

# Halting a Wilful Degeneration into the Abyss: Rhapsodizing the Morass of Despair in Esiaba Irobi's *Inflorescence* and *Cotyledons*

**Niyi Akingbe**

English Studies Unit, Ondo State University of Science and Technology, Okitipupa, Ondo, NIGERIA

Email: deniakingbe@yahoo.com

## ABSTRACT

An examination of Nigeria's nationhood in the themes of *Inflorescence* (1989) and *Cotyledons* (2009) reveals a dogged inscription of Esiaba Irobi's poems within the context of Nigeria's interweaving socio-political tragedies: the rapacious rape of her resources by the successive political class, the continuous violation of her humanistic ethos by the rampaging military institution, and the ignoble dispossession of her hopeless downtrodden masses. Irobi portrays a dialectical juxtaposition of the fragmented and haunted existentialism in Nigeria against the sanity and sanctity for human rights obtainable in the Western nations. The grounding of Nigeria's disillusionment further underscores Nigeria's stand on the brink of a political precipice. The paper aims to evaluate how Esiaba Irobi's *Inflorescence* and *Cotyledons* have implicitly challenged Nigeria's inability to live up to its expectations of fulfilling the present and future aspirations of its teeming population in the areas of human and infrastructural developments.

Keywords: Halting; wilful degeneration; abyss; rhapsodizing morass of despair; political precipice.

## INTRODUCTION

Esiaba Irobi's poems in *Inflorescence* (1989) and *Cotyledons* (2009) quintessentially focus on the appalling undermining of Nigeria's nationhood by the military in collaboration with the civilian political elite. The themes of both *Inflorescence* and *Cotyledons* are inward looking and they are essentially grounded in the transposition of the Nigerian political history into a farcical fantasy, crudely mediated by the military leadership's mediocrity. Irobi further illustrates in the anthologies, a haunting canvas of desolate Nigerian landscape, trapped in a forlorn trajectory of perennial systemic failures in its tortuous nationhood. This failure underpins the social and political statement on the precariousness of human existence in the postcolonial Nigeria. It is a political failure whose cataloguing in the anthologies is so daunting that it could be mistaken as a universal statement about the general failure of governance in the postcolonial black Africa.

But Nigeria's failure, like the failure of many other African nations has been examined by Edmond Mfaboum Mbiafu (2002) to be self-inflicted,

"the idea of a curse, featured as the poetics of failure, is illustrated in the irradiation and continual emergence of fatality that numbs

human beings and constitutes, in the end, an obstacle to progress. Whether an Hamitic curse or a curse of History, the belief in these myths conveyed to anesthetize black consciences has no place in an Africa that in order to rise up needs to get rid of these demons of its adulterated imaginary, which create so many impediments to action" (p.32).

Nevertheless, a comparative evaluation of governance in Africa reveals that while Southern African nations and Ghana have recorded a relative improvement in their economic and political indices, Nigeria with its abundance natural resources has remained an embarrassment to the Africa's pride. This embarrassment has been poignantly captured in the words of Gerhard Wendler (1988),

"the discovery of oil in Nigeria has presented a paradox. In spite of the huge income which Nigeria and the oil companies receive out of oil sales, Nigerians not only remain poor but are becoming poorer every day. The enormous wealth is distributed among the government, the oil companies and a handful of individuals" (p. v).

The authenticity of this failure, as reiterated in Irobi's poems is validated by the voices of the dispossessed

masses, the unemployed and the Nigerian exiles in the Western countries.

Most significantly, poverty emanating from Nigeria's systemic failure has continuously generated anger and resentment from Nigerians who have realised that Nigeria makes enormous wealth from its oil production which they could see but do not benefit from. In despair, various Nigerian communities have resulted into agitations, to protest this inequitable distribution of the common wealth. This agitation, is gradually degenerating into constant calls for the fragmentation of Nigeria along the ethnic lines. It is worth bearing that at the fore front of this campaign for the balkanization of Nigeria, are the ethnic militant groups like: the dreadful *Boko Haram al-Islam*, an Islamic militant sect which is assiduously campaigning for the inauguration of an Islamic republic in the Northern Nigeria. In the South-Western Nigeria, the *OPC-Oodua People's Congress*, a militant political organization, is demanding for the autonomy of the Yoruba country. In the South-Eastern Nigeria, the *MASSOB-Movement* for the actualization of the sovereign state of Biafra, a militant political organization is relentlessly agitating for the formation of the Igbo country. Similarly, the South-South militant organization, *MEND-Movement* for the emancipation of Niger Delta, is strongly demanding for the total control of its oil resources accrued in the *Ijaw* enclave of the Nigeria's South South. In the same vein, campaign for resource control is being championed by the *MOSOP-Movement* for the survival of the Ogoni people, a non-violent ethno-environmental organization established by the late writer and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa to draw awareness to the environmental degradation of and for the development of the Ogoni land in the Nigeria's South South. Irobi appropriates in the anthologies the interaction of historical facts and memory to construct a wasteland of an increasingly fragmented and disjointed society, which is perfunctorily yoked together through the military might over the years. Nigeria history therefore provides a poetic resource for constructing the monumental destruction of its political heritage by the military and civilian leaders since it got independence from the United Kingdom in 1960.

The paper will strive to analyze how Irobi's excursion into the past decodes a Nigeria's present, which is strewn with failures and disappointments orchestrated by the military alongside the civilian political elite. This paper will further establish the portrayal of Nigeria as a land that is continually traumatized and mutilated and whose citizen's aspirations forever remain emasculated by its successive leaders.

## ARTICULATING NIGERIA'S DEPRIVATION IN NEW HISTORICISM

As suggested in Tyson (1999) that given its status as a critical mode which emphasizes 'the relationship between a text and the society' (p. 288) that produces it, the literary theory known as New Historicism has been chosen as the framework for this paper. It is a theory which interrogates the assumptions and attitudes governing how events are seen differently by the author and individual readers of a literary text. It relates a text to other texts produced at the same period in a given society; thus, literary and political connections can be drawn between the aesthetic elements embedded in the text, and the cultural realities that obtain in such a society (Tyson, 1999). Within the ambit of New Historicism, the subject matter and thematic concerns of the texts under focus will be analyzed with a view to drawing out these connections and discussing their significance within the analytical concerns of the paper. New Historicism is pre-occupied with the examination of literary texts from the perspective of their being embedded within the social and economic circumstances in which they are produced and consumed. For new historicists, these circumstances are not stable in themselves and are susceptible to being re-written and transformed; from this perspective, literary texts are part of a larger circulation of social energies, both products of and influences on a particular culture or ideology.

New Historicism proffers an eclectic approach to literary study. As such, it incorporates many aspects of other critical viewpoints, even if it does not agree with them in totality. For example, it obtains from New Criticism the approach of seeking the interconnectedness that underlies any work of art (Selden, 1989, p.192). It shares with Reader-Response theory the view that a work of literature can impart different meanings to different readers (Booker, 1996, p.137). From Postmodernism, New Historicism appropriates the critical doctrines of discontinuity, eclecticism, heterogeneity and decentred authority in narratives. It rejects Derrida's notions of the interface of language and text, but puts forward its own concept of the interconnection between culture and society. Like psychoanalysis, the theory explores the notion of power struggles and similarly advocates that power produces individual subjects. New Historicism shares with Marxism the notion that literature tells the story of the past. However, while Marxism advocates the complete liberation of the oppressed as a critical objective, New Historicism returns to the stories in the texts to find out how they affect society. These extensive borrowings from other

theories have given it a flexibility that enables it to adapt the analytical tools and perspectives of other theories to suit its own purposes.

As is typical of New Historicism, *Inflorescence* and *Cotyledons*' interpenetration of Nigerian political history is patently relative and generates a negotiation of meanings between competing groups rather than its imposition by a dominant group. Irobi in conformity with New Historicism, recognizes in his poetry that history is the history of the present which is always in the making, and radically opens to transformation and rewriting, rather than being monumental and closed. Just like New historicists, Irobi argues that any "knowledge" of the past is necessarily mediated by texts of different kinds. Hence, there can be no knowledge of the past without interpretation of the "facts" of history which need to be read just like any other text.

### INDICTING THE MILITARY FOR NIGERIA'S RUINATION

The destructive proclivity of the military in the ruination of postcolonial Nigeria constitutes a paramount literary leitmotif in the Irobi's poetry. This leitmotif is accentuated by the bleak depiction of contemporary Nigerian society as a metaphorical casualty of the military's destruction. This is exemplified by 'Sandhurst', a poem in *Inflorescence*:

Sandhurst,  
 Your beauty is the beauty  
 Of a beast...  
 Behind your gates of steel  
 The mind of a continent creaks and wheels  
 Like the blades of a windmill.

On your windswept lawn  
 Fringed with the bones of children  
 And the carcass of rabbits,

Your tigers graze, sniffing  
 The scent of blood, until each dawn,  
 Beyond these walls,

In camouflage lands,  
 The lust for blood bangs in the brains  
 Of these carnivores;

The spotted scavengers  
 Of the Sahel Savannah, in whose mad molars  
 You crack the thigh bones of power.  
 Sandhurst, your carnivores  
 Have paced the desert step by step, shovelling  
 Sand into the eyes of the future.

The future blinks. It rusts. It flickers

Like the eyelids of your lunatics. Yet, the  
 ginseng  
 On these trampled fields tremble with rage

Resisting the whirlwind's assault. (Irobi, 1989,  
 pp. 13-14)

The poem marks an attempt by Irobi to come to terms with the ruination of Nigeria's political and economic institutions by the military, whose incursion into the Nigeria's political space, has been marked by a debilitating civil war, corruption, brutality unemployment, ethnic loyalty and sectionalism. Sandhurst typifies a metaphor of disorderliness and subversion of democratic authority. This is affirmed in the negative actions of the Sandhurst-trained elite Nigerian soldiers, whose penchant for staging coups as signified has no limits. The Nigerian soldiers are described as tigers, carnivores and scavengers who continuously sniff at 'the scent of blood, until each dawn/beyond these walls/in camouflage lands/of the Sahel Savannah have often 'paced the desert step by step, shovelling/sand into the eyes of the future', thereby leaving the future blinking, rusting and flickering 'like the eyelids of the lunatics'. Irobi's inference to the subversive activities of the Nigerian soldiers serves as the underpinning motif for analyzing the roots of the devaluation and corruption of the political structures, which have hampered the growth of postcolonial Nigeria. This subversion is paralleled by the 'The Sahel Savannah', a poem in *Cotyledons*:

Naked like vulture's head, the brown landscape  
 Spreads out like the carcass of a desert trampled  
 By camels. Rusting with dust, tufts of elephant  
 grass  
 Pock-mark her groin. Nude like the truth,  
 This is the Sahel Savannah, the empire of  
 hyenas:  
 "We prowl, plural beasts with double backs  
 and  
 Growl like blood gurgling through a gutter  
 Tracing the contours left by water. We prowl,  
 Each step a gust of dust. Each howl an anthem  
 And a pledge. We are the beasts of Sandhurst  
 The spotted scavengers of the Sahel Savannah.  
 Look at our shoulders! Can't you see the tremors  
 Of power? Listen poet! We are carnivores.  
 We can put Abuja between our molars  
 And crack her like the thighbones of a Zebra.  
 Yes, your destiny is this squealing rabbit  
 Between our paws; this grisly bleeding thing  
 Without a tail. We prowl. Bakolori lies  
 On our right. Remember? Ha-ha-ha-ha how  
 The peasants were put in an Indian file  
 And machine-gunned like coup-plotters.

But the blood has dried. The dust has settled  
 And the millets are in bloom again...’’  
 No, compatriot, the dust has not fully settled  
 As you prowl, it whirls, after each step,  
 Into a sandstorm, churning and turning  
 Until it spirals into an inferno of pebbles  
 And stones and, compatriot, empties itself into  
 your  
 Eyes like a revolution!(Irobi, 2009, pp. 37-38)

The haunting Nigeria’s military brutality is inscribed within the bestial discourses of devaluation and dehumanization of the masses, and terror is so compellingly captured in the familiar images of killing, maiming and shooting. The brutal killings of Nigerians is often characterized by the excessive display of monstrosity by the Nigerian army. This decimation of Nigerians by the soldiers has been witnessed in the brutal killing of the masses in Ugep in 1977, in Bakolori in 1980; the killing and demolition of Odi by the army in 1999 and the killings by the army in Zaki-Biam, in October 2001 (Alubo, 2001, p.22).The poem moves beyond the metaphoric representations of the military as ‘carnivores’ and ‘hyenas’, who prowl and howl uncontrollably, to engage the gruesome killing and the destruction of the peasants at the Bakolori village, in order to dispossess them of their agrarian land: ‘Bakolori lies/ on our right. Remember? Ha-ha-ha-ha how/ the peasants were put in an Indian file/and machine-gunned like coup-plotters’.

However, the poet persona indicts the military, by holding them accountable for this heinous act when he reminds the military that the Bakolori killing will forever serve as a millstone to torment their conscience. The military do erroneously claims that the killing has been forgotten: ‘but the blood has dried’, ‘the dust has settled/and the millets are in bloom again’. But the poet persona quickly reminds the military of the repercussion of their dastardly act, which would elicit a counter reaction: ‘No, compatriot, the dust has not fully settled/as you prowl, it whirls, after each step,/Into a sandstorm, churning and turning/until it spirals into an inferno of pebbles/and stones and, compatriot, empties itself into your/eyes like a revolution!’. Nevertheless, to assuage the Bakolori massacre’s victims, providence caused Alhaji Shehu Kangiwa, a former civilian governor of Sokoto state, to fell off his horse and died during a polo game in November, 1981. Earlier on, Kangiwa had forcefully taken the Bakolori peasants’ land for the construction of water dam unabashedly, without any form of compensation. In an attempt to peacefully protest- the brazen seizure of their land by the peasants, they were gruesomely murdered on 28

April 1980 when Dangiwa ordered the police to shoot at them, and hundreds of the peasants were gunned down at a full sweep. The title of the poem is suggestive of political upheaval, and connotes a forceful historical dislocation of the Bakolori’s peasants by the repressive Nigerian military . The personalization of this historical and gratuitous killing of the Bakolori peasants in the postcolonial Nigeria, remarkably underscores the perennial and wanton killings of the innocent and harmless citizens by the military.

### JUXTAPOSING NIGERIA’S ROT WITH WESTERN WORLD’S GLITZ

Irobi’s poetic preoccupation with the articulation of the parlous state of Nigeria, intends to establish the facts responsible for such rot, and for the criticism of Nigeria’s leadership’s obsession with corruption. This preoccupation justifies the effectiveness of poetry as a vehicle for analyzing Nigeria’s glorious past in relation to its turbulent present. The poetics of Irobi’s *Cotyledons*, essentially examine the striking images of perennial power outage, political instability, corruption and exile, which constitute the poetics of juxtaposition of Nigeria’s dilemma with the Western economic prospects in *Cotyledons*. This juxtaposition starts with the comparison of the stability in electricity in London against constant power outage in Nigeria, this is exemplified by ‘*London*’:

Here is London. I love London.  
 God’s own kingdom.  
 There is light here, light enough  
 To see the fingers and the faces  
 Who switched off the light  
 In my own land.(Irobi, 2009, p. 8)

The poem demonstrates that poetry’s relationship to reality is often rendered symbolically, and this relationship is underscored by its presentation of a realistic examination of postcolonial Nigeria, engulfed in darkness, orchestrated by the constant fluctuation in electricity distribution. This is a striking contrast to the regular distribution of electricity in London, whose brightness is astoundingly appraised by the poet persona, as ‘light enough/to see the fingers and faces’. However, the poet persona’s employment of a remarkable rhetorical device in the poem, ‘Who switched off the light/in my own land’, implies that power outage in contemporary Nigeria is not a natural phenomenon, but a fall-out of the mismanagement of Nigeria’s vast economic resources, by the corrupt military and politicians, whose actions have in turn affected the constant electricity generation.

While Irobi declines to choose between approving and endorsing of wilful running into exile by the

Nigerian dissent voices, for fear of being persecuted at home by a repressive government, he did not hesitate to vehemently condemn the political fugitives' running away from justice, after looting the treasury. What Irobi does not hesitate to illustrate in 'Paris', is the Nigeria's pervading rot, caused by the thieving Nigerian politicians, and this is theatrically portrayed in 'Paris':

In the heat of a Parisian summer  
A man garbed in a chieftaincy robe  
Sits on a high stool, in a cafe, devouring  
hamburger.

“Senator! Senator! I greet him.  
“Do you know that your appetite for life  
Has devoured the destiny of my children?”

That at home, your wife is in prison,  
Your daughters in the streets, your motherland  
Pregnant, like yourself, with Kwashiorkor.

He stands up, snoring as he stands. And with the  
base voice  
Of a breathing corpse, he snores, “Young man,  
I am a fugitive.  
I came to Europe with an empty mind.”

If you see such a man, mark him well.  
He has stolen his country's oil wealth...  
(*Cotyledons*, p. 13)

Although Irobi's poetry is largely nuanced by the African postcolonial inanities, but its rhythm is grounded in the Nigeria's socio-political shenanigans with which it intersects. This intersection is theatrically underlined by the poem's portrayal of Nigeria as emblematic of a wasteland, that has been mercilessly and repeatedly raped by its rapacious leaders since its independence: 'Senator! Senator! I greet him/Do you know that your appetite for life/has devoured the destiny of my children?' However, the remorseless audacity of the thieving politician, increasingly fuels the constant threnody of despair in the poem: 'He stands up, snoring as he stands. And with the base voice/of a breathing corpse, he snores, "Young man, I am a fugitive/I came to Europe with an empty mind"'. Irobi remarkably notes that the debilitating unemployment suffered by Nigerian youths, the big craters on the road and malnutrition of the Nigerian children, are direct corollaries of corruption and prebendalism in postcolonial Nigeria: 'That at home, your wife is in prison/Your daughters in the streets, your motherland/pregnant, like yourself, with kwashiorkor'.

Nevertheless, Irobi's sharp retort to the politician's unabashed kleptomaniac mien, clearly seeks an

indictment on corrupt practices of the Nigerian politicians: 'If you see such a man, mark him well/He has stolen his country's oil wealth'. The poem clearly delineates the dilemma of a fugitive politician who is running away from justice shortly after a military coup in Nigeria. Amply captured in the poem is a fusion of clinical observation and historical perspicacity which Irobi dexterously evoked to articulate Nigeria's long experienced despoliation by her buccaneering politicians. The perspicacity embedded in the poem, resonates a pictorial analysis of the characteristics of a typical Nigerian politician with no moral scruples, who sees politics as a means of self-aggrandizement. It is interesting to note that Irobi's vivid historical sense has been tasked in the poem to caricature Nigerian politician's craze for materialism and to register a stinging denunciation of military coup which has disrupted Nigeria's democratic process and left its economy in ruins.

'Paris' demystification of corruption in the post-colonial Nigeria is strikingly paralleled by 'Rome' in Irobi's *Cotyledons*. The apparent attempt by the Nigerian political leaders to inscribe corruption into national culture raises a cursory concern in 'Rome'. Corruption desultorily covers Nigeria's political landscape in the poem, and is acknowledged as a dent in its aspiration to greater nationhood:

And I remember Maikontri, where Justice, the  
mule of rule  
Is blinking from the shit of wolves sitting on the  
Bench  
I remember my land: the woman with an issue  
of blood...

“Maikontri plunged headlong into life, stealing  
Killing, grabbing, plundering with open arms.  
Like branches of the very tree she vowed to  
uproot”.(Irobi, 2009, pp. 15-17)

Anguish in the poem comes from the unmistakable pictographic representation of the grim, reality of devaluation and retrogression of the postcolonial Nigeria into the abyss. The poem evaluates Nigeria, as been taken hostage by its corrupt leaders: 'Maikontri plunged headlong into life, stealing/killing, grabbing, plundering with open arms/like branches of the very tree she vowed to uproot'. This interrogation of the plundering of Nigeria followed to its end culminates in the bemoaning of the defective judicial system's inability to correct this malaise, 'And I remember Maikontri, where Justice, the mule of rule/Is blinking from the shit of wolves sitting on the bench/I remember my land: the woman with an issue of blood'. The poem is situated within the context of Nigeria's nationhood discourse in which

Irobi evokes the imagery of ambiguous dispensation of justice in contemporary Nigeria. There are two inferences to be drawn from the poem: that corruption has been institutionalized in Nigeria, which has undermined its development; its legal system has been so compromised by the elite to the extent that only the hapless masses bears its brunt while the elite is always let off its hook. We can see that, there is a striking innuendo to be drawn from these lines: that the ineffectiveness of the Nigerian Judicial system, is a product of prolonged military rule which amounted to a kind of aestheticized meddlesomeness, that eventually weakened the sacrosanct judicial procedures.

### AESTHETICIZING DECADENCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

Irobi's poetry reverberates a double-edged preoccupation between conducting an expose on the prevailing contemporary decadence- corruption and devaluation of social infrastructures-and a campaign for the restoration of sanity, by repudiating corruption, although he metaphorically depicts Nigeria as an uninhabitable waste land where life is brutish and short. Irobi's choice of subject matter in 'Mabera' laments the mismanagement of Nigeria's oil-wealth by a handful of its elite while the majority of her population wallows in abject poverty. This lamentation marks a critical recognition of the stratified economic underpinnings, which reflect in the juxtaposition of immense wealth and acute poverty in contemporary Nigeria, otherwise metaphorically depicted as 'Mabera' in the poem. Inferred in the poem is the overwhelming influence of corruption which can be seen in every facet of Nigeria's nationhood and its overall effect can be felt in her spiral retrogression into bankruptcy. Nevertheless, Irobi exercises a restraint not to characterize Nigeria as a completely failed state like Somalia in East Africa, but he circumspectly depicts the pervasive tottering of Nigeria to the abyss in 'Mabera':

When you set out for Mabera  
Ask that your path be rough  
Like Abuja: a harvest of rocks,  
And when a cruise of Limousines  
Crowns your vision with gust of dust,

Plod on, oblivious of the madding crowd  
Drifting westwards,  
Backwards, towards the edge of the pit  
You left behind.  
Lead your mind like a camera (Irobi, 1989, p.11)

Mabera metaphorically stands for Nigeria in the poem, and the incorporation of familiar names and

places like 'Abuja', Nigeria's capital city with its rocky topography, accentuates the depiction vividly. Nigeria nationhood's narrative is constructed against the background of ruggedness, and the daily experiences of her citizens who continually 'plod on' with undying hope that things might turnaround some day, indicates that they have always been situated within the context of palpable uncertainty. Hence, Nigeria's (Mabera) narrative generates in the poem a disturbing insight into the discourse of inequity in the distribution of wealth between the elite and the downtrodden masses. The inequity is substantially demonstrated in the poem when the elite is portrayed as 'cruising in limousines' while the masses are 'plodding on', on a rocky Abuja road. The reality of this inequity is profoundly underscored by the pitiable depiction of the struggling masses, who in the course of eking out a living off steep hillsides of Abuja are constantly harassed by a 'cruise of limousines' of the corrupt politicians, which throws-up 'gust of dust' that impairs their vision.

Subsequently, Mabera (Nigeria) is portrayed by Irobi as a semiotic space where the tension between poverty and affluence is constantly contested. Since Nigeria moved its capital city from Lagos in the South Western Nigeria to Abuja in the North central, the political power has been so concentrated in Abuja to the extent that who so ever is desirous of employment into the federal government departments has to make a repeated pilgrimage to the capital city. This Abuja's new status endows it with limitless affluence and wealth which only the daring could access. At the same time, Abuja in the poem is employed by Irobi to delineate a socially stratified Nigeria along the affluence and poverty lines. In the foregoing, Irobi suggests that the Politicians and bureaucrats occupy the class of affluence while the masses are trapped in the trajectory of poverty. In other words, Nigeria's (Mabera) narrative in the poem serves as a semiotic text of two different modes of discourse: poverty and affluence. This contestation between poverty and prosperity is exemplified by the tumultuous drifting of the masses 'westwards/backwards/towards the edge of the pit'.

In narrating the shifts in Nigeria's past and present, Irobi engages in his poetry, the discourse of social and political pressure which necessitates that an individual seeking a transformation in his fortune, would need to move out of Nigeria to the Western world. The dilemma of adaptation to a new life and differences in life lived within and across national borders by Nigerians, is essentially grounded in 'New York':

New York! New York!  
So Nice

They named you twice.  
 Beside a newspaper stand along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
 I see a puzzle of men and women from  
 Maikontri.  
 Some, leafing through the Milestone Section of  
 Time Magazine  
 Others and their children, the Transition Section  
 of  
 Newsweek.  
 Compatriots, which devil's submarine fished  
 you  
 here?

“If there is any purpose in existence,  
 We will find it here.”  
 “Anywhere you find a peace of mind  
 Is home, sweet home”  
 “Every soul is a star soaring thru' space  
 At its own pace”  
 “When great souls meet even in an alien land  
 They create a brand new world  
 For their schizophrenic souls”...

Oh, Maikontri is a carnivore  
 That devours the swift gazelle  
 The striped zebra, the singing nightingale  
 Devours the beautiful and the splendid...(Irobi,  
 2009, pp. 24-25)

The poem negotiates a new dialogic of what constitutes a home, as ‘Anywhere you find a peace of mind/Is home, sweet home/Every soul is a star soaring thru; space/At its own pace/When great souls meet even in an alien land/They create a brand new world/For their schizophrenic souls’. The poem recalls Nigeria’s tragic political history between 1993 and 1998 when the military annulled the presidential election won by the charismatic politician Chief Moshood Abiola, but the election was annulled by the military who ruled instead by decree. However, during this period many politicians were hauled into jail and scores of Nigerian academics including Irobi ran into exile. For these Nigerians who were forced into exile by the military, wherever they have chosen to live outside Nigeria become their metaphorical homes.

The Creation of a home in exile has been explained in the words of Njeri Githire,(2005) as “the quest for a place in which the self feels at home, comfortable, and secure pervades postcolonial literature, criticism, and theory. Likewise, the themes of location/dislocation, belonging/marginalization, alienation and identity-central to the problematic of home-have been among the major topics of critical inquiry and creative expression in contemporary literature” (p. 74). The

poem’s (re)evaluation of happiness, succour and fulfilment as the essential variables of ‘home’ rather than the specific geographical sphere where an individual’s biological essence is inscribed, conforms to Githire’s submission. The notion of home in exile linearizes the temporal and spatial discourses of ‘home’, thus enabling the diasporic Nigerians to have a sense of fulfilment while living outside the Nigeria borders.

Irobi tellingly pursues further the bastardization of Nigeria by its successive political leaders, which drives many of its promising youths into exile, in the Western world. Despite Nigeria’s return to the democratic governance in 1999, no corresponding attention has been given to its youth empowerment programme and government seems to be in a quandary about how to create jobs that could accommodate lots of them. Under this circumstance, taking to crime and drug trafficking seem to be the way out for some youths, while the search for greener pastures in America and European countries remains a succour for the courageous few. Irobi’s poetry accusatorily places the drifting of youths from Nigeria to Western world not on transnational exegesis but on the urgent need to run away from Nigeria’s degradation. But upon getting to America and Europe, the Nigerian exiles are soon confronted with a barrage of social complexities like racism and cultural differences inherent in the social systems of these countries. To this end, agony of the trauma of exile has been vividly explicated by Dolores de Manuel (1997), when she argues that “the manifold burdens and wounds of exile, whether the departure from the homeland is voluntary or not, result not only from the separation from home, but also from the unfamiliarity and otherness imposed by life in the new land, with its alien codes” (p. 39). This exilic trauma is painfully captured in ‘Frankfurt’:

Standing still holds a thousand terrors.  
 You are surrounded in a foreign country  
 By the harsh consonant of a strange  
 Language you cannot understand...

Mother, mother, I have tried to reach you by  
 phone  
 Since your ears are deaf to poetry.  
 How else can I communicate these experiences  
 Except by telephone. But your line is dead!

“NET is burning! NET is burning!  
 Fire! Fire!” (Ibobi, 1989, p. 29)

The poem juxtaposes the dilemma experienced by a Nigerian immigrant, whose existentialism is situated between the need to embrace the challenges of his new abode, ‘you are surrounded’ ‘by the harsh

consonant of a strange language you can not understand', or a return to his country where infrastructures are in constant state of dilapidation, and the telephone lines are always dead. This dilapidation is ramified in the persona's reference to the fire incident that took place at the National Telephone Exchange's building some years ago: 'Net is burning! Net is burning! /Fire! Fire! This dearth of infrastructure in contemporary Nigeria only complicates and obscures any thought of the persona's return to Nigeria. Hence, he resolves to rather live abroad rather than Nigeria, and live life meaningfully: 'I leave to live, I exit to exist/I am the exile'.

## CONCLUSION

Inscribed in Esiaba Irobi's *Inflorescence* and *Cotyledons* is the historical realities of Nigeria's retrogression, orchestrated by the bad leadership of both the military and civilian since its independence. By adopting a New Historicism approach to the evaluation of Nigeria's past in relation to its present, Irobi has poetically diagnosed Nigeria's perennial problem of systemic failure to be emanating from the dearth of a crop of visionary political leaders. By this diagnosis, Irobi has significantly unmasked corruption to be the bane of Nigeria's inability to take its rightful place among the developing countries of the world. Corruption has in turn hastened the devaluation of basic infrastructures, which has led to many of its youths going on exile to the developed Western countries where they could realize their social and economic aspirations. Irobi through this quintessential diagnosis helped extricate the nation's political misfortune from historical myth and inscribe it within the context of socio-political history.

In juxtaposing Nigeria's misfortune with the Western world's fortune, the anthologies essentially foreground Nigeria's dialogic not as an object of reflection, but as a subject of self-reflection.

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