biafra nation-state has imbedded itself deeply in the thematic of power imbalance in the poetic of *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. In declaiming a protest against political tyranny in the tumultuous Nigerian nation-state, Esiaba Irobi not only verges on marginality of his Igbo ethnic group, but deftly delineates structural deficits (in the formation of Nigeria). This deficit accrued from the yoking together of adversarial ethnic groups who are illogically denied the sacrosanct right to be different and to secede.⁸ Without adequate consideration of the inherent differences among these federating units, the British colonial authority hastily created a nation. Complexity and inherent dilemma in the formation of colonial Nigerian nation-state aptly recalls Samir Amin's delineation of the concept of a nation. Amin further describes a nation thus: "the concept of 'nation,' as with all concepts that define any human community, is based on a fundamental contradiction, which opposes universality—of the human species, of its destiny, of its societal forms—to the particularity of the communities that make up humanity" (8).

However, if Nigeria's formation is steeped in social and historical contradictions, its sovereignty is legitimized in one way or another by default through suppression. It suffices to say that the Nigerian nation-state is incontrovertibly and constantly held together by the army which Irobi describes as "the Spotted Scavengers of the Sahel Savannah" (*Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 86). Savannah denotatively refers to the northern Nigeria's landscape of flat grassland. Ostensibly, "Sahel Savannah" is pejoratively used by Irobi to foreground the scathing lampooning of soldiers of Hausa/Fulani extraction in the Nigerian army.⁹ Sadly enough, a crack in Nigeria's nationhood has proven that what is been continually exhibited to the entire world as "model of unity in diversity" has always been an "empty and false slogan." The "unity in diversity" model is a dubious posturing that underlies a divisive, incoherent Nigerian nationhood. Obviously, the theme of imminent disintegration that underpins Nigeria's fragile nationhood is symptomatic of the tension that has consistently engulfed it from independence. As such, the tension often manifests in clash between a retention of its inequitable status quo against the current clamouring for a wholesale political restructuring. This is a concern which has imbedded itself deeply in the thematic of political marginality of the Igbo nation in the poetic of Irobi's *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. It suffices to say that Irobi's espousal of a fury verges on resentment at the perceived underhand armistice which obscured the realization of a Biafra nation-state in 1970. Also, in quiet introspection, he is sensitive to the enduring political bickering among the majority Nigerian ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo.¹⁰ Such bickering has continually re-awakened the call for Nigeria's disintegration along ethnic lines. This enduring call has in effect discredited the logic behind the

prevention of the Igbo from actualizing its aborted Biafra republic in 1967. It would seem that, by interpreting the psychology of the turbulent Nigerian politics from a disadvantaged position, Irobi increasingly endorses a reverberation of rancorous calls for Nigeria's fragmentation as to end this long-endured trudge to nowhere.

Biafran nationalism aside, Irobi's disillusionment with the nebulous Nigerian nation-state flows from its failure to staunch the political alienation of other federating units by its dominant Hausa/Fulani unit. This is a domination which has triggered a mind-boggling political burden that has continued to threaten Nigeria's sovereignty in the past decades. This dismay is further illustrated in Irobi's spontaneous outburst of growing disillusionment which "even the blind could read like a braille, the veins and patterns of ruin on the skin and forehead of our country" (*Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 92). This concern recognizably marks a vexation established in the acrimonious poetics of the collection.

THIRD GENERATION NIGERIAN POETS' DISILLUSIONMENT WITH THE POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA

The combative stylistic of *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* concedes the legitimacy of Irobi's dedication to political struggle to right the wrong in the decades of Igbo's political marginality. His pursuit of Biafra nationalism reflects his dissatisfaction with the power imbalance that has often underlined a growing disillusionment in the works of the third generation Nigerian poets like Remi Raji, Ogaga Ifowodo, and Olu Oguibe. Within the context of social deprivation, the third generation Nigerian poets have appropriated language of dissent to articulate their frustration with the apparent political failure of Nigeria. Through the deployment of virulent metaphors, ribald anecdotes, and lewd poetics and images that somewhat tilt toward obscenities, these poets have turned their creative enterprises to poetic platforms for the lamentation of personal frustrations and disillusionment. Given the reality of pervading decadence, rancorous thematic and imagery embedded in their poetry are tendentiously invested to reiterate plight of the downtrodden Nigerians. The inherent subversive poetics contained in the third generation poetry are tellingly designed to challenge the successive Nigerian rulers who have appropriated national discourses to perpetrate dictatorship, bad governance, and mismanagement of the nation-state's economy. When all is fairly considered, the magnitude of frustration suffered by these poets has been illustrated in the words of Sule E. Egya:

While the earlier poets, such as Osundare, Ofeimun, and Ojaide, step out boldly with radical poetics and confrontational praxis, wrenching poetry from the sublime rhetoric of modernist craft to the blunt expression of a communal vision, howling at oppressors in stylized orature, the new poets already immersed in the intensity of oppression that defied the venom of the earlier poets, invest their metaphors with anguished threnody. (53)

Irobi and other third generation Nigerian poets have consistently lamented the betrayal of the people's genuine aspirations for a better life, such that they continue to suffer poverty, unemployment, and the dilapidated state of the nation's economy. With its lack of alternatives, disillusionment with the Nigeria's nationhood has often thrown up many instances where the most reticent poet of the third generation found himself compelled to write subversive poetry, in response to a debilitating social dehumanization. The disillusionment of these poets is exemplified in Irobi's frustration in "The Valley":

A landscape where tender cotyledons
Will not sing with trembling blades:
We are here because we are here
Because we are here
BECAUSE THIS IS WASTELAND
AND, WE ARE WAITING FOR GODOT.

(*Cotyledons* 43)

Within the context of Irobi's deployment of lamentation in the poem, it is easier to decipher ostensibly that much of the third generation Nigerian poets' disillusionment stems from the effects of the prevailing compromised governance. Correspondingly, in a poem which foreshadows his imminent departure for exile, Irobi further deploys a lamentation on the tragedy of lost nationhood:

THE TALLER TREES
gigantic in their height.
S
T
A
N
D
in the best places in the sun.
UNDER
their canopies and shadows,
THE CREEPERS,
wriggling, crawling, roiling,

WEARY WITH TOIL,
The creepers, men like me,
THE EXILE;
I leave to live, I exit to exist.
(“The Wall” in *Cotyledons* 23)

Again, the poem suggests that domination of the political space by the older generation, political elite continues without interruption, to the detriment of the hapless youthful generation who are consigned to irrelevance. Sadly, in the fallout of inequitable distribution of power among the Nigerian federating units, a crop of incompetent leaders has emerged to perpetrate maladministration which has gathered heaps of infractions that has bred unemployment, corruption, and lack of patriotism among a cross-section of the country’s youth population. Perceived incompetence has also ignited the dearth of social infrastructure which has continually developed into the regular rationing of electricity and a poor network of roads across the country as exemplified in “The Delta”: “Like a nation rationalizing its universities / Osy, we are the reeds rooted / To these discs of drifting mud / Bobbing like crabs in the surging tide” (*Inflorescence* 35). Gloria Emezue has essentially delineated the third generation poets’ frustration when she contends that “their anger over the vicious cycle of brutality that diminishes the [nation] is unmistakable” (quoted in Egya 50). The new writers in Africa and, by extension, the third generation Nigerian writers do not “write back” to the West in the classic Postcolonial Studies’ sense, in which most first and second generation writers do or did (Ede 113). One can argue for the substantiation of Ede’s claim that the third generation Nigerian poets are not primarily interested in global issues like their first and second generation counterparts. Rather, they are preoccupied with a deployment of acerbic poetics to correct the anomalous internal social malaise besetting the Nigerian landscape. To these poets, operating at the local level of postcolonial Nigeria affords them a firsthand insight at examining and commenting on the negative effects of bad governance where the youth, the women, and the masses serve as objects of collateral damage. This notion is underscored when Irobi hedges a palpable rancour against the depredation of the Nigerian academics who were hounded into exile by successive military regimes:

When a quiver, no, a visitation of marxist mosquitoes
with old testament beards and jean trousers, torn
and stitched in a thousand places to advertise their solidarity
with the disenfranchised and the poor,...
They fled. All of them. Into exile: England, Ireland,
Scotland, United States of America, Canada, Australia, where
they shaved off their Fidel-Castro beards, bought designer

Jeans, designer sunglasses, designer condoms and started
a new revolution... ("Spring" in *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 22).

Arguably, the third generation Nigerian poets do not essentially espouse any particular ideological concern, and their thematic preoccupations are often directed at the depth of the power elite's mismanagement of the economy and political opportunities. Apparently, it could be said with an enduring conviction that a persistent social tension between the privileged elite class and the struggling Nigerian masses must have urged a firmer commitment of Irobi to the utilization of political thematic in his poetry collections: *Inflorescence*, *Cotyledons*, and *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. More importantly, Irobi's poetry remains largely an arena for the contestation of political struggle between the southern and northern Nigeria's political rivalry (Akingbe 16).

THE NIGERIAN NATION-STATE AND THE PROBLEMATIC OF POWER IMBALANCE

Readers may without difficulty relate with Irobi's dissatisfaction with Nigeria's political turbulence. It is a dissatisfaction located in his combative delineation of Nigeria's inherent problematic of power imbalance that has often reflected long drawn hostilities between the northern and southern federating units. This long drawn out supremacy contest has also been referenced in the words of former Biafran secessionist leader, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu.¹¹ In *Because I am Involved*, Ojukwu contends that "the ability of the north to assume the impossibility of an east-west understanding on any issue of national importance had distorted, and continued to distort, the delicate balance of the Nigerian federation" (Ojukwu x). A follow-up to this schism abundantly resides in an enduring politico-religious festering that had originally given birth to perennial religious crises¹² in northern Nigeria. It is politically motivated crises often targeted at the southern Nigerians sojourning in the northern part of the country (Maier 176). As this upheaval underlies a pervasive cynicism that political tyranny creates, its destructive effect gathers condemnatory accretions in the poetry collection. Such condemnation really rankled Irobi and his inability to disentangle his literary production from Nigeria's political palaver becomes a compelling necessity. It suffices to say that Irobi's ostensible obsession with the deconstruction of power imbalance is daunting. Such deconstruction certainly connotes the difficulty younger generation Nigerian poets often confront while diagnosing the malaise of the Nigerian nation-state. Nevertheless, Irobi in the collection succeeded in delineating the confusion caused by the many new and old, still unresolved historical falsehoods that accrued from the fraudulent formation of postcolonial Nigeria.

It bears remarking that the astonishing similarity between Irobi's poetic candour and his burgeoning dramaturgy testifies to the melange of history and socio-political consciousness in which his literary productions are rooted. Most tellingly, Irobi's *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* was written for solace as he was battling a devastating colon cancer while on self-exile in the United Kingdom, an ailment that would eventually kill him. It is a collection that embodies his most articulated political insights which express his anxiety about the internal colonialism and marginality of his beloved Igbo ethnic group in southeastern Nigeria:

In actual fact

I am an exiled poet from a fictitious country called Nigeria,
 From where I was banished, seven years ago, by the Beasts of Sandhurst
 (*Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 13)

Here, the poem declaims Irobi's frustration with Nigeria which has made him opt for a self-imposed exile in the United Kingdom. By lending his voice to denounce inequality among the federating units of the Nigerian nation-state, Irobi's poetic perspicaciously attracts some melodramatic fuss that attests to his iconoclastic temperament. Perhaps, exile must have afforded Irobi the needed space to articulate his thoughts on Nigeria's inequity. Edward Said has significantly explicated the dilemma of exile in *Culture and Imperialism* when he writes, "[I]t is no exaggeration that liberation as an intellectual mission has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentred, and exilic energies..." (332-333). As such, exile provides Irobi a convenient platform to probe into the Nigerian nation-state's political deficit. Inevitably, Irobi is eclectic as his eccentric poetic jab in the collection broadens and deepens our understanding of the political complexity trailing Nigeria's controversial nationhood.

Curiously in this poetry collection, Irobi moves away tangentially from his usual trajectory of protest to reference his mistress Georgina Alaukwu to articulate his exilic experience. Such referencing afforded him an interlude to reel off a torrent of political anxieties he shared with this lifelong mistress. Olu Oguibe, Irobi's co-traveller in the exilic trajectory, has provided a useful insight into a decoding of hidden facts that bother Irobi's exilic experiences as encapsulated in *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. Oguibe illustrates these experiences thus, "Irobi's last collection of poems, *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin & Other Poems*, provides very frank insight into his journey into exile, his frustrations, his losses, but also his numerous loves and founts of strength; the book constitutes a veritable testimony to his perseverance" (19). Irobi's losses in exile range from racial discrimination and non-recognition of his creative genius by the Western audiences to persistent anxieties over failure to secure tenured appointments (which he suffered most often) and manuscript rejections from publishers. In the aftermath of betrayed

into the swamp where they belong...

Do not despair, my love, the land, right now,
bristles with scorpions, reptiles, alligators,
soldier ants. So I cannot anchor at the harbor

("Homecoming" in *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 81)

Operating within a trajectory of self-awareness, therefore, the poem suggests a related point: that Irobi's disillusionment with Nigeria's political structure is grounded in the divisiveness orchestrated by its northern-Nigerian sectional army. Nigeria's inequitable dilemma brings with it an understanding which becomes bound up with the image of harassment suffered by writers in postcolonial Africa. What remains incontrovertible is that Irobi's treatise on the troubled Nigerian nationhood in the collection has made very explicit the ubiquitous link between politics and poetry. Interaction between these two elements has been illustrated in the words of Reed Way Dasenbrock's essay, "Poetry and Politics": "the connection between poetry and politics is not limited just to situations in which poets become politically involved in an explicit way.... All poetry is political in one way or another, since even the choice to eschew explicit political involvement or reference constitutes a form of political action" (51).

This implies that there is an obvious interaction of politics and poetry in *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. It is an interaction which unobtrusively illustrates how Irobi intersects history and politics in the postcolonial Nigerian nation-state. It also marks up a reiteration of his further delineation of power relation among Nigeria's mutually distrusting units. This delineation is substantively captured in the lachrymal rhythms of *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. However, tendency to play down the importance of politics to a reading of Irobi's poetry as his plays could diminish the overall incredible versatility imbued in him as a polemical writer. As such, a critical reading of the poetry collection reveals that, it can be hard to tell whether politics or aesthetics takes priority in Irobi's artistic preoccupation. This puzzle becomes necessary and profoundly so when a reader takes a mental note of how Irobi intertwines personal reminiscences with a politico-historical delineation of Nigeria's national dilemma.

A FURY THAT VERGES ON NIGERIA'S HISTORICAL SENSITIVITY

Nigeria's embarrassing political imbalance could be read through the critical lens that discerns a perceptible fury in *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. In the collection, Irobi untangles a recollection that recreates his imaginative return to the tenuous landscape which portends Nigeria as a political backwater that exerts

negative influence in African postcolonial politics. Implicitly, the poetry collection deconstructs the drawbacks in Nigeria's political inequality. It is a deconstruction that shows in its wake uneven political opportunities among its federating units. This is symptomatic of unfair domination of the Nigerian political sphere by the Hausa/Fulani dominated-army from the north. Martin Meredith has further commented on Nigeria's political dilemma when he intones that "the birth of Nigeria as an independent state proved especially difficult. The most populous country in Africa, it was beset by intense and complex rivalries between its three regions" (75). Invariably, with historical hindsight, Irobi has conducted a clinical riff on the troubling Nigeria's historical events in his poetry collection. Such portrayal often stokes up a macabre and apocalyptic imagery which is horrendous.

Nevertheless, Irobi is a poet overburdened both by history and morbid political sensitivity which usually manifest in his riled up outbursts. These outbursts often reverberate as he strives to emphasize the depth of perceived disunity and misrule associated with power imbalance in postcolonial Nigeria. An attempt to call attention to the root of this imbalance has warranted Irobi's critical analysis of the nation-state in disarray as the thematic of the collection. It is an analysis which forcefully reiterates a notion of subverted Nigeria's nationhood. This is further illustrated through acquired imaginative transfusion that enables Irobi to juxtapose political shenanigans with responsive governance. This is in fulfilment of Fanon's suggestion that when a native writer recalls his childhood memories "old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies" (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* 222). It is a recollection of political tensions in postcolonial Nigeria, a recollection that often showcases the outcome of significant conflicts between southern elites resisting political domination of the north and northern political gladiators wishing to curtail the marginal political influence wielded by the south whenever it becomes obvious. This tension is obliquely established in "Horizons! Horizons!": "the eagles and egrets were leaving in droves / winging west because the vultures had taken their places / ...No milk for the farmer, his wife or peasant children? / While the handsome hyenas of the Sahel Savannas prowled and fattened from the spoils of their war" (*Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 93).

Accrued consequence of the Nigerian nation-state's inequitable political deficit bears a remark in Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's book, when they opined that "political institutions determine who has power in society and to what ends that power can be used. If the distribution of power is narrow and unconstrained, then the political power institutions are absolutist" (80). This alludes to the necessity for the writer to be grounded in political realities of his milieu. Consequently, Irobi has reconfirmed in *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* that the absolute power wielded by the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group of northern Nigeria has ostensibly fuelled

Nigeria's inequitable power equation. This inequity has significantly robbed the nation-state of its shine. Invariably, if Irobi's artistic leaning is often referenced by his iconoclastic artistry, the stylistic of his plays and his poems is pedagogically rooted in a dialectical canvass where subjective and objective thematic often clash. It is stylistic that has gathered political accretions needed to address the besetting socio-political tensions that have consistently ravaged the Nigeria nation-state. This becomes tellingly significant, if one considers quite dispassionately, the magnitude of depravity suffered by the younger generation Nigerians. Essentially, a deconstruction of the clash between subjective and objective thematic becomes frightening if one considers deprivation in terms of unemployment, run-down educational system, non-functional healthcare and the compromised judiciary. In view of these startling realizations, it becomes quite easy to understand why Irobi has invested damning cascades of vexation in his poetry. This is done in tandem with an intensification of historical hindsight needed to decipher the extent of distrust that has engulfed the postcolonial polity, an aftermath of power imbalance. A further delineation of this inequity by Irobi comes with a concern which cries out to us and demands that we bear witness for the delineation.

Placing northern Nigeria's power domination narrative in counterpoint to the resistance of the Igbo, one stumbles upon an avalanche of combative expressions encased in the collection. These are poetic vibes that decisively underlie pulses of Irobi's unbridled discontent, rage, and belligerence as they constantly nuance the rhythm of *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*. An apocalyptic image of a disintegrating Nigeria is recalled from the reading of the collection as it resonates concatenation of resentment at the country that has been politically rudderless since independence. Moreover, Irobi's horror is very clearly a reflection of voices of "Nigerians from all walks of life [who] are openly questioning whether their country should remain as one entity or discard the colonial borders and break apart into several separate states" (Maier xx). In view of this, Irobi has taken it upon himself to engage his poetry in the criticism of what Karl Maier's seminal book, *This House Has Fallen*, describes as "politicized tribalism" (Maier xxi). Maier employs this concept to accentuate his criticism of a perceived ethnic chauvinism against a backdrop of an increasing political inequality in Nigeria's nationhood.

IROBI AND THE BURDEN OF NIGERIA'S FAILURE

It may be impossible to disagree with Benedict Anderson's seminal definition of a nation as "imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (15). Irobi's poetic portrayal in the collection fittingly illustrates this discernible ambiguity in the contraption of contemporary Nigeria's nationhood.

Defects in Nigeria's political architecture can arguably be traced to the obtrusiveness of the British colonial government. This ostensible intervention culminated into an arbitrary yoking together of differing ethnic groups with incompatible socio-religious orientations. It suffices to say that the British colonial authority had a feeling that there was something wrong in forcing a cohesive nation out of the amalgamation of the Islamic northern Nigeria and Christian southern Nigeria. But it rationalized its error of amalgamation by convincing itself that it was creating the most populous nation in Africa. Surprisingly, at the attainment of independence in 1960, Nigeria appeared to have been on the brink of becoming Africa's pride, but fell to the bickering of political manipulations afterwards. The ominous clash between expectation and reality played out when, shortly after attaining independence in 1960, Nigeria experienced its first military coup in 1966. This debacle eventually developed into a full-blown civil war that lasted from 1967 to 1970. The aftermath of the civil war left southeastern Nigeria and the Igbo beleaguered. The failure of Biafra to mutate into a nation-state orchestrated a backlash against the Igbo ethnic group. It subsequently suffered internal captivity for decades under successive northern Nigeria-dominated military who treated it with sustained subjugation. Biafra's failure translates into Igbo's political exclusion whose cataloguing in the collection leaves Irobi overwhelmed, entranced, and inconsolably horrified. But it is a horror in quest for an outlet that exploded in a paroxysm of rage, which further dissolves into caricatured absurdities painfully illustrated in the collection. This rage further unfurls in "Orpheus":

Your capacity to laugh at yourself and weep over
the remains and the relics of what we all believed
would have metamorphosed into a great, humane culture.
Somehow, it never did. Lacked, perhaps, the moral
and ethical will. Its decay, though, remains our common loss.
Do not ask for whom the bell tolls, O my soul, do not ask.
Look at your own fucked-up country in the heart of Africa
(Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin 9)

Building on the thematic of depredation, inference to Nigeria's failed aspiration to greatness in the poem is as grotesque as it is saddening. Its marked impact on Irobi needs to be placed within the context of loss of opportunity: "the remains and the relics of what we all believed / would have metamorphosed into a great, humane culture / . . . its decay, though, remains our common loss" (12). This inference articulates Irobi's recognition of Nigeria's stagnation and its comparative failure in the comity of Third World nations. This indexing of loss and rot that has overwhelmed postcolonial Nigeria should not be treated as an aggressive propaganda against the Nigerian nation-state. Rather it should be seen as Irobi's egregious, but succinct depiction of Nigeria's inability to put its act together in

order to earn its respect as the leading black nation in the world. It reiterates a striking cynicism that betrays Nigeria's failure as a long-running embarrassment. Strangely enough, it does not require a great deal of circumlocution to realize that an illustration of Nigeria's stagnation has been of great concern to Irobi's poetic thrust pointedly deployed in his earlier collections: *Cotyledons* and *Inflorescence* (Akingbe 15). As expected, Irobi's seeming adoption of circumlocutory gambit for the indexing of the impetus behind the rundown of the Nigerian nation-state by its cavalier political elites in "Orpheus" yields a remarkable dividend of insights trailed on robust paradoxes that accompanied such dexterity.

It suffices to state that Irobi's scathing reprimand on political elite's colossal depredation of the Nigerian nation-state is further extended in scope in "Hammurabi" to accommodate a condemnation of the pillaging of Africa by its colonial overlords. Just as morality endorses what is right as acceptable and what is wrong as condemnable, he sees colonialism as a watershed in Africa's history of exploitation. However, rather than launching a direct condemnation against Europe for its ruinous economic expedition in Africa, Irobi fired a salvo of poetic tirade to this effect. It is a criticism deployed obliquely in order not to get distracted from addressing Nigeria's political misadventure. Tortured by an awareness of the equivocal nature of his position as a self-styled "exile" in the United Kingdom, Irobi delicately weighs his lampooning of colonial powers' devaluation of Africa in a measured tone. Nonetheless, it is implied in the poem that Africa's economic failure is rubbed in by her ridiculous dependence on aids and hand-outs from economically advantaged nations. Cynicism is embedded in Irobi's review of Africa's historical past which indicts colonial Europe for its economic rape and political dehumanization which lasted for centuries. This is graphically portrayed in "Hammurabi":

What pictures of Africa do you see? A changing continent,
struggling to survive five centuries of rape and economic buggery?
Or a grisly disintegrating continent, a disgusting Africa
Where the blood never dries on the beak of the vulture and strands
of human flesh dangle forever from the fangs of other carnivores
(*Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 31).

Irobi's condemnation of Africa's "five centuries of rape and economic buggery" in the poem, recalls the historical narrative of slavery and colonialism perpetrated on Africans by the European hegemonic powers which lasted for five centuries. Further, his stinging denunciation of the economic buggery is akin to the re-awakening of Africa's postcolonial liberation campaign championed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "[t]o fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which

makes the building of a culture possible. There is no other fight for culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle” (233). In continuation with his liberatory commission, Irobi rhetorically asks: “What pictures of Africa do you see . . . [a] changing continent struggling to survive five centuries of rape and economic buggery?” This suggests a pre-colonial Africa with a thriving, sure-footed economy, in marked contrast to postcolonial Africa with a battered economy occasioned by neocolonial manipulations of the West. A fall out of this can be realized from the oppressive economic policies often administered by European financial institutions like Brenton Woods and International Monetary Funds. An economic strangulation that continually superintends a regime of shameless theft of postcolonial Africa’s economic and natural resources like gold, petroleum, diamond, and others. Inscribed in the poem is the colonial and postcolonial initiated expansion of Western capitalism which incorporated Third World nations (especially those in Africa) into an exploitative world system that has destroyed their economic prosperity and independence. Irobi further criticizes a worrying level of complacency regarding the postcolonial African political elite’s failure to engage in positive initiatives that could turn around the socio-political condition of the continent. He frankly admits this to be largely responsible for Africa’s underdevelopment. By disentangling African political and economic failures from the subjective, he has ostensibly admitted that contemporary Nigeria’s and Africa’s failures in general are essentially orchestrated by their elite’s reckless gluttonous gambits.

Doubly ironic is that an engagement with Nigeria’s political failure has intensified the emotional response by the shift in emphasis in the collection from the celebration of its cultural repository to the condemnation of its political inanity. While the older generation Nigerian poets like Gabriel Imometime Okara, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Aig-Imokhuede, and others have celebrated Nigeria’s cultural heritage, Irobi has consistently identified with the devastating effect of its political failure. Rather than downplaying them, the result of this identification lies in his eclectic deployment of satiric garbs at the perceived anomalies. Irobi’s anger is grounded in the interstice of historical and social consciousness, to criticize this perceived failure. Significantly, Irobi’s subscription to the appropriation of history and oral tradition elements in his artistic exegesis has been acknowledged by Nnorom Azuonye in his e-conversation with him:

Poetry, by definition, is that phenomenal fusion of music and imagery that creates life and propels life forward in the world.... Verse is our vain human attempt to capture this force, this magic, this occult force.... But poetry, real poetry, can only be found in the speech of nature, the power of landscapes, the terror of the dark, the forest and its hallucinations, when *Amadioha*, the god of thunder, clears his throat and voice....

Here, one can deduce that however iconoclastic Irobi's poetry appears in outlook, it is clearly foreshadowed in the fermentation of oral tradition and historicity. It is a fermentation that reflects a conviction that art must be politically committed to the defence of societal integrity. Inability to reconcile the necessity to speak truth to power in his poetry with complicity in unjust prevarication has continually driven Irobi in *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* to stridently criticize Nigeria's false unity. Most disturbingly, torrents of deprivation suffered over the years has continuously generated anger and resentment from Nigerians, who have realized that the country operates inequitable and inefficient federal structure that privileges northern Nigeria to the disadvantage of southern Nigeria in terms of appointments into political offices and economic opportunities.

For the avoidance of doubts, inequity in Nigeria nation-state's political structure has further manifested in the successive military governance distribution ratio which recorded only two southern military rulers (Generals Ironsi and Obasanjo) against six military rulers from the north (Generals Gowon, Muhammed, Buhari, Babangida, Abacha, and Abdusalam). This military rulers' distribution ratio convincingly implies that the gap between Nigeria's status as Africa's foremost populous country and the real root of its leadership dilemma can be traced to its inequitable political structure. Anxiety emanating from this inequity documents the ravaging disunity that has threatened its nationhood since the military incursion in 1966. Wole Soyinka has attributed the imbalance in power relation often associated with most nations in the postcolonial Africa to the incongruous yoking together of people of differing ethnic groups. This is exemplified in his words: "Was the partitioning of Africa by the imperial powers simply a geographical violation of a people's right of coming-into-being as a nation? Only if we insist on believing that political instability within the so-called nations that make up the continent today owes nothing whatever to the artificiality" (26). Hence, this imbalance has created disaffection in postcolonial Nigeria and resulted into despair. This has equally necessitated various Nigerian ethnic groups to continually agitate and protest the accrued unfairness that emanates from the country's inherent power imbalance. This agitation is gradually degenerating into constant calls for the fragmentation of the Nigerian nation-state along ethnic lines (Akingbe 16). It is worrying that bellicosity of this agitation is underlined in "Horizons! Horizons!":

MAICUNTRY, WE HATE THEE, our own dear fucked-up land
 Though tribe and tongue has differed and in brotherhood
 Of ill we stand... a different flag
 embroidered with the yellow rays of a fiery rising sun
 as if its makers and designers knew it was the sign
 of a doomed future...

Save my bullet when I die, o Biafra

Save my bullet when I die

If I happen to surrender and die forever...

(*Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 91)

Disenchanted with the burden of Nigeria's nationhood, Irobi hacks through a deep-seated discontent entrenched in the poetics of denial and repudiation as eloquently captured in: "MAICUNTRY, WE HATE THEE, our dear fucked-up land." Strikingly, "MAICUNTRY" typifies a deft graphological subversion of Nigeria's nationhood, whose erroneous yoking together by the British colonial authority has created more division than unity. Remarkably, Nigeria got its independence in October 1, 1960 with disregard to its inherent disunity. But, no sooner had it achieved independence than its trail of disunity ruptured into a civil war in 1967. Of course, the civil war encouraged its eastern federating unit to declare secession from it as the Republic of Biafra. This declaration led to the Nigerian Civil War that lasted between 1967 and 1970. Ironically, Irobi has often stated that he was born on the day of Nigeria's independence, October 1, 1960. Irobi interpreted that striking coincidence in terms of a destiny shared with the Nigerian nation "a destiny of agony and pain" (Diala 2014: 27). Irobi's loyalty continuously resides with the erstwhile Biafra because he is from the Igbo-speaking part of Nigeria that formed the short-lived Republic of Biafra. Hence, his impassioned ode to the Republic of Biafra is entrenched in the chorus of the poem which eulogises the short-lived Biafra Republic: "*Save my bullet when I die, o Biafra / Save my bullet when I die.*"

It is only fair to say that Irobi has consistently attributed disturbances in Nigeria's nationhood to the unfair distribution of political opportunities among its federating units. This is a view he shared relentlessly with Odumegwu-Ojukwu, the former Biafran secessionist leader. In his illustration, Ojukwu declaims that "the desirable see-saw of Nigeria's political interaction cannot take place when the sheer weight of one participant ensures, at any given time, that one end of the bar remains rooted to the ground" (Ojukwu xi). Therefore, Nigeria's history sufficiently provides a poetic resource for Irobi to contextualize a monumental destruction of the nation's political heritage by its ethnic biased army.

ARMY AS A CATALYST OF DISRUPTION

A major contradiction that has been observed in the portrayal of the army in Irobi's *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* lies in its dual role: the army as an agent that repels foreign invasion and the army that has been identified with subversive inclination. Due to its penchant for power which is often demonstrated in incessant coups,

the army has achieved notoriety for regularly truncating democratic institutions in postcolonial Nigeria. Despite being the highest military training institution in the United Kingdom, Sandhurst is mocked and satirized in the poem as a breeding ground for renegade soldiers who have continuously undermined democratic processes in postcolonial Nigeria and Africa. Given its propensity for frequent destabilization of democratic governance, Sandhurst typifies a metaphor of disorderliness and subversion of constituted authority as emphasized in the poem “Horizons! Horizons!”:

The Beasts of Sandhurst, The Sweepings of our society.
 The scented arseholes of our constipated universe whose
 skulls are filled with the substance of the colon...
 Distinguished idiots! Brilliant baboons! Infinite cunts!
 Zombie o, zombie,
 Zombie o, zombie
 Tell am to go kill
 A joro jara joro

(*Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* 82-95)

“Horizons! Horizons!” provides an unobtrusive naming of the northern Nigeria-dominated army as a catalyst that has reversed Nigeria’s sovereignty shortly after its independence. Acrimonious tension that accrued from the adversarial interaction between the army and civil populace has unambiguously created the deserving energy out of which Irobi’s anger flows. It is an anger invested in poetic felicity which gets expressed in the description of brazen actions that tremble between horror and discovery, outrage and rational explication. Fallout of the emotional effect of the army’s transgression of Nigeria’s nationhood necessitates Irobi’s outbursts in a string of outspoken and provocative innuendoes. In torrent of abuse, the soldiers are described in the poem as “beasts of Sandhurst” and “scented arseholes of our constipated universe.” The demonization of the army is facilitated by Irobi’s stylistic appropriation of the iconic beastly metaphors. In the poem, “infinite cunts,” “baboons,” and “cesspits of my contempt” are appropriated to depict the army’s insensitivity to the democratic aspirations of Nigeria’s teeming civilian population. Hence, the army’s ravenous disposition to political power correspondingly illustrates its inability to apply a measure of logic in its operations. The army’s dispensation of brutality is further examined in the ubiquitous rhythm of mockery in the chorus of “Horizons! Horizons!” Thus, the “Zombie o, zombie / Zombie o, zombie / Tell am to go kill / Ajoro jara joro” chorus ostensibly satirizes the soldiers as nitwits. It is a chorus which owes its inspiration, insight, and virtuosity to Fela Anikulapo-Kuti’s musical composition. Essentially, the rhythm of “Zombie” is grounded in a no holds bar waves of protest against military brutality. Further, Irobi’s antagonism against the military in the poem is derived

originally from “Zombie,” a popular Afro-beat number. A musical composition crafted by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, an award-winning maverick Nigerian Afro-beat maestro. Fela’s subversive and protest music, as his bohemian eccentricity, have continually engaged with the brutality, beating, killing, and dehumanization of the Nigerian civil populace by the military. Irobi further employs a demystificatory gambit in “Horizons! Horizons!” to represent the soldiers in negative terms. They are described as “the spotted scavengers of the Sahel Savannah / computerized human being / zombies / little vapid minds who have no vision for themselves or the nation / disembodied Godheads” (95).

Each line of “Horizons! Horizons!” reads like a teardrop and the entire poem sufficiently resuscitates a barrage of laments that seamlessly cling together. This authenticates Irobi’s accusation of the Nigerian military as the perpetrators of political instability and divisiveness. This is a development, which has pitched one ethnic group against another in postcolonial Nigeria. Moreover, these declamations elicit the collaboration of the readers who will ultimately decide in their individual judgements, whether Irobi’s perception of the Nigeria’s military is real, distorted, or hyped. Furthermore, this stylistic approach in Irobi’s poetry affirms Chinua Achebe’s metacritical analysis of the union of the writer with the reader. In this union, Achebe emphasizes “the triumph of the written word is often attained when the writer achieves union and trust with the reader, who then becomes ready to be drawn deep into unfamiliar territory, walking in borrowed literary shoes so to speak, toward a deeper understanding of self or society” (Achebe 61).

CONCLUSION

The paper has attempted an evaluation of how Irobi’s rage has been nurtured by nostalgia for his beleaguered Biafran republic while on self-imposed exile in the United Kingdom. It is a nostalgia imbued by his subscription to Biafran nationalism which has sharpened his backlash against Nigeria’s power imbalance. He considered this imbalance as the anomaly that has stultified the country’s sovereignty in *Why I Don’t Like Philip Larkin*. Further, the paper argued that the British-inspired midwifery of a multi-ethnic Nigerian nation-state somewhat favors northern Nigeria against its southern component. However, a more plausible discontent observable in Nigeria’s jaundiced power relation would seem to be that people are already fed up with the marginality accrued from this perceived power imbalance. Irobi’s poetic craft is belligerent in tone as its thematic is provocative in the collection. Perhaps, the inherently subversive poetics contained in Irobi’s *Why I Don’t Like Philip Larkin* (and in the poetry of other third generation Nigerian poets) is tellingly designed to challenge the successive Nigerian rulers who have

appropriated national discourses to perpetrate dictatorship, bad governance, and mismanagement of the nation-state's economy. Apparently, Irobi's employment of political, historical, and social contexts for the delineation of inequitable structure of postcolonial Nigeria has offered a useful insight. The collection bemoans a scandalous inequity that has continually fuelled rancorous demand for the fragmentation of Nigeria along ethnic lines—an inequity which has enthusiastically made Irobi long for the rebirth of Biafra as a sovereign nation. Inscribed in the lines of *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* is a historical excursion into the Nigeria nation-state's troubled past which calls for an urgent restructuring of the polity to dismantle the inequitable power relations among its federating units. The collection further illustrates how political power has been wielded over the entire country by the dominant northern Hausa/Fulani through its rampaging military. Irobi contends that this domination is debilitating and systematic as it alienates Nigeria's plural-structured federalism. The paper pointedly illustrates that Irobi is shattered and bewildered by this inequitable political structure because it has primarily rendered his Igbo ethnic group subservient. As such, he is anxiously compelled to call for the liberation and resuscitation of the short-lived Biafra Republic in the collection.

In conclusion, we must admit that Irobi's dogged pursuit of Biafran nationalism in the collection is essentially necessitated by his determination to shake off the derisive devaluation consistently suffered by Nigeria's Igbo tribe. Although, it is easy to dismiss Irobi's nationalistic concern as ostensibly chauvinistic, this is more than offset by the ludicrous power imbalance ravaging Nigeria's nationhood. Nonetheless, the collection effectively decries and deconstructs the political shenanigans shrouded in the narrative of dominance, suppression, marginality, and wanton subjugation of the Igbo. It is an unrestrained denunciation of the subterranean political subjugation of the Nigerian nation-state by the Fulani/Hausa political elite class of northern Nigeria.

Notes

1. Esiaba Irobi is a prodigious third generation Nigerian poet and playwright. His literary fame has been ostensibly diminished by the obscure publication outlets where his plays and poetry collections were published and years of exile which denied him a deserving recognition as a writer in the Western world.
2. Esiaba Irobi's dramaturgy bears similarity to that of Wole Soyinka.
3. Irobi's infusion of orature and metaphysics derives from eclectic influences from Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, and the Ngwa-Igbo's cultural background.
4. Dambudzo Marechera is a maverick Zimbabwean novelist and poet. His works are crowded with anecdotes and slanderous jokes.
5. Nigeria's eastern region, the homeland of the Igbo ethnic group, was seceded from Nigeria in 1967 to form the short-lived Republic of Biafra. This secession eventually led to the Nigerian Civil War which lasted between 1967 and 1970.
6. Esiaba Irobi's *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin* is a poetry collection devoted to the revival of the Biafran nationalism, the evaluation of his experience when on self-exile in the United Kingdom, and a critique of the declining Nigerian nationhood.
7. Since Nigeria attained independence in 1960, there has always been a perceived marginalization of Southern Nigeria by Northern Nigeria. This development has formed the bulk of narratives in some Nigerian literary works.
8. Lord Frederick Lugard, a former colonial Governor-General of Nigeria, facilitated the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates to form Nigeria in 1914.
9. Nigeria attained independence from the United Kingdom in 1960 and became a republic in 1963. However, the military coup of 1966 truncated Nigeria's democracy. The long years of military rule have been attributed to cause Nigeria's enduring retrogression.
10. Political power in Nigeria is often acrimoniously shared among its majority ethnic groupings of Hausa-Fulani (north), Yoruba (west), and Igbo (east) to the detriment of its teeming minorities who are somewhat marginalized.
11. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu is a former governor of Eastern Nigeria who orchestrated the secession of the region from Nigeria to form the sovereign nation-state of Biafra, although the new nation only lasted for three years between 1967 and 1970.
12. For decades now, Nigeria has witnessed an upsurge in perennial politico-religious crises in the Islam-predominant Northern Nigeria. Attacks are often targeted at the hapless Southern Nigerians sojourning in that part of the country.

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