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**A Grammar of African philosophy:
Being and transcendence in Falola**

Abstract. The entrance of Toyin Falola, a renowned African scholar historian based at the University of Texas at Austin, into African literary creativity has mid-wived a significant landmark in the development? of an African theory of knowledge and an African theory of being, with the consciousness of miscegenation of African oratorical, rhetorical, and discursive poetics alongside the stifling alternatives of Western paradigms and metropolitan capitals of ancient Greek and modern philosophies. Integrated into this poetics of African knowledge are philosophical reconstructions of the Yoruba concept of Eda (being), a dialogical discourse method, African individuality and socialism, the philosophy of womanhood, motherhood and of the transcendence of human spirit, illusion and magic over the empirical structures of science and physicality. This provides a multi-disciplinary window into the project of evolving a valid African epistemology and theory of knowledge that are insulated from critical and theoretical homage to Western alternative paradigms.

Keywords: Toyin Falola, African literary creativity, African theory of knowledge, Yoruba concept of Eda (Being), first person singular pronoun – the ‘I’ of social individuality, motherhood, epistemology

Introduction

The oratorical devices in Falola’s literary works are taken from African Yoruba folktales, which are studded with knowledge of life and the universe and are therefore sources of an alternative African philosophy of knowledge of social, cultural, mythographic, and metaphysical inquiry. Rather than narratives mythologized out of their unsung relevance as an indigenous system of knowledge, they are in fact evidence of a civilization and its

religiously well developed potential for greatness, which were truncated by the evils of slavery and colonialism before their emancipation into canonized paradigms for global consumption as an exclusive African cultural and philosophical praxis. ‘Mothers’ Wisdom’, a poem in Falola and Adesanya’s encyclopedic volume of poetry, *Etches of Fresh Waters* (2008) uses African folkloric structures of rhetorical narrative as a ‘school’ for teaching African philosophy of ‘essaying’, using hypothetical questions to carry out inquiries into assumptions about existential truth. It is also evidence of a dialogical system of knowledge, where one element A calls another B into existence, inasmuch as universal knowledge is predicated on relations of phenomena and their aggregates and angles of difference, and difference within sameness – in one word, relativity. The poem embeds mythographic details that make its surface simplicity a deceptive foray into the depth of the African anthropomorphic subjects which are recurrent archetypes in modern African literature as derived from folklore. The ‘monkey’ in this poem is a type of *Eda*¹ ‘being’, a paradigm of behavior, character, and being which is similar but different from the cultural-semiotic infractions of meaning we may associate with *Iwa* in Yoruba social ontology. Both *Iwa* and *Eda* are categories of epistemic concepts in Yoruba philosophy of ‘being’ – a most stupendously mimetic term that forms the crux of ancient and modern system of theorizing in literature, art, and criticism.

In fact, the depth of Yoruban encyclopedic knowledge would extend its plasticity of meaning to metapoetic and phoric relations of symbology wherein the ‘monkey’ that is ‘killed’ by an unknown assailant at large is a personification, an agency of codification, a riddle, a representation of a treasured phenomenon which is not necessarily anthropomorphic but a significant phenomenal archive of knowledge: “Who killed the monkey and hid it in the forest?” (p.55). This “monkey” figuration of meaning belongs to the same trajectory of discourse as “the red-eyed turtledove”:

Who killed the red-eyed turtledove in a hut
 Of one who owned the hut?
 Who met the owner of the hut in his hut
 But refused to share the turtledove with the
 owner of the hut?

I had no answers

In both instances of the obsessive search for valid empirical answers to philosophical assumptions and hypotheses, the poet-persona and scholar had no valid answers to satisfy his acute appetite for knowledge. Thus, in the first case, his conclusive memory of perplexing disappointment over the futility of his quest for knowledge via a perplexing research question was: “Disgraced – I traveled back to the village”. In the second failed attempt, he sighed “The city had no answers for me”. In this poem, the “monkey” and the “turtledove” narrative belong to the same paradigm of mythology and proto-scientific method of inquiry in indigenous African societies.

The “monkey” and “turtledove” discourse is a long mythohistorical narrative in Yoruba folklore which *Etches* embeds as a complex archetype of the *Eda irubo* or *Eni irubo* – the ‘Victim’ as opposed to *Eda buruku* or *Eni buruku* – the ‘archetypal Villain’. This is a branch of the Yoruba philosophical category of meaning and of knowledge. The sociology of Yoruba moral theory and cultural concept of characterology produces specific categories for reading the nature of being. Such concepts include, among others, *Eniyan rere* and *Eniyan buburu* ‘good natured person’ and ‘evil person’. There is a Yoruba proverb, *Eni pa inanki lo n gbe inanki pon. Pami koo gbemi* ‘It is one who kills the inanki (gorilla) that hangs him on his shoulders, kill me quick, and you hang me on your neck’. This anecdotal has paracultural correspondence to the archetype of villainy and consequence of killing the “albatross” in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s epic narrative poem “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”². But this is a mere coincidence and does not evince any cultural or literary influence. The “monkey” in this archetype is a type of *Eda irubo* or *Eni irubo* ‘victim’, while the “turtledove”, with a slant of

epistemic difference, codifies *ohun irubo*³ ‘the scapegoat phenomenon’. These are categories of epistemological meaning. The monkey as a personage signifies integrity of ‘smartness’, intelligence and extraordinary skills. Since questions and argument are the logic of philosophy, the questions in Falola’s poetry are somewhat like the Greek Socratic dialogue. They are discourse questions about the question of philosophical ‘truth’. They seek to subvert the culture of Western resistance to African paradigm of the nature of philosophical and scientific inquiry.

The African culture was consigned to ‘silence’ and repression. Thus, Falola and Adesanya’s episteme has unraveled the complex ideology of justice and activism that are integral to African indigenous knowledge. It has reinforced the postcolonial struggle by the minority of academic ‘leftocrats’ to subvert the hold that the over-privileged metropolitan philosophy has on the African nature of “Truth” – knowledge, wisdom, and understanding which are expressible in the politics of economic, political, cultural, and intellectual disequilibrium. This poetic narrative also resonates a paradigm of indigenous African theory of society whereby the rule of law is cruelly repressed by the super ordinate cream of African aristocrats and their Western surrogates who are allergic to fundamental questions that challenge their self-reflexive ego: foundational questions that reveal the crude underbelly of leadership villainy and cannibal corruption, exploitation, and the voracious appetite for genius in evil in post independence African procapitalist societies. This poetic work attempts to use oral folkloric narratives as extended metaphors for an African kind of socialism and socialist ethics which, according to MJC Echeruo (2009),⁴ had evolved at the idyllic time and space of Okonkwo’s Umuofia in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and is different from the Western Hegelian type of socialism. Kwaku Korang (2009)⁵ also asserts that Unoka expresses his idleness as a type of socialist, protest ideology of “social individuality that was not yet recognized by the Igbo society” at the moment, time, and space of Umuofia historical

ethnography and socioeconomic ontology. These are problems that carry weighty epistemological questions in African theory of society and being. That is why the poets are breaking the structures of repressive silence – a silence that is louder than an uproar, the silencing of the African epistemological truth. They meant to ask a question, to interrogate history and the moment of history! The poets meant to open to the readers the African elastic moment and momentum of existence, to know the nature and status of economy, culture, and human rights using African critical strategies that are exuded in their poetry. The poets break the shells of mystic silence; they provoke a critical tradition that hopes to dismantle the hegemonic superstructure of the metropolitan capital.

The governing philosophy of *Etches* is that the intellectual capital finds it morally correct to interrogate the vassal. Yet, ironically, the intellectual capital seeks to outlaw the vassal from interrogating their own paradigm. This reminds me of Niyi Osundare's philosophy of antithesis in which he says, "We must ask questions" – because interrogation of the past and the present is the bedrock of philosophical knowledge. Wherever and whenever truth is repressed and confined to silence, that "silence is louder than voice" because, as in Osundare's poem, "Benin Mask in a British Museum", "Unspoken grief becomes a god" that would not "dance *langba langba*" to the "drums of Philistine revels"⁶. It will one day boomerang. The poet-persona in *Etches* is an agency of the oppressed, an index of the seeker of the truth, wisdom and knowledge. The seeker of truth asked the question in innocence. But the oppressor who made the rule against such license of interrogation by the commons ironically broke their own laws by employing the services of a question to answer a question in the poem. The commons asked: "Who traveled to the jungle to become a monkey?" Instead of answering the question or confessing they are ignorant of that knowledge, the lords reacted with a question: "Why ask a question / If answers are forbidden?"(55). The questions asked by the commons constitute a philosophical inquiry

meant for purposive exposure to knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. The poets are suggesting that where “truth” is hidden, there “puzzles” of “imagination of answers” are replete. Thus, the governing philosophy of this poem is that knowledge is phenomenal, and as such, a desirable object. Where the transaction and distribution of knowledge is diplomatically repressed, the wildness of imagination thrives. And this may be a potential source of social anomie. Invariably, the poem addresses three levels of epistemic elements here – one is the theory that knowledge thrives via interrogative discourse, and lack of it provokes or encourages the procreation of imaginative refractions whereby the knowledge that is hidden translates to promotion of ignorance and instigation of violence. Where people strive to survive the stifling suffocations of public ‘secrecy’ and withdrawal of the essence of truth and knowledge, truth becomes a rare phenomenon. This type of society will consequently produce a flurry of imaginations that are meant to unravel the truth. In this work, we have a discourse of African folkloric philosophy that becomes a strand of social ideology. While, for example, the metropolitan capital of humanities and cultural studies represses the use of indigenous theory to interrogate African literature, it has enabled ‘contamination’ of the African episteme of ‘truth’ through a battery of Western critical mediation methods that are often misapplied to the reading of African textual space and social praxis.

First Person Nominative Singular Pronoun and the Emergence of an African Theory of Social Individuality

The depersonalized poet persona in this poem is represented in first person nominative singular pronoun – the “I”. I have elsewhere in this paper described the use of “I” as the mark of a sociology of individuality. It is clear here, perhaps, that the individual mind and soul in search of knowledge is a collective energy for the whole body of knowledge seekers or Africana scholars who wish to know the truth, to unravel the depth and meaning of existence in African context. This is perhaps a reference to the first generation of African scholars who

sojourned to Europe and America in search of knowledge about their own African society. This forms part of Falola's historical perplexity as he attempts a metacritical narration of the problems of African intellectual development in *The Power of African Cultures* (2003:42): "The elite were aggressive in appropriating European intellectual ideas, even to explain the tradition they claimed as theirs". This comment by Falola confirms my assertion about the philosophical target to procreate an African epistemic strategy in *Etches*. Thus what the Western praxis of knowledge teaches about Africa and African literature and the arts is out of the "multiplicity of puzzles without end." Since the Western Universities are distanced from the African pre-colonial lifestyle by time, space, and cultural differences, the attempt to theorize about that alien space cannot bear objective understanding of truth about their subject, but forms a multiple work of guesses and imaginings that are apparently both advertent and inadvertent misapplications, misteachings of African nature and theory of existence. The African students "traveled" to the city to solve the puzzle" about the truth of African knowledge – literature, art, architecture, meta-science, science and pristine technology. They "...stumbled on a house of elders" who were supposed to know the "answer". But, ironically, the city elders are ignorant and also in quest of knowledge about the same complex subject.

It is necessary to account for the semantic and philosophical extension of the first person nominative pronoun "I" as the poet persona in this work. This is the "I" of social responsibility, as well as a generic metaphor for the ideal African personage who is in quest for knowledge. There is an extensive range of morpho-semiotic representation of the "I" wherein it codifies every person, all seekers of knowledge and understanding about the universe. Thus, the "I" is an integrative sign, with composite reference to all seekers of wisdom and knowledge across the borders of race, space, religion and language. Here lies one of the many strands of globalization poetics in this work, apart from the incorporation of

paintings and drawings of people of all races in the illustrations that accompany the poems to make it a literary work of “double sense” and aesthetic appeal. The thesis of “Mothers’ Wisdom” is that knowledge about Africa, which Africana scholars and researchers are looking for, resides in Africa and not anywhere else. No wonder then, that when the poet-persona “traveled to the city to solve the puzzle”, he thought he was lucky to “stumble on the house of elders” at the city only to discover with utter disappointment that even the city elders themselves are in search of the same cryptic answers to their innumerable questions and problems of knowledge and the common basic question of the meaning of existence in Africa and in African epistemology. Apparently, the “elders” and “the city” in this poem carry a cultural semiotic equivalence of the professors of the Western metropolitan intellectual capital. In the Yoruba culture from which the “fresh waters” of cultural and philosophical ideas that enabled this poetry takes its source, elders of the city may generally mean *awon agbagba ilu* ‘philosophers of the kingdom’. Within the context of this poem, they are *awon ojogbon ilu* ‘the professor, philosophers, wisdom bank of the kingdom or realm’. However, the logic of reason in this poem is beyond this level of interpretation. The “city” here means the Western world. And the elders are university wits in the advanced world, where African scholars prefer to study. Even though the research is all about African societies, Africana scholars still seek to learn about Africa from overseas. We see that within a split of ironic situation in this poem, the elders of the city in the foreign “land” calls the knowledge seeker a “foolish man” because he left the indigenous land of knowledge only to cross the seas to seek knowledge of his own cultures in a foreign land where people are “ignorant”, where the philosophers at the intellectual capital are themselves asking to know better about the nature of African knowledge. The city seems to have confessed to the poet-researcher their own diplomatic strategy for repressing the truth of African knowledge, which is achieved by making African scholarship dependent on foreign ideals and theories in a

fashion that is similar to the post colonial madness of obsessive dependency on imported schools, books, textiles and modern custom from the West.

Falola's criticism of Africa's intellectual dependency on the West has been essayed in several of his treatises with an insistence that "Africans have continually adopted change and adapted to imposed circumstances" (2003:92). The problem of Africa's ambivalent modernity is such that Africa becomes a dumping ground for expired European ideologies because both the academic and non-academic elites have introjected colonial values that blinker them from the light of reason over methods of applying African indigenous philosophy and praxis to Africa's social, economic and political problems. The problem has been succinctly put by Ali Mazrui:

...development is modernization minus dependency ... African culture is central to this process of reducing dependency in the dialectic of modernization ... What is needed is more of modernity and less of "the Western spring." A non-Western route to modernity is possible for Africa – provided African culture is fully mobilized as an ally in the enterprise." (1996:3-4, 17)⁷

In the poetry under study, the West is presented as uncomfortable with the researchers discovering the truth about the "power of African cultures" and the nature African knowledge. Therefore, they have to outsmart the situation by "killing the monkey" and hiding" or concealing it "in the forest". The monkey is a personage of African knowledge and power of philosophy. There is the consuming fear and caution that "... if you are slow to hide the monkey in the forest/ The monkey will hide you". Here is a trenchant revelation about global and Western politics of knowledge. The West is smart to quickly "hide" the "monkey" – to deny the knowledge and existence or validity of claims about the existence of African epistemology. Peter Bodunrin, one of the earliest African scholars that drew awareness to evidences of rational thinking and philosophical inquiries in pre-colonial African societies predicted:

I am sure that the influence of our speculation will one day spill over the walls of our academic citadels to influence the lives of society at large. I am also sure that a distinctive African philosophical tradition and focus which the rest of the world cannot ignore, and which they will be compelled to study will emerge (1985: ix).

No intellectual argument may be clearer than this. Bodunrin's philosophical vision has today withstood the test of time as Africana scholars of the 21st century are now awakened to a new consciousness about the intellectual sophistication of African philosophy as well as its relevance as a reliable and valid body of knowledge which may be explored in the direction of search for an independent African intellectual identity and total development. Falola and Adesanya's *Etches* is a subversion of the Western negative paradigm of discourse which inferiorizes African cultural and intellectual identities as a relevant praxis for globalization. African knowledge may not necessarily subvert the hegemonic dominance of the West on the industry of knowledge in the world; it would however provide an alternative therapy for global development. It is only by providing an African alternative as contribution to the global melting pot of cultural and intellectual hegemonies that Africa would not lose her own powers of identity to the politics of global negotiation. Aime Cesaire (1956:15) says "There are two ways to lose oneself: by a walled segregation in the particular or by a dilution in the universal". Definitely, *Etches* is a powerful African poetry with the ideology of intellectual liberation of Africa. Thus, in this poem since the West ("the city") has no answers for the poet-persona in quest of valuable knowledge of Africa, he returns to Africa, the original source of knowledge to find answers. Why does one have to travel from Yoruba land, where the real festival takes place, and travel to New York to conduct research about "Egungun festivals" (masquerade) from the plastic sculpture of an *Aladoko* (a type of masque) that is 'imprisoned' in glass cabinets at the American Museum of Metropolitan Arts in New York? Indeed, there has occurred an intimidating mass exodus of the African intelligentsia from Africa to the West in search of intellectual green pastures. While this cream of the new

African Diaspora escapes from the cannibal ideologies of African post-colonial leadership, they are enthralled by the dominant intellectual ideology of the metro capital in the West.

Falola belongs to a new consciousness in the generation of the new African Diaspora who have gained satiation from their quest and questions in the West. And they have now become unveiled to a new thinking that Africa is the source of their intellectual 'being'. Thus, the poet persona returns to his African origins like a prodigal, and confesses: "Disgraced – I traveled back to the village". This paradigm of return to African roots has occupied a large field of study in the discourse of Africa and Africans in Diaspora who felt that the re-inscription of their humanity, and their individual and racial integrity in the space of world recognition lies in the 'journey back' to Africa. In the 1960's up till the 1980's there were several fragments of philosophical opinion about the search for "roots" and "identity" by the blacks in Diaspora, both in the West Indies, North America, Brazil, Cuba, the United Kingdom, etc. The racial fires that engulfed the Western world and their colonies were an untold panorama of dehumanization and disregard for the humanity of blacks after the abolition of the slave trade and its replacement by official racism. Thus, the poet figure in *Etches* attains a distillation of spirit whereby the experience of movement from the historical moment of ignorance to knowledge is a driving force. There lies an overriding motivation for the poetic voicing and philosophy of the work. Falola and Adesanya were born on the soil of Yoruba land in Africa. Their immersion in the native culture precedes Falola's voluntary exile to the Western world of post independence African generations. But, the fires of negative energies that conspire to repress their search for 'truth', 'wisdom', knowledge, and understanding was a child of circumstance that led to their sojourn abroad. Ironically, what they seek in the West is not there. The answer to their critical question is resident back home in the forgotten African "forest". Thus the journey back to the African village is a totalizing experience that exposes the ignorant seeker of self-knowledge and truth to the real cultural

meaning of motherhood and womanhood in Africa, which is different from the philosophical paradigms erected for the gendered specie in the West.

In the Yoruba paradigm, the mother is “wisdom” personified. And the image of the ideal African woman is not a prostitute, sex object, lesbian, homosexual, single mother, or victim of rape. The celebration of Mothers’ Day is not a new invention in Western culture; it dates back to the festivals used to honor Rhea, the mother of the gods. The epistemic culture and versatile mythocosmic logic behind the idea of motherhood in African cultures is deeper and more complex a praxis than the Mothers’ day celebrated every second Sunday of May in Denmark, Finland, Italy, Turkey, Australia, Belgium and the United States. A variant of this also occurs in the Christian archetype of the motherhood of Mary mother of Christ, who, invariably, is regarded as the harbinger of eternal life in Christendom. In Africa, the entire continent is known by the panegyric - ‘Mother Africa’, while the space and land is popularly called ‘Fatherland’. In African social semiotics, the land is father, but the earth is mother. So, in Africa the logic of philosophical configuration of ‘motherhood’ as found in many creative and critical works is ‘Mother Earth’. In fact, in his book, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (2004), Falola refers to Anta Diop’s assertion that the “origin” of “matriarchy” was indeed “attributed” to “Africa” (45). In African literature, the image of Africa is one of ‘Motherhood’ – a reference to the expansive African cosmos and the very collective spirit and soul of Africa. This kind of complex cultural philosophy of ‘motherhood’ is not in the West. In fact, history shows ‘Mother’s Day’ celebration in the United States originated from the personal self-culture of Julia Ward Howe in 1872 and Anna M. Jarvis, a school teacher in Philadelphia who in 1907 “began a movement to set up a national Mother’s Day in honor of her mother, Ann Maria Reeves Jarvis”. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the second Sunday in May a national holiday in honor of mothers⁸. In the African paradigm, not only is the history of motherhood as a philosophy far older than in the United States and

Britain, it is possibly older than that of the Greek and it can not be traced to the self-culture of a single individual within the ontological span of Africa's cultural history. In 'Mother Africa', the earth is mother – an ideal metaphor for soil fertility and good climate and luxuriant vegetation, peace, innocence, power of procreation, and ultimately of “wisdom” as foregrounded in 'Mothers Wisdom' in *Etches*: “Ten aged women kept the village gate”. Then later, the poet persona is directed by his conscience, the psychologically repressed but often erupting voice of 'truth' in his soul:

Go back to the village women
 Seek the wisdom of the land
 Listen to moonlight stories
 Acquire the power, great power
 To make the old into new
 The new into the familiar
 The familiar into the new (p.55).

As poetry of multiple sense, the authors also use this womanhood episteme to dismantle the theory of patriarchy associated with African culture and society. It is somewhat a literary and critical rejoinder to the early works of Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe where women are represented in the images of subservience, weakness, helplessness and irrelevance in the fictional social structure of African societies. This conceptual model of female subservience has been debunked in Fashina (1997). Pre-colonial Africa did have a modicum of archetypal regard for the 'being' of the woman. However, what seems to have negatively induced the post-colonial African society to a dream state of uncustomary breakdown in gender relation was the loss of traditional ethics to colonial mentality and the absurdity of Euro-modern culture and development along the ideologies of amoral European practices. And again, on the part of African women, Juliette Bartlett-Pack (2005:85) observes, “Having come in contact with Western feminist ideology that challenges traditional ideas about women rights”, African women elites like Zulu Sofola began to “create women characters that seek to establish egalitarian relationships with their husbands”. The fact is that African women elites

who were exposed to radical ideologies of female liberation from the West began a culture of self comparison with western women through gender activism – a kind of colonial mentality and misplaced priority of induction into otherwise amoral and culturally contaminating socialism which post-colonial Africans mistook for ‘female emancipation’ and ‘social civilization’. It becomes morally contradictory that while some African women elites romanticize the greatness of African indigenous cultures, they paradoxically suspend the culture for western alternatives when it comes to issues of polygamy, dress and hairstyle, adornment, and the pride of their gender responsibilities within the context of African customs and tradition.

And this kind of ‘colonial mentality’ did not spare another cream of African professionals who became elated at the new delicate renaissance and Eurocentric humanism that was unleashed to subvert the growth and development of an African indigenous cultural nationalism ‘in the face of increasing racial discrimination’ against blacks in the world “by Europeans” (85). The insidious injection of uncustomary colonial cultural practice into African cultural space destroyed the legacy of intellectual and psychological war which the likes of David Brown Vincent, a European who adopted the African name, Mojola Agbebi, (1860-1917) fought for.⁹ Agbebi has lamented:

The introduction of the usages and institution of European life into the African social system has resulted in a disordering and a dislocation of the latter which threatens to overthrow system altogether and produce a state of social anarchy. Dire evidence of the resultant chaos is to be found in the total breakdown of parental control, and the advent of a life of wild license mistakenly taken to mean the rightful exercise of the rights and prerogatives of individual liberty, as defined and permitted under the customs and usages of European life.

Agbebi committed his life and works to the study and propagation to Yoruba traditions and art, while disagreeing with his own European birthmark, culture, and customs, especially regarding polygamy.

Niyi Afolabi's vigorous review of *Etches* rightly inscribes it as "The poetry of double sense",¹⁰ in the sense of Yoruba dialectics of "double speaking" through proverbial listing as a method of discursive poetics. However in the sense of Falola's conceits of radical theories, the work reveals a meta-logical poetics of polysemic narrative of historical, anthropological, hermeneutic and cultural aesthetics, – all at meta-poetic and meta-communication levels. Thus, viewed from this critical lens, *Etches* becomes a poetry of multiple sense by a "mouth sweeter than salt". The concept of "falolaism" in *Etches on Fresh Waters* is holistic and integrative, embracing the whole gamut of consolidated cultural and poetic philosophy of the two-in-one authorship. Thus, falolaism incorporates the familial and filial philosophical energy of the Aderonke –esque reconstructions of 'humanism' along inter-gender integrative force. And the public announcement of the duo's ironic literary coitus and "tying" of a poetic "nuptial knot" provides a scholarly refuge whereby this claim can be referenced with incontrovertible footnotes – not the kind of critical fallacy that adopts the importation of *Tokunbo* 'imported' theories as alien external paradigms to engage the African work, but one which regards the textual sovereignty of the text as a self-generative and self-referencing corpus of an African knowledge. A logico-semantic proposition resides in the symbolic "wedlock" of the male and female authors of this huge volume – much like the symmetrical energy of anode and cathode, Sango and Oya as deities of electricity. And this is a branch of epistemic initiation into a deification process for the copula, namely Toyin Falola and Aderonke Adesanya. It is exempla of a philosophical paradigm shift that seeks to dislodge existing structures of spatial gulf between the human gendered species as erected by Western humanism and the social sciences. As African creative 'deities' of indigenous knowledge and wisdom, they seek to transcend, to break the physicalized barriers of gendered space and to dissolve the 'flesh' which is the very agency that acts as proxy for the physical, mental, psychic, and philosophical impediments that barricade their 'ascension' out of the realm of

limitations of 'Ego' and binary identity. The fusion is ironically a subjugation of the human 'knowledge' which ties man's perception of reality and objects to eternal moments of fixed images and imaginaries of an ever-present space in-between. This space is the barrier between gendered wo+man (woman and man conflated and thus realized as a transform – wo-man). That often perceived gendered space between man and woman tends to halt their ascent from stereotypes. But, these poets use poetic imagination to dissolve the gendered space between their sex, and to fuse their gender energies in positive procreation of epistemological ideas.

Etches becomes an ironic mockery of the spurious 'stereotypes' and inter-gender 'war' which have been fought with intellectual instruments and cudgels of dialectical and materialist ideology that are borrowed from western political and literary theories, and which do not have systemic relations of cultural meanings to indigenous African gender ethics and knowledge of nature. The poet-scholar philosophers are therefore essentially anti-structures. Iconoclasts both! And this becomes a conceited irony of conflict between Falola the anthropological and cultural historian and Falola the philosopher-poet/deity on the one hand, and Adesanya the fecund art-historian and painter-poet/deity on the other. As a historian Falola could be diachronic, synchronic, and anachronistic at the same time. These are structural paradigms. But his anti-structural philosophy of space/flesh dissolution and the astral transcendence and submergence of natural laws is an evidence of incredible philosophy of high science and promiscuous ambivalence that defines their genre of art as the work of *Abami eda* 'a mysterious being'. This is another systemic and indigenous theory and episteme in the cosmology of African space. As an African (Yoruba) category of thought, *Abami eda* as a critical term defines a person, situation, idea, thing, or place that is stupendously inexplicable in ordinary language – one that transcends the normal natural paradigm of knowledge and of 'knowing'. This strand of theory is a holistic 'integram', that is, an

integrative grammar of transcendental philosophy that provides framework for the constructed episteme in *Etches*.

Thus, *Etches on Fresh Waters*, as a product of gender miscegenation and a radical exhibition of the much talked about but not so substantiated claims to a magical fusion of gender energies in pristine African society, becomes a uniquely transcendent poetic masterpiece that deals a lethal blow to the arsenals of gender segregation and apathy in African scholarship. This is one of the many strands of integrated critical theory and poetics of mediation that the work exudes. But there are complex ironies involving the absurdist contrariety of meanings generated by the title of this work. In the Preface to this work, the scholar-poets attempt a self-critical exploration. They draw allusion between the title and the Yoruba discursive idiom used in the epigraph, *Omi tuntun ti ru, Eja tuntun ti wo inu e* which they interpreted as “Fresh waters engender new fishes” (p.x) or in my gloss, ‘a spring of fresh waters has begotten a shoal of new fish’. This idiom has correspondence of meaning to the old western or universal idea of ‘new wine in new wine skin’, which initiates a level of meaning that *Etches*, as a title, alludes to at the surface. The idea of ‘fresh waters’ is a meta(-)phoric foregrounding of the authors’ grand mission to break new grounds of thinking, and rewrite a grammar of semantic plasticity, not just by creating a new concept of reading in the humanities for the banal purpose of intellectual excitement. Theirs is a new philosophical statement of profound meaning, one that seeks a new outlook of reading history, space and humanity in relation to the universe. Thus the concepts of *Omi tuntun* and *eja tuntun* in this work transcend the ordinary sense of its daily application. The ordinary sense of ‘new fish’ in ‘fresh waters’ is only the beginning of its versatile branchings of meanings, as the authors of this work can not be expected to have foregrounded such simplistic meaning in their highly transcendent and lavishly ironic and meta(-)phoric poetry, especially in view of their scholarly backgrounds, as well as the African esoteric force that is the hallmark of this poetic

work. In fact, the paradoxical co-occurrence of “etches” (which the poets make “on waters”) and “waters” is evidence of my stylistic distrust of the authors’ semantic and literary intentions and distentions. Water is luminous and it is liquid; whereby etches cannot, in ordinary sense, be marked or engraved on water.

This conflation of paradoxes further validates, perhaps, my point about the infinity of semantic fields of meanings and the dislodgement of paradigms and structures of knowledge via a denial of the truth and fact of the phenomenological. Although in the theory of knowledge, ‘truth’ and ‘fact’ may not co-occur within the same radius of meaning without the pitfall of self-contradiction; I have suspended this paradigm with lower case initials for the purpose of this enquiry. The reader is therefore bound to extend their imagination to cover several possibilities of allusive metaphors of speech. At one breadth, the idea that ‘etches’ are being made on ‘fresh waters’ evokes a sense of the possibilities in artistry – a process that triggers our imagination to contemplate the possibility of new artistic breakthrough. By semantic extension, the componential meaning of the authors’ choice preposition – ‘on’, which is [+surface], gives direction to possibilities of meaning that occurs to us after initial confusion over the permutations of the meaning of this poetic title. Given the instance of meaning derivable from the angle of this preposition, we could imagine the authors making an artistic painting design on a surface of ‘fresh waters’. However, would this water get polluted by the paints? Would the art which ordinarily should be a work of permanence be able to maintain stability on the ‘waters’? How would the ‘etches’ of art work retain its traditional power of inscriptive permanence and plasticity on waters whose molecules are loose and free to the extent that it is anything but permanent? Through the logic of these interrogative possibilities that challenge the reader’s imagination and attempts to suspend its disbelief, this work has opened up a theory that hopes to subvert the earlier theories of ‘the permanence of art’ - the likes of John Keat’s “unravished bride of quietness” that is etched on

“the Grecian Urn” in his romantic poem. While earlier Art theorists believe in the ‘permanence of art’, the conceptual model of falolaism is conversely the ‘impermanence of art’. There is a deliberate hint at the possibility of impermanence of art as an alternative theory. This work is an attempt therefore to reconstruct the epistemology of art by denouncing the knowledge of art as stable, true, fixed or permanent. Ultimately, the images of antiquated gods and goddesses in the Greek, Roman, African, and Asian galleries and museums are no longer to be read and perceived or realized as fixed historical relics of knowledge, but an ever changing, luminous vibration of knowledge that spoke to this moment, this living present in human existence. Herein appears a new brand of falola-esque postmodernism, though the temper of this theory is never postmodern in the ordinary sense, but essentially meta-postmodernist, seeking to subvert Western postmodernism, formalism, structuralism, and the idea of realist phenomenology. Thus, *Etches* foregrounds a delicate theory of knowledge that is at once rebellious and radically provocative. The system of thought presented in *Etches* invariably dismantles stereotypes of religious dogmatism which confines the human to certain fixed programs of existence. Thus, the world’s major religious doctrines and philosophies that posit a linear progression of the human soul from carnality to sacredness is invariably too fixed a paradigm for this type of falola-esque ‘fresh waters’ of knowledge. In as much as the doctrines are stereotypes, they are antithetical to the system of fluidity propagated in the philosophy of *Etches on Fresh Waters* .

The ideational versatility of Falola’s *Etches* at once underscores the imprecise and often ambiguous communication system of Literature and of the poetic language in general. The weakness of verbal arts, and the flexibility of creative language provide leverage for Falola’s articulation of his “metaphysical conceits” in *Etches*. Not only does this work foreground a multiplicity of meanings through the co-occurrence of otherwise ambivalent lexico-semantic words, it has done so deliberately to mesmerize the reader and disrupt the

paradigms of syntagmatic order and invariably of coherent thought. Falola's interrogation of the logic and morality of the order of cohesion is not pitched to subvert the integrity of intellectualism, but to prove that the paradigms of social, linguistic and ideational cohesion and coherence are outdated such that they impede the progress of dynamic intellectual reasoning. Thus, his poetics is one of high intellectualism that seeks freedom from the ties of historical formalism. Falola's kind of philosophical theorizing appears to be studiously taking off from where the likes of Hegel, Frantz Fanon, Wole Soyinka, Anthonia Appiah and Homi Bahbah may appear to have lost their voice or been misheard. The principles of linguistic cohesion and ideational coherence, the techniques of sequence and enumeration – indeed all the decorum of logic and rules of composition ever known in the art of rhetoric are often generally brought to naught in 'subversive' literary and poetic language. Here is the fundamental license to aberration in literary and poetic language. Whereas literature claims to be the closest to humanity and natural reality in the creation of a picture of the disorder in society as a means of promoting social order, literature paradoxically provokes disorder and chaos via its license to transgress the order and decorum of human language and thought system. There is no doubt that Literature brings intellectual excitement to the discipline of humanities and the arts. But, at the same breadth, as Wole Soyinka said, "Literature is the most promiscuous of all disciplines" (2009)¹¹. This observation is true to the extent that the flirtation of Literature with other disciplines is neither a strength nor a weakness. The strength of literature is underlined by its flexible accommodation of other disciplines across its open borders. Thus Toyin Falola the scholar historian turned poet-god *Sango* and Aderonke Adesanya the painter and art historian turned poet-goddess *Oya* have crafted a work of radical subversion of natural knowledge.

If we consider that the "etches" made on "fresh waters" is at once a pollution of the freshness of the "waters", we must by the same stream of thought agree that this kind of

pollution is positive, and that the metaphor is figurative of the ironic processes of creativity through destruction, like the cancer patient who must endure pain afflicted by the physician's audacious dispassion in caring for and curing them. Thus Falola's work again addresses the fundamental paradox that underlies the philosophy of creativity. In order to be made with more refined quality, the gold must pass through the heat. In order to mold a magnificent sculpture of brass work, the work must pass through the furnace of fire. No wonder in Yoruba philosophy, it is said that *Ikoko ti yoo je ata, idi re nilati gbona* 'the pot that must eat salt and pepper must endure the heat it takes'. This philosophy is overtly procreated in *Etches* in the poem entitled 'KENGBE ORO (THE PREGNANT GOURD)' when the poets say

The honey eater
 Looks not at the edge of the axe
 The astute trader
 Bothers not with the din of the marketplace
 The egg lover
 Regards not the anus of the hen
 Thirsty throats befriend weeping palm tree
 Stretch out your calabashes
 I have poured libation
 Come join the spree (*Etches*, 59)

The foregoing lines present a paradigm of African philosophy of endurance, perseverance and hard work in order to achieve success in any life endeavor or goal. It is a social science of human experience in society. Tayo Alabi in his sociological inquiry into the dimensions of meaning in "Songs in Udje Poetry" (2009) has suggested that the one method of studying pattern of organization in African society is to look at the structure of their oral performance. The poem above is derived from Yoruba oral performance and it speaks volumes about the system of Yoruba knowledge and philosophy about the relations of hardwork and achievement. Thus, the oral agents in this poem such as the "honey eater" versus the "edge of the axe", the "astute trader" and the "din of marketplace", the "egg lover" and the "anus of the hen", "Thirsty throats" and "weeping palm tree" are altogether a paradigm of indigenous African thought system and philosophy of life. Each level of

anecdote is a summary of a large and expansive node of folkloric stories that teach some kind of rational theory of nature and of existence in the face of chain and choice, cost and benefit analysis. They belong to the logic of thought in relation to the human and the environment in the attempt to negotiate survival. This principle were products of close observation of social and economic dynamics of history and a deep meditative contemplation on the social order and consequences of mutual interaction between human and nature in a reciprocal cost and benefit chain of accountability on gain and losses, opportunity cost, and alternate forgone within the world ecological order. Who says the indigenous African peoples of pre-colonial period were incapable of rational thinking? The rationalization of thought in the poem “KENGBE ORO (THE PREGNANT GOURD)” is an example of a systematic body of philosophy of human social behavior within a paradigm of possible challenges of choice, cost and benefit. The poem attempts to posit categories of objective truth derived from African indigenous knowledge of the psychology of social behavior. Thus, the poem outlines tested and testable valid observations that have become derived principles and poetics of human behavior in different social and economic contexts. This principle of the poetics of human behavior and the facts of existence are procreated in other segments of this poem as in,

Heavy words require no knife
 To part
 The commonplace is no abode
 For the ones born to rule
 The pit recalls
 The pig arrayed on royal bed
 The weakling
 Courts not the warfront
 The one with chopped fingers
 Asked not the goldsmith for rings (*Etches*, 59)

This segment joins symmetry with the preceding one in terms of formalistic structuring of language, philosophy, and the ordering of ideas in a way that reveals the height of poetry at its best. If poetry is truly “the best words in the best order”, then *Etches* is not just a volume of undigested details of African oral folkloric verbalization, but a stylistic ordering of African

indigenous ideas and philosophy of being. For example, the two segments of ‘KENGBE ORO’ cited above are a run on of ten lines each. Each segment has five ideational levels, which are relayed in a pair of parallel lines, wherein the first line is a noun phrase that functions as the subject of the clause, where the second line in each case begins with a finite verb that functions as the head of a verbal group structure, as in ‘The honey eater/ Looks not at the edge of the axe’ and ‘The egg lover / Regards not the anus of the hen’. This pattern of structural stylization is not consistent in this poem and never in the entire volume as an evidence of the falola-esque idealization of anti-structure and anti-paradigm philosophy. This escape from formalism possibly enables the use of inverted order of subject and verb position in the second and fifth segments of this poem, as in ‘Commune I with my forebears’, ‘Bring I warnings and tidings’ and ‘Shave I must the foamy cap’ (underscore mine). These are some of the consistent stylistic snapshots of this work which are ironic evidences of ‘form’ from which the poet-philosophers seeks escape.

Apart from the above, the ironic constraint of social individuality resonates in the use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ in this work. This type of individuality is a postcolonial philosophy of ideological activism that has literally proved dangerous to most postcolonial artists of the social order of liberation like Soyinka, Achebe, Ngugi and others in exile from Africa. When the poetic voicing of ideological criticism of the State and social order become personal in a way that challenges the culture of ‘collective’ voicing, the bourgeois tradition interprets it as an infraction of order which elicits the charges of felony especially in the infantile democracies of post-colonial Africa. The same kind of novel social individuality may have accounted for the tragedy of Okonkwo as a sacrificial lamb of ‘new’, and hence rude, order of individual activism in a native tradition that was yet to emerge from her primal values of communalism and collective responsibility. Thus, Achebe’s Okonkwo is a gifted but too queer character with a new kind of individuality and social outlook that transcends his

time and age. Thus, his own people looked at him as a man of excessive mania. He expired before his time, though MJC Echeruo (2009)¹² says “Okonkwo dies to return” and his vision would outlast his contemporary Umuofia society. The philosophy of the ‘I’ in *Etches* is at once ironic and ambivalent when viewed from the angle of double authorship. But, considering the ‘meta-phoric fusion of principles and energies of gender identity and the dissolution of the separatism of identity as foregrounded in the metaphysical and conceit-ful ‘wedlock’ of the joint authors, the resort to a grammar of individuality (the ‘I’) in the articulation of poetic, ideological and philosophical elocution becomes an interrogation of contemporary knowledge. This stance becomes part of the meta-narrative and meta-phoric ploy in *Etches*.

Thus the conceited complexity of poetic meaning is that the poets have engaged the fluidity and vulnerability of language to play on our intelligence through the magical powers of words. This is a slant of the paradigms of transcendental vibrations of this poetry. And if magic is an hypnotic suspension of our reason and sense of rationality, as opposed to science which invites our sense of rationality through empirical knowledge, then I can deduce that another slant of falolaism, as an emergent theory, is the use of ‘magic’ and all its arsenals of hypnotic power to carry the reader on an imaginative flight of delicate harmony between ‘reason’ and ‘illusion’, rather than the usual stereotypical platitude of imaginary inexplicable tension and binaries between reason and illusion.

 Notes

¹ From the Yoruba concept of *Eda, Iwa, Ori, Ayanmo*, we can construct a theory of being in African philosophy. See Babatunde Lawal, Orilonise: The Hermeneutics of the Head and Hairstyles Among the Yoruba” In *Features* Volume II:2 (Winter2001/Spring 2002)

² This another category of thought and reading theory of African literature.

³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner (“Marinere” in its original publication) is one of the English poet’s longest poems written between 1797/8 in the Lyrical Ballads collection of British Romantic literature.

⁴ See MJC Echeruo, “African Literature and the Burden of History” – plenary paper at the 35th annual Conference of the African Literature Association (ALA) – with the theme “ Africa and Blackness in World Literature and Visual Arts, University of Vermont, Burlington, USA, April 15-16, 2009.

⁵ See Kwaku Larbi Korang’s “Postcolonial Humanism in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” paper delivered at the 2009 ALA conference, University of Vermont, Burlington.

⁶ Niyi Osundare’s radical poem, “Benin Mask in a British Museum” – FESTAC ‘777 was written in the world Festival of Arts and Culture hosted by Nigeria in Lagos, 1977. The grieved African ‘god’ is “unspoken” having been caged nude in show glass in a British Museum. Osundare moves from the idioms of traditional archetypes to radical sociology protest against post-colonial oppression.

⁷ Cited from Toyin Falola, *The Power of African Cultures*, New York, University of Rochester Press, 2003. where Ali Mazrui was copiously quoted.

⁸ Cited from <http://www.davformothers.com/mothers-day-history>

⁹ 1911 reprinted in Henry Wilson, ed., *Origins of West African Nationalism*. New York, St. Martins Press, 1969, p.304-308.

¹⁰ Soyinka’s keynote lecture at the April 2009 African Literature Association (ALA) conference at the University of Vermont in Burlington, USA.

¹¹ See Niyi Afolabi, “The Poetry of Double Sense” a critical review of Toyin Falola and Aderonke Adesanya’s *Etches on Fresh Waters*. In: *Etches on Fresh Waters*, Carolina Academic Press, 2008, 6-27.

¹² See MJC Echeruo’s 2009, op.cit.

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