

government, S. O. Wey, was interviewed and his valuable recollections appear in print for the first time. Alhaji Abdul Razak, who recorded the minutes of the meeting between Ironsi and the rump of the government was interviewed. Iloegbunam used the U.K. Public Records Office and examined the minutes of the British cabinet meeting of August 2 1966 which confirm that the U.K. High Commissioner and the U.S. ambassador persuaded Gowon not to announce the secession of the Northern region in his first broadcast as head of state. Professor Ben Enwonwu, a childhood friend of Ironsi, provides illuminating recol-

lections. The author also made good use of West Africa magazine, always a useful primary source. All the above, in addition to many other interviews and a most comprehensive use of secondary sources result in a thorough research biography which will in turn become a valuable source material for historians, political scientists and biographers.

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Promising leaves

BY MARK OZAVESE AFADAMA

Bunmi Oyinsan (ed) TREMBLING LEAVES (AN ANA LAGOS ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT STORIES), Oracle Books, Lagos, 1999, 112pp.

PROSPERATIVE or budding writers share a similar aspiration: to be accepted as worthy of publication and thus uplifted from a state of being unknown to the known. And for many a prospective fiction writer, the genre of the short story may well be the veritable testing ground of seminal expression, a stepping stone and a launch pad to greater artistic accomplishment.

This view probably underlines the commitment of the Association of Nigerian Authors (Lagos State chapter) to a programme of consistent discovery or promotion of new literary talents in the Nigerian literary context. Its most recent achievement in this regard is the publication of this anthology of short stories.

The book parades a crop of new male and female writers and offers thereby a compendium of individual perspectives linguistic capabilities and idiosyncrasies that confirm once again that there are clearly inexhaustible resources existing for literary sustainability in the Nigerian milieu.

The writers may well be the 'trembling leaves' in a sense of being tentative and unpractised sojourners on a universally vast and, in very many areas, distinguished literary terrain. And then in the sense of being long-suffering victims of a malignant socio-political order. The themes of the anthology are thus of destruction and desolation (which is physical, psychical, personal and collective); poverty and the ways of escaping from it; moral laxity and ineptitude in matters of sex, love and relationships; rape and sexual harassment of women; alienation

and exile instigated by military dictatorship; and of course, recrimination and the prospects of societal renewal following the era of the collapse of military destructiveness and the subsequent embrace and enthronelement of democracy.

In most of the stories, these thematic revelations are conveyed through refreshing narrative methods. These methods encapsulate unique stylistic perspectives and a general technical initiative and depth: qualities which incontestably define a substantial literature.

'Age Of Iron' by Tony Kan-Onwordi which sets the tone and texture of the other stories is flamboyant in view of its very poetic outlook. The psychical disposition of the narrator is principally of disappointment and rage over a torturing social reality. He walks 'stopping under the burden of truth and prophecy, through these streets, reeking with pain and rage.' (p.11). He is the poet-prophet and watchman who notes 'the sights, the smells and sounds... the tired, cracked streets... old men silhouetted in doorways like cursed fig trees... children with spindly legs and wild eyes.' (p.9). But he also soberly notes that 'it was not always so with us. We had a past that was rich... the wealth our soil and sea brought us... soldiers with pot bellies and politicians in flowing gowns conspired in their greed to impoverish us' (p10). Demoralised and alienated by all the drought and darkness in the land, the option of exile becomes inevitable: 'the journey from this land of my birth, bearing with me the sacred seeds of hope and renewal' (p.13).

Life as an exile in a foreign land and the precarious life of a returnee exile to his native land constitute the subject of 'Exile' and 'How Dahunsi Regained His Nakedness', contributed by Obi Nwakanma and Akin Adesokan respectively. Utilising the fictive resource of realism, the writers render the experience of exile as unfortunate and psychologically traumatic. Because of it and for want of a relief, the exile's recourse is too consistent restatements of self-identity 'I, a priest-king in exile!' (p.21); and nostalgic retrospections of a real home and culture gracelessly abandoned. Worse still, the tragic termination of the life of Aduba and Dahunsi (both returnee exiles) in circumstances of military siege further express the dangers of military rule and the ultimate meaninglessness of the self-preservation that a move to exile dims to achieve.

However, an examination of the military problem through a portrait of the dictator archetype is most adequately achieved in Uduma Kalu's 'Riddle Of The King'. This story uses the technique of a tale (a parable) within another tale. The parable is an oral literary resource deployed in a modern context for a purpose of thematic and technical development. The convergent lives of King Eburute and Professor Eneke espouse the dire consequence of any act of opposition or betrayal directed at an authoritative military personage. King Eburute is the typical dictator: brutish and sly, with a set of teeth that are 'greenish... giving him a carnivorous look...' (p.71). His example emphasises once again that dictators are easily taken for granted for their lack of physical attractiveness, positive intellectual prowess and social finesse. And this is perilous to their opponents as the (case of Eneke shows) because beneath the intellectual naivety of a dictator lies a deadly suspicion, an unfathomable rapacity, a calculativeness, murderous propensity and the concern for self-preservation and perpetuation.

The military problem is yet further examined in 'Science And Technology', by Sunday Ayewanu. This story is unique for its use of the technique of dream for conveying and expressing social reality. The experiences of Olumide are clearly Kafkaesque: first, of a moving fan up the ceiling that transforms into an arm waving at him; second, of an advertised breed of car with engines on its opposite ends; and third, of an advert that disappears from the page of the magazine in which it had featured. Moreover, Olumide, confronted by insistent interrogation by two very stern-looking, rifle-wielding soldiers, grows confused, confounded and incoherent and he is ultimately passed off as a lunatic case. The total effect of all this, in addition to

Olumide's fantastic regenerative transmutations, is a heightened farcicality that leads to a heightened entertainment value in the fiction. Science, like a dream can make the implausible plausible; and by extension, the absurdity of military imperviousness and predation, turn more manageable and surmountable.

Similarly, the dream technique is used by Akachi Adimora-Ezeuigbo in 'Faith' to highlight a feminist predisposition to confronting and arresting certain basic forms of female-targeted aggression of men. The dream of a very young girl, raped by a very grown and very high-handed man, is no longer a dream but reality in its deprived abjectness. The narrator, a university teacher and a feminist, is in complete empathy with the situation of Victoria who is a victim of sexual harassment by a male university lecturer. In the face of all this, a Christian solution of looking up to God for deliverance from difficult situations of life and impending evil is the deus-ex-machina suddenly introduced by the author to secure the student's victory over her male pursuer.

Carnal desires of men and women that translate into non-violent forms of moral turpitude and abuse of relationships constitute the focus of such stories as 'A Heathen's Niche', 'On One Foot', 'Whistles In The Wind', 'The Table Under The Almond Tree', and 'Valley of Hunger'. The story 'Agony Of Love' by Iyabo Adeoye is a moving tale of the emotional trauma of losing a loved one to sickle-cell anemia.

Perhaps the stories 'Dobo', 'The Last Harmattan' and 'Obinna the Vulture', are more poignantly expressive of general hardship and excruciating poverty that protracted military misrule engenders. The metaphor of 'Matainos' (in 'The Last Harmattan') as a haven of agedness, faith, chaos and decrepitude is particularly apt. Even so, the means of reprieve from poverty vary: mainly by the exploitative (as in Dobo turning to petrol racketeering for which he is ultimately and tragically burnt) and by the diabolical (as in Obinna and his friend turning to the service of a witchdoctor for money-making rituals).

These then are the landmarks of *Trembling Leaves*, an anthology that is definitely a worthy successor to its immediate antecedents. Yet, in spite of this, it is observable that because these anthologies of short stories must aspire to the expectation that 'the Nigerian literary scene needs a fresh vitality, new voices and new visions, they have (by their very form as anthologies of short stories) crystallised a pattern that is indicative of a diminishing volume and vigour of overall fictive conceptualisation and actualisation. In other words, anthologies of short stories

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<< by different authors (in contrast to those by the same author) through their increasing ascendancy get notably suspect as doing a disservice to the literary canon because most of the new talents that have been published in anthologies do not become fully fledged artists with robust voices, vision and literary careers. Their expressions are mainly scanty and incidental fly-by-nights existing 'obscurely' only on the pages of the anthologies.

In view of this, it is worth reiterating that artistic production is still largely an individualistic pursuit. Robust and vibrant artistic individuality, expressed in equally robust and vibrant artistic productiveness over a period

of time, engenders a definable, easily recognisable character - call it the corpus of the artist - and thus establishes a lasting thematic, stylistic and technical basis for consistent reference and discussion.

Hopefully, the writers within *Trembling Leaves*, would grow far beyond their tentativeness and their short-stories, and in time establish, each of them, their unique, vibrant voices, vision and styles, and thereby contribute a meaningful plus to the prestige of the heritage they are committed to uphold.

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From your child, with love

Lookman Sanusi, Toyin Adewale, Richard Mammah (eds), OPEBI THE HUNTER AND OTHER STORIES, Synergy Educational (with Mace Books), Lagos, 1999, 72pp.

AN experimental literary offering. Nineteen stories produced by certain Nigerian primary school pupils under the auspices of Synergy Educational's story writing competition, initiates the Nigerian literary landscape into a new tradition of children literature written by children themselves. This example is an effective challenge to a hitherto dominant tradition of children stories written by adults from the perspective and for the perspective of the child. Examples of the stories abound: *The Drummer Boy* by Cyprian Ekwensi, *Chike And The River* by Chinua Achebe, *Without A Silverspoon* by Eddie Iroh and so on. These books, by every intent and purpose, have been and will continue to be considered and accepted with an appropriate seriousness befitting the established literary canon.

In fact, after an adult reading of *Opebi The Hunter*, the feeling that develops is that of a pleasant encounter of a curio: an aggregation of children's perceptive and cognitive potentialities clothed by a very raw innocence, naivety and promise. Seriousness of acceptance and consideration may not be on immediate response, aided by a nagging suspicion woven from such puzzling thoughts as: aren't these stories merely a rehash of those heard from adults? Are they really original and imaginative? Can children really be storytellers with a confidence and deliberateness of thematic and technical intent comparable to the matured and experienced mind of the adult storytellers? Can these stories stand rigorous criticism?

Yet the anthology is truly a surprising reflection of the narrative imaginativeness and effort of very young people who, from the newest seeds which in the sprouting stage of this literary offering, will grow to become formidable materials for further literary growth and expansion. This is the conviction and vision of the editors and publishers and thus, the stories are presented as a serious and ingenious affair, to which a reader's consideration is understandably important.

The stories are mostly, and essentially, moralistic-didactic portraits, animal and human stories operating within the mode and tradition of oral literature which in this instance are expressed and presented in the written medium. The resources of orality as regards development and presentation (thematic and structural) are judiciously adhered to and utilised.

The themes examined which are varied, are of the consequences of greed, arrogance, jealousy, larceny, lasciviousness and of being talkative; others are retribution or poetic justice in the face of inhuman treatment or evil and the glories of responsibility and humanness.

With the exception 'The Promise', 'The Wicked Nurse', 'The Stranger', 'Opebi The Hunter' and 'Oliaku And Ego', all the other stories (exemplified by 'The Blessed Family') are very restricted in development. But what they lack in length is compensated for by a certain succinctness and ingenuity of thematic unfolding. 'Joromi The Good Boy' expresses in a deeply touching manner the inevitability and finality of death. Joromi is 'a

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