

Cyprian Ekwensi's *ISKA* Revisited

Virginia U. Ola*

Since 1969, the reputation of Cyprian Ekwensi as a novelist has been struggling to resurrect itself from the traba which it was summarily confined by the often-cited destructive, though just, article Bernth of Lindfors, in No. 3 of *African Literature Today*. Not even Emonyonu's spirited response to the same, or the more moderate assesment of Killam later, could hasten this process of revival.¹ More recently, John Povey and Eustace Palmer embarked on a mission to rediscover Ekwensi. While avoiding critical paternalism or unwarranted praise respectively, they have evolved a new and more constructive angle to Ekwensi's criticism, anchored on the important area of the author's social concern.² This was, in fact, Emonyonu's main point in the above-mentioned article.

Povey's contention is that Ekwensi's efforts would be better appreciated if the criticism of African Literature showed more concern for the sociological and cultural aspects of a writer's work. While taking issue with Povey on several points, Palmer sees this as already happening in the context of a new African aesthetic which stresses the relevance and purpose of literature in an African enviroment. It is understandable that Ekwensi should feature prominently in this new era of criticism, if one could regard it as such. However, the core statement in Palmer's article is for me the one which empasizes that if we are to discuss Ekwensi as a serious novelist 'with important and influential qualities', "then we must pay as much attention to his art as to his social concern".³ The present paper intends to pay such attention to Ekwensi's, perhaps best realized, but most ignored novel, *Iska*.⁴ While *Iska* is not a completely well-wrought novel, it does show some basic forms of development in the author's handling of his usual theme of pressure of the city, and its eventual destruction, quite often, of the unwary and the uninitiated.

The major accepted areas of weakness in Ekwensi's works are: the failure to keep a proper grip over all the materials of his story; the use of incidents of psychological implausibility and melodrama to resolve his plot; and instances of linguistic infelicities and sometimes outright moralizing. *Iska* betrays fewer instances of these faults and in addition shows more consciousness of some vital elements of the novel in plot, structure and its tight pattern. It also differs from the other works in other important areas. It is significant that the heroine in this instance is not miraculously saved from her misfortunes by too contrived a conclusion, although the reader is still treated to some doses of melodrama at the end. She is not allowed to escape to the village for some replenishment after her normal and spiritual degradation, like Jagua Nana. When she visits the village here it is out of necessity, but she decides eventually to go back to the city to face a new life more suited to her needs and dreams.

Ekwensi's central concern in *Iska* is to dramatize the extent of the destructive and divisive tribalism which inevitably led to the Nigerian Civil War in the 1960's, but the theme is anchored in Filia and her Northern husband, Dan Kaybi, who against stiff family opposition

*Department of English and Literature, University of Benin.

marries her. The usual letter-writing of the Nigerian popular pamphlet plays a central role in the realization of this inter-tribal affair. Dan Kaybi's eventual death in a fight does not come as a surprise to the reader, for Ekwensi has from the start portrayed him as a character prone to violence and rash in judgement. He has had two potentially serious brushes with violence before the third one in which he dies. He is not unlike Okonkwo of **Things Fall Apart**, the man prone to violence who finally dies through it. Dan Kaybi is also consistently pictured as an outsider as is testified to by his father's vehement protest against his marriage to Filia.

You will not see what is wrong. You have never seen what is wrong. You were born a Northerner. You would not study your **Koran**. You would not go to mosque. You went to school. You would not wear robes and sandals, only English dress. You speak English all the time. You associate with other tribes. Now this is the result. What do you call it? (*Iska*, p. 30)

This type of artistic consistency is applied in the depiction of most of the characters in the book, thus sparing the reader the sudden and improbable reversals of character such as we notice in Ana of **People of the City** when she attends Sango's wedding to Beatrice, itself a most improbable union. The same consistency cannot however be said to have applied in the case of Musa Kaybi and the shaky political association between him, Nafotim and Yusuf Alabi.

What sets *Iska* apart from Ekwensi's other works is that in a way it is a tragedy in more subtle ways than just the inability of the heroine to find peace, and her eventual death. Filia is situated in the middle of the story, acting as a central consciousness through whose eyes and with whose point of view we see all the events. The story is that of her tragedy. Her disappointments, grief, occasional agony are the themes of this work which is structured in the form of a quest, the search for happiness and meaning in life. The dominating theme of tribalism is also worked out through her and her fate. By birth and by marriage she is in the middle of the tribal animosities which led to her brother's death in a riot, and her husband's death in a brawl in a local bar. The latter forces her to leave Northern Nigeria and seek for a means of livelihood in Lagos, a more convincing reason than that of Jagua who abandoned her husband on the pretext of childlessness. Filia is actually not allowed to experience marriage. She simply drifts from one mistake to another till her death.

The stages of her tragedy are worked out in a progressive structure which is the dominating pattern of the book. It moves in stages, and as each stage is passed the reader is exposed to a variety of confused individuals with shattered lives and relative degrees of failure. The confusion and insecurity which threaten the peace and manhood of Gadson Salifas, Rayimi's aimlessness and dedication to violence and destruction; the bewilderment and unhappiness of his young wife are aspects of the tragedy which Ekwensi explores in this book, and which *Iska*'s own tragedy is but a microcosm of. The numerous men and women each with a personal problem, who form Piska Dabra's congregation after abandoning their husbands and children clearly reveal the fact that the exterior glamour of Lagos and most big cities is quite often a cover for deep-seated pain and suffering. Like *Iska*, all these characters are in search of peace, success and happiness in a most bewildering environment. Ekwensi captures this fact in the following passage:

Life as a whole was one big joke. This was a place as artificial as plastic dishes, as treacherous as the eroding hillsides of Milikan Hill. This was what they call Lagos: a circus, a cinema show put on by some ambitious ass simply to have pages of history written for him by clowns. A home of bastards...and phony characters all searching for their own identity. (*Iska*, p. 125).

This environment provides a sharp contrast to the protected home and conventional environment where Filia grew up. Her journey into Lagos is one into experience and the steps to that experience are concretised in her interaction with the four major characters with whose names the sections of the book are identified: Dan Kaybi, Remi, Piska Dabra and Dapo Ladele, each of whom is closely associated with the heroine and involved in her education. All of the characters in a way owe their importance in the book to Filia; each typifies a specialized form of experience from which the heroine emerges either wiser or degraded, but each time realizing more painfully her helplessness and psychological emptiness. Ekwensi also uses them for exploration of different themes.

Filia possesses the youth and beauty of many of Ekwensi's heroines, qualities which get them into circumstances or attract them to men whom they either save or destroy, sometimes together with themselves. From the start she demonstrates what Palmer calls "the restlessness and yearning for excitement, activity and freedom which usually impel those who are destined to be the city's victims. Iska is such a victim and her tragedy is final, unlike that of Jagua who is given the opportunity to go back to the village after her long sojourn in sex, crime and politics.

Filia is introduced to the reader as highly vulnerable, both physically and emotionally. Her experience on her honeymoon testifies to the physical aspect. Her idealism is both admirable and at the same time constitutes her major weakness. Despite the usual glamour of Lagos life there is something sombre, something depressingly tragic about her story. Filia hardly ever operates as a free agent. The string of bad luck which trails her moves in such quick succession that she hardly recovers from one before another follows; but through all the stages she still struggles to hold onto a positive vision of life. The death of her father, followed soon after by that of her husband, suddenly forces her into a search for the limelight, to make a name in the world of fashion and modelling. She had tried to settle at Ogbu but found the agricultural community dull and boring. In a short while she discovers that the tempo of Lagos life is unlike anything she has been used to. Initially she clutches onto her idealism as is evident from her answer to Remi:

I'm not interested. For me to give myself to a man I must love him—for his own sake. I must see his face in all I do. I must think of him the whole time. His smile must mean my happiness; his frown must be like—like hell—fire. I must be sad, miserably lonely if I do not see him for twenty—four hours. I must love him; then giving my life will be right. (*Iska*, p. 96).

She also admires intellectual endowments in men; as she says, "I like a man to have strong views."

Iska lacks Jagua's compulsive search for riches, wealth and comfort. In men Jagua goes after the rich and the powerful; Iska, in contrast, wants them "elegant and civilized". As ephemeral and vague as her descriptions are, they do point to qualities positive and admirable, and are not likely to lead to Jagua's type of deliberate exploitation of Freddie to assure her own comfort and security. Filia is ambitious and intends to realize her dreams through hard work. She is fully cognisant of the types of personal sacrifice she would have to make in order to achieve this fame which has become almost an obsession. That she solicits her mother's help by inviting her to Lagos, and eventually giving her a more fulfilling life, is a sign of her sense of responsibility. This arrangement is the reverse of Ekwensi's usual practice of eventually retiring his heroines to the village. In *Iska* he brings the village to the city and gives the heroine the chance of dying in the company of her mother.

I do not share Povey's lament that Ekwensi has not created a major political figure in

Iska: "No figure stays relentlessly in the mind in this slender bitter-sweet love-tale. Politics becomes merely a backdrop to the events".⁵ The roles of Nafotim and Rahimi shed enough light on the political temperature of the period. On tribalism, which is portrayed as the politics of hate, Dani Kaybi's death furnishes enough evidence of its depth. Its irrational basis and senselessness are recreated in Iloma Enu's account to her daughter describing the tribal riots in the north:

One mistake they all made. No one of them tried to find out what was wrong. The Ibos came. They saw the Hausa man fighting with the Ibo man. They joined the Ibos. The Hausa came. They saw the Ibos fighting their man. They joined their own man. Just like sport. Just like children... The fight had begun. From that shed it spread throughout the market, throughout the whole town and into the suburbs... For what reason? A small quarrel over potatoes. (*Iska*, p. 25).

The passage is not just a vivid description of the Nigerian issue but a universal comment on the nature of mob reaction everywhere. Filia's brother died in the riot and the bitterness precipitated her father's return to the village. In recounting this sad episode by means of flashback, Ekwensi avoids over statement and over description, as sensational as the events actually were. The story of the Enu family becomes a paradigm for that of most Ibo families in Northern Nigeria at that troubled period. Ekwensi is able to pick out just the essentials of that life while avoiding the mundane and the banal.

The remaining characters fit into the religious theme. In Nigerian literature Ekwensi is perhaps second to only Soyinka in exposing artistically the shady dealings of the strange mushroom of religious sects flourishing in all corners of Nigeria to day. Piska Dabra's religious techniques are as exotic as his name is. Typically Iska is drawn towards him with a force she cannot understand: only to find that even in religion Lagos operates in a special way. The "messiah's" less than honourable advances towards her soon jolt her into reality. On her first day,

Filia stared mesmerized at the bearded face of Piska Dabra with the clear brow and mumbling lips. The hands were lifted in an attitude of prayer but at that moment it seemed to her that a vital force exulted her above man, above the political petty squabbles and the irritation of Lagos, of the world, of life itself. Piska Dabra's words fell on her shoulders lightly and pleasantly with the delicacy of feathered snow. Suddenly she caught herself nodding, so relaxed was she. (*Iska*, p. 131).

This initial trance—like response and her misconception are totally erased at her final discovery of the prophet in the arms of Abigel Salifas. Salifas is one of the unfortunate ones who has had his family broken up by the strange fervour and zeal of the followers of the prophet. When the prophet dies in one of his paralytic fits, Abigel once more roams the city in search of a job, a house and another man. In Remi's case, after establishing a riotous record with men of all ranks and reputation and after a serious attack of venereal disease, she finds some peace and stability among the Prayer People and eventually settles down to married life. In many ways Remi has been a foil to Filia who has in reality never truly been a part of Lagos. After her brief sojourn with the Prayer People she continues in her search for peace and happiness. Her final discovery is that even in religion there is corruption. The Prayer People had been unable to do anything for her body and in addition had crushed her spirit, and in her own words "...how could she respect a man who talked of the life beyond and yet led in the present one a life of sin?" (p. 167). If Dapo Ladele raises her hopes once more those too are quickly dashed when she realizes that Dapo Ladele either talked of principle without believing in them, or believed in them only as long as there

was no one to buy him off. The bizarre circumstances of her death mark the end of her search.

It therefore seems that *Iska* has two well-developed organizational patterns: the first based on the stages of Filia's experience and process of education the second based on the three major themes of the novel: politics, tribalism and religion. All these are ultimately controlled by Ekwensi's symbolic application of the title of the book throughout. *Iska* is the Hausa word for wind, and right from her childhood Filia has been identified with it. Ekwensi has made the word synonymous with the Ibo "Ogbanje" and the Yoruba "abiku." A typical characteristic of this type of existence is restlessness, an unsettled life that blows across the world several times. In one of her reflective moments she comments "Nothing was ever consummated in this life of hers. One thing began... something else took over". Even Dapo had been struck about something intangible, "about this girl—some mystery he had never been able to penetrate" (p. 208). She has drifted through the novel in search of something she never found. The drifting is portrayed as both intrinsic to her nature, and as part of Lagos life where girls "drift" along the martina during lunch. She has lived as a true child of the wind, retaining an air of mystery which finally culminates in her mysterious death. Lagos is formless, chaotic and always in a flux; Filia's life and dreams seem to fall into such a pattern. Even at the peak of her fame in the modelling career there was always a feeling in her that she was in the wrong place. She constantly falls into fits of depression when she becomes overpowered by a feeling of emptiness and even considers suicide as a solution. Ekwensi calls her problem the nakedness of the soul (p. 142). She moves from depression to determination in turns, but always seeing life as a challenge which she is willing to face; in fact as an adventure which one must undertake.

Filia's character therefore falls into this symbolic motif to which the other themes of the book become sub-themes, and in which context most of her otherwise illogical and strange actions begin: to acquire some meaning. The sudden change in her character from a young protected woman who insists on going home to seek parental consent before her marriage according to an age-old Ibo tradition, to one with an insatiable desire to be an actress, to model dresses, to appear on television and in the newspapers makes sense in this context. Even Hawa Kaybi, her mother-in-law, calls her choice "an adventure". Although the Mallam would not say much this critical time, another Mallam had said of her at the age of five: "Do not go on this long journey because... Do not go on this long journey because... Not yet. All I see is *Iska*, wind. It comes, it goes, like magic" (p. 35). The Mallam had openly predicted that she would die young. Logically too, Filia's mother had commented that the qualities Filia liked in Dan Kaybi were "fleeting" ones; like *ska*.

The consistency and deliberateness with which Ekwensi explores this symbol invests *Iska* with a mysterious, intangible quality which hovers over the heroine's life and over the fluid landscape of the novel. In addition, the heroine lacks the earthiness of Jagua and is sympathetically portrayed throughout. These qualities, together with Ekwensi's usual talent in evoking the violence, lust, confusion, cruelty and various pressures of Lagos, from which even Jewel's marriage to Okere cannot sometimes escape, give this impression. He has successfully demonstrated the tensions, real terrors, loneliness, and the sense of failure which underline the exterior glamour of Lagos. The merits are substantial enough to offset the negative effects of dull moralizing and political polemics, occasional resort to sensationalism, and melodrama often expressed in stilted and outright bad English, and still make *Iska* Ekwensi's most successful novel, both thematically and stylistically.

At the end of it all one cannot but wonder if Ekwensi has not suffered unduly by being slotted into the wrong compartment in the critical exercise; and whether in fact he should not be considered as belonging more to the tradition of the picaresque novel rather than to the more advanced technique and form conscious novels of the twentieth century to which Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* belong, especially since he is one of the

earlier practitioners in the area of the African novel. I am talking here of the type of consideration which Ian Watt accords to the earliest masters of the English novel in this passage:

After Defoe, Richardson and Fielding in their very different ways continued what was to become the novel's usual practice, the use of non-traditional plots, either wholly invented or based on a contemporary incident. It cannot be claimed that either of them completely achieved that interpenetration of plot, character and emergent moral theme which is found in the highest examples of the art of the novel. But it must be remembered that the task was not an easy one, particularly at a time when the established literary outlet for the creative imagination lay in eliciting an individual pattern and a contemporary significance from a plot that was not itself novel.⁶

The object of a picaresque novel is to take a central figure through a succession of scenes, introduce a great number of characters, and thus build up a picture of society. Fielding and Smollett took their readers through such a panoramic tour of society. We admire them for this ability just as we admire Scott as a novelist of action and even as a novelist of character, though his heroes and heroines are wooden and unreal. The heroes' actions always seem to have an artificial source rather than arising logically from the passions of the characters who most of the time exhibit a most gentlemanly incapacity for passion. Usually they are brought into action by being put into some arranged situation. Most of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novels fall into these two major groups of English prose—the novels of action and the novels of character. Analyzing the plot of *Tom Jones*, Edwin Muir writes:

The plot of *Tom Jones* is an adroitly constructed framework for a picture of life, rather than an unfolding action. The incidents are accurately timed; they come in just where they should to suit the scheme of the book; but they are never inevitable; we do not see in them the logic of action, but an exquisitely orderly mind arranging everything for its own purpose.

The main object of such a novel to which *Iska* in some ways bears resemblance is not only to delineate character, but to give it in such variety as to suggest a picture of society. Even melodrama has its own merit when used successfully, as we find in Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Ekwensi's mentors may therefore be some of the early masters of the English novel rather than "third-rate American movies and fourth-rate British and American paperback novels".⁸

The novel is rich in offshoots, and most of the terms used for its criticism are still controversial. A substantial number of present day critics of this genre are the devotees of E.M. Forster and Percy Lubbock, and are brought up in the tradition of the round character, point of view and form respectively. Most novelists could find a position within some of these critical schools as long as critical analysis of technique does not become everything. Ekwensi should find such a place. That critics themselves sometimes become tired of purist positions in criticism is clearly demonstrated in this down-to-earth criticism of Henry James by Edwin Muir: "James is the father of most of these question-begging terms; he was an incurable impressionist; and he has infected criticism with his vocabulary of hints and nods"

Notes

⁶See Bernth Lindfors, "Cyprian Ekwensi; an African popular novelist," *African Literature Today* No. 1969, pp. 2—14. Ernest Emenyomi "African Literature: what does it take to be its critic?" *African*

Literature Today, No. 5, 1971, pp. 1—11; G.D. Killan, "Cyprian Ekwensi," **An Introduction to Nigerian Literature**, ed. Bruce King, University of Lagos and Evans, Lagos and London, 1971, pp. 77—95.

²John Povey, "Cyprian Ekwensi: The Novelist and the Pressure of the City" in **The Critical Evaluation of African Literature** (ed.) Edgar Wright, London, Ibadan, Nairobi, Heinemann, 1973, pp. 73—94 and Eustance Palmer, **The Growth of the African Novel**, London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1979, pp. 36—62.

³Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴Cyprian Ekwensi, **Iska**, Spectrum Books, Ibadan, 1981. All references to this text are from this edition.

⁵Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁶Robert Scholes (ed.), **Approaches to the Novel**, Chandler Publishing Co., San Francisco, 1961, p. 61.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁸Lindfors, *op. cit.*, cited in Palmer, above.

⁹Scholes, *op. cit.*, p. 177.