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**THE UNFORTUNATE GENERATION WRITES BACK:  
THE SIGNIFYING TEARS OF AKEEM LASISI'S *NIGHT OF MY FLIGHT***

**Abstract.** A very lamentable disposition of the contemporary phase of Nigerian literary criticism is the tendency to construct a Manichaeian category of appraising Nigerian writings in such a way that writes off the imaginative products of the new Nigerian writer as *other*. While there have been some passing sympathetic explanations for the 'unpleasant gaps' within these generational experimentations (with reference to economic, institutional and political challenges plaguing the younger generation), there has, however, been the predominant castigation of new Nigerian writing as an imaginative and intellectual exercise in mediocrity, in comparison with those of earlier generations. This paper sets out to revise the critical persecution against new Nigerian writing by examining the robust creative and discursive statements of Akeem Lasisi's *Night of My Flight*. This work explores the postcolonial, gender(ed) and intertextual negotiations that cast it as representative of a new creative energy growing within this 'peripheral' zone of Nigerian literature. It subsequently advocates a new direction in Nigerian literary criticism which should ensure a healthy reading culture of new Nigerian literary products, with a view of promoting the elements of their uniqueness and generational difference.

**Key Words:** Postcolonial(ism), Canonicity, Gender, New Nigerian Writing (Writer), Differences.

## INTRODUCTION

Ever recurring within the sanguine stream of Nigerian literary criticism is the volatile whirlpool of the 'generational debate,' which has monumentally constructed polemical signposts of the Nigerian literary canon. A dominant feature of this development is the assumption of the older generation(s) of writers as the revered custodians of the ideo-aesthetic ingredients of the Nigerian literary practice, which often makes room for the self-righteous condemnation of the efforts of the upcoming generation as peripheral. This *other* (the castigated generation) often 'writes back,' subverting the cardinal pillars of the hegemonistic stance of the older. In this, the contentious dialogues around the Nigerian literary scene become what Jacques Derrida would most likely note as an *aporia* in the Nigerian metaphysics of literary presence, a scramble for representation and signifying which needs to be deconstructed.

This paper concerns itself with an appraisal of this generation-bent debate, with a particular assignment of interrogating the choleric and often cynical vilifying of the new Nigerian writer. It seeks to revise the marginal status of this latter generation constituting a group of 'Unfortunate Children of Fortunate Parents' (Biodun Jeyifo's coinage and title of a paper which this paper's title benefits from) by engaging in a postcolonial and gender-conscious reading of Akeem Lasisi's *Night of My Flight*, identifying the latter's seminal imaginative statements and discursive intents which, to a great extent, rupture the essentialist and minnowing positions of the older generations of writers and critics against the new.

### **Sundry Voices in a Castle Of Canon Making**

That there has always been a set of Manichaeian traits in the generational criticism of Nigerian literature is a fact that is as immanent as the tendencies of assigning authorizing signposts of what constitutes this literature are ever present, a procedure which evinces practices of discursive

inclusion and exclusion. In this regard, there often occurs a super ordinate, boundary-prescriptive 'guarding' of the ideo-aesthetic landmass of Nigerian writing by representatives of the previous generation(s), a development reminiscent of discursive 'commentary' which Michel Foucault observes as formulaic and ritualized, 'things said once and preserved because it is suspected that behind them there is a secret or a treasure' (56). And very characteristically, the next generation interrogates the basis of this commentary, revising the considered gaps inherent in the reading(s) of the previous generation(s) along parameters which are often repulsive to the latter. An example of this discursive warfare is that which raged between a cream of monumental figures of the first generation creative guild and members of the Ibadan/Ife and Ahmadu Bello University schools of imaginative and critical contemplations representative of the second generation on matters involving linguistic realism, socio-cultural rootedness, political commitment, and populist bearing, which the latter accused the former of lacking in its creative assignment(s). On their part, the first generation pioneers saw their successors as united in shallow and opportunistic pontificating. In an interview with Jeyifo, published in *Contemporary Nigerian Literature: A Retrospective and Prospective Exploration*, Wole Soyinka avers:

Now this "generational divide," a lot of it of course, in ideological terms, a lot of it, you will admit is, a lot of blather. One disappointment which I've had in the, what you might call the new wave of writers, the ideologically inspired writers, is for me, a self-cocooning amongst themselves, a kind of conspiracy of comradeship ... And when I talk of "self-cocooning" I discover habits of protecting even the obviously dishonest amongst themselves....But as long as even within its fold the so called "second wave" ideological left insists on gathering strange birds under its umbrella and keeps a conspiracy of silence about the obvious shallowness, hollowness and opportunism, that is really the word, there will always be this seeming divide(25).

The above instance of generational confrontation is indicative of the process and economy of canonizing. In David Clippinger's apt submission, a canon is 'a group of texts,

authors, and / or artistic movements...considered representative of the particular interests and values of a discourse' (46). The battle for canonicity thus involves the negotiations of several subjectivities towards a representative or a set of representative literary templates. Clippinger argues that

The contestation over canonicity in contemporary culture has erupted as a result of the investigation into the institutional processes and procedures by which a text is elevated, deemed "art" and hence canonized(46).

Within the above framework, the new generation of Nigerian writers (constituting the third generational wave) may be succinctly described as excluded. Living within a grossly harassed socio-political reality of institutional corruption, nepotism and the atomizing blight of economic hardship, the bulk of new Nigerian writers are embattled within a riddled educational universe, the impossibly high cost of publishing, a depleted audience more drawn to film than to books and the inertia of spirited criticism in engaging with their literary wares. In his paper referred to above, Jeyifo makes the following thoughtful remarks:

The very title of this address-"The Unfortunate Children of Fortunate Parents"- is a reflection of this grim historic fact that young people in general, but especially those in our tertiary institutions, and with regard to virtually all aspects of life chances, face daunting odds; they face material, psychological and spiritual disabilities that were simply unimaginable in my youth, in my years as an undergraduate and a postgraduate student. Any talk of inter-generational dialogue between respective generational cohorts that ignores these crucial factors is doomed to be stillborn (26).

Jeyifo's observation notwithstanding, the present generation of Nigerian writers has been predominantly demonized by an avalanche of criticisms by its older colleagues who (it seems) chose to be largely unconscious of the peculiar socio-political moment(s) of the contemporary Nigerian nation-state and the implications of these on the multiple thematic and aesthetic challenges the present generation of Nigerian writers faces. For instance, Charles Nnolim's

fascination with the salubrious postcolonial statements of the earlier generations of writers with regard to political nationalism, cultural retrieval and interrogation of the failed post-independence Nigerian society leads him to view the purported de-emphasis of these concerns by new Nigerian writers (a spurious reading in itself) as evidence that they ‘lack a clearly defined thematic focus’ (8). Does this remark suggest that the hallmark of a generation’s presence in a national literature is the inscription of a thematic metanarrative? For Niyi Osundare, despite the ‘hungry, enthusiastic, energetic’ attitudes of his younger craftsmen and women to their thematic and aesthetic burdens, they tragically evince a pathological enslavement to foreignness and the virus of a hip hop hysteria in the present atmosphere’ (31). One wonders if ‘foreignness’ is really the peculiar problem of the new Nigerian writer when one notes the breath-taking manipulations of traditional oral resources by writers like Funsho Aiyejina, Ademola Dasyuva, Remi Raji, Akeem Lasisi, Rotimi Fasan, and several others, or if hip hop is necessarily pestilential to the production of a viable Nigerian work of art. Femi Osofisan magisterially erects the ‘absence’ of the new Nigerian writer on the Nigerian literary canvas when he submits that if a roll-call of the writers/writings of the last decade were to be called, ‘it is almost certain that the response would be a blank stare’ (68). And Tanure Ojaide vehemently charges the new Nigerian poet with imaginative aridity. In reaction to the latter’s flagrant disposition in comparing a new generation poet with Osundare, Remi Raji, a highly experimental poet of this embattled epoch, pursues:

You see, the problem lies in the inability of a proper critical fixation on the bulk of writings coming out. So, clearly this is even evident in the statement of Tanure Ojaide who is probably not sure of the identity of the writer he compares with Niyi Osundare. And to refer to writers of the new generation as copycats is the unkindest and uncritical thing I have ever read on the pages of our newspapers in recent time (Egya,90).

The instances of the critical persecution aimed at the Nigerian writer of the new age depicted above signify an incident in which the terms for literariness are determined, organized

and circulated by a network of codes, dispositions and practices authorized by a group or groups of *grand* authors who create meaning in their ironical decree of the *death* of the text and the end of textuality. This becomes the *truth*, ignoring and silencing any other perspective of imaginativeness, ideology or thematic concern running contrary to their ideological and aesthetic views. Their discursive truth echoes Peter Canning's opinion when he says,

Truth can only be represented indirectly, "transcendentally," by the empty (but universal, a priori, necessary) categories of understanding "filled with empirical intuitions" (339).

Thankfully, though, the present experimentations of the new Nigerian writer inscribes the Nigerian literary scene as a supple space for multiple imaginative possibilities, historical recollections, futuristic projections and thematic delineations encompassing both collective and individual concerns. As Sule Egya maintains, 'it is hoped that studies in Nigerian literature will shift from the previous generations of writers to this most vibrant generation. A lot is happening in Nigerian literature today, and this calls for adequate critical attention' (i-ii). It is in this spirit that this paper critiques the ingenious contribution(s) of Akeem Lasisi's *Night of My Flight* to the rich corpus of Nigerian literature.

### **Creativity, Bridal Chant and a Rhetoric of Reco(r)ding**

Akeem Lasisi may be described as the new generation poet-laureate of the oral memory and an imaginative archivist of the traditional Yoruba poetic tradition. Born in a family of a revered line of hunters in Oyo State of Nigeria, Lasisi was very early in life 'initiated' into the lores and life of the Yoruba traditional culture, immersing him in a literary cosmos which was later to fertilize his experimentations with the recreation of some of the oral poetic forms in writing and in the English language. Lasisi has also re-packaged these poetic forms in performances negotiated in English and Yoruba, re-creating their native flavours in (post)modern aesthetic contrivances.

These have been staged both locally and internationally. In an interview with Sylvester Asoya, Lasisi reports,

I have performed for individuals and corporate organizations. I had a memorable performance experience at the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday ceremony of the late Chief Bola Ige. After my rendition at the event in Ibadan, Ige embraced me for about five minutes and prayed fervently on me ... Eventually, he described me in his post-birthday article as a “young wizard of Yoruba and English Poetry” (4).

Lasisi’s versatility in Yoruba oral poetry has informed some remarkable feats in his written creative career. His first collection of poems, *IREMOJE: Ritual poetry for Ken Saro-Wiwa*, won the ANA/Cadbury Poetry Prize of the year 2000. In it, he re-constructs and transforms Iremoje, a traditional dirge performed among Yoruba hunters in honour of their dead colleagues, into a socio-political commentary on the Nigerian state, lamenting, in particular, the loss of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni leader who was assassinated by the tyrannical Sanni Abacha government in 1995. His second collection, *Wonderland* (2001), translates the Ijala poetic tradition of the same vocational group referred to above into a virile aesthetic tool of social-criticism, manipulating a dialogic motif (usual in traditional Yoruba poetry) to satirize and lampoon the institutional and bureaucratic contradictions of the Nigerian polity. His third collection, *Night of My Flight*, reclaimed the laurel achieved in 2000 by winning the ANA/CADBURY poetry prize of 2005. This was to be followed by *Ori Agbe* (2005), a CD album of poetry in honour of Wole Soyinka. Though predominantly rendered in English, this latter effort may be appraised as monumental in fixing Yoruba orature within a postmodern medium of dissemination. Indeed, Osundare acknowledges Lasisi as

bard of the hearth, the home, the public sphere, and the hunter’s trail, no doubt the most culturally rooted and experimental poet of the new generation(31).

*Night of My Flight* re-creates *Ekun Iyawo*, a genre of poetry performed in traditional Yoruba land by spinsters about to marry on the eve of their wedding. Denji Ladele and Dejo Faniyi informs us that it was a usual ceremonial engagement predominantly held in the Ogbomoso, Oyo, Iseyin, Okeho, Saki and Ibadan areas of Yoruba land (v), about sixty to eighty years ago ( that is, before the publication of their book of the same title in 1979) (iv). The main epoch of this genre, from this submission, was effectively about eighty to one hundred years ago. In this poetic act, that is *Ekun Iyawo* (literally ‘the tears of the bride’), the bride evokes a strong emotional current characterized by effusive tears over her impending severance from her parental home. She chants her reminiscences of childhood, the experiences of growing up with her peers, the disciplines of being a daughter, an adolescent, and a lady, all preparing her for this important moment. In these, she chants her grief. She thanks and praises her parents for their love, care, and offers of discipline and asks for their blessings before she proceeds to her matrimonial home, which, to her, inhabits a mysterious zone that may either adorn or damage her. She dreads the unpleasantness of in-laws, the tyranny of her husband where his love drains, barrenness, the trials of polygamy and the unfriendliness of a hostile neighbourhood.

There are some heart-lifting (or rather, mixed) twists to her rendition. For instance, she flaunts the fact that she is nubile, a virgin (a crucial factor of female honor). She anticipates a pleasant home and feels confident about her sexuality. The itinerant feature of the *Ekun Iyawo* (for the bride, in the company of her friends, must visit elders in her neighbourhood, extended family members, and well-wishers) offers the bride an atmosphere of intense social integration and class elevation. Indeed, this important social endorsement of her femininity must formally have begun during the learning of this genre, which only befits a woman of honour. According to Lasisi in a book of the same title,



...she had to go for a special training months before her wedding day. Her trainers were the mother, other matriarchs (old or young) in their locality, and her friends. She had to master both conventional/ existing corpus of the bride's poetry, and new ones that would mark her out as a creative and intelligent lady on her day of rendition (2-3).

Contrary to lacking 'a clearly defined thematic focus,' as maintained (for the new generation) by Charles Nnolim, in its appropriation in *Night of My Flight*, *Ekun Iyawo* becomes a postcolonial artifact embracing a multiple socio-political concern lodged within an oral poetic arsenal. Divided into six parts – 'Spinster's Eve,' 'Time To Say, Bye,' 'On the Wings of the Wind,' 'Upside Down,' 'Turning Point,' and 'Jemila,' - *Night of My Flight* engages with themes ranging from the purely individual to the characteristically cultural and public; from the gendered to the exclusively national and global. Deploying a bride who is a cultural mulatto of the traditional and post(modern), *Night of My Flight* assumes a poetic diary chronicling a set of signifying tears on a number of discursive items, thus adding a seminal voice to the imaginative contemplation of the Nigerian postcolony in Nigerian literature on behalf of a new generation literary wave.

Central to this is a reading of marriage in relation to the contemporary urban Nigerian woman. Though conscious of the illuminations of feminist epistemology about the patriarchal architecture of most social institutions and practices around the globe, Lasisi's bride-persona projects an African(ist) gaze that synthesizes the aspirations of the African woman's quest for visibility with the kernels of her African cultural reality. She inhabits a world grossly different from that of the Western white, a space where marriage and the family are seen by woman as ratifying, rather than rupturing her subjectivity and sexuality. The bride experiences the anxieties common with 'mature' ladies who fear the omen of not being approached by suitors and do everything within their whims and caprices to find their men:

I headed for the miracle temple  
 Hoping for a cork for my fermented wine,  
 A godly cork for my lingering hen.

Strategic seat  
 Strategic applause  
 Strategic smile on my powdered face(6).

After a bout with delays and denials, she heaves a sigh of relief:

I found my man at the nick of fate  
 When awaiting days began to tick in haste  
 Tilting spinsterhood's pendulum to nervous realms (6).

Lasisi's discourse on women and marriage in this passage inscribes an African(ist) feminist apologia in the course of the contemporary woman's struggle for visibility and audibility in her society, since it is a 'black feminism' which, according to Lisa Tuttle, 'is rooted in black culture' (352). Far from being avenues of patriarchal exploitation, as they are shrilly proclaimed by Marxist and lesbian/radical feminists, these institutions adorn woman with honour and allow her to *speak*. Says the bride:

This eve of my flight,  
 I think in tongues and speak in rhymes  
 This eve of my crossover,  
 I am a longer pageant of eternal poems (3).

However, Lasisi problematizes marriage as a human event which can produce either warmth or worms, depending on the attitudes of the individuals involved in it. Here, marriage is depicted as negotiable within the intellectual ambience of hindsight and foresight involving the woman's decisive role. Thus, the contemporary spinster who witnesses the tragic experiences of failed marriages in the society (mostly issuing from male tyranny) may seek a cave (a happy home, through a critical selective process and suitable comportment) or a cage (an unfortunate result of her uncritical decision(s)). While the bride allows:

After this night,

I am tied to the whims of the pike,  
 To the apron string of gender thieves.  
 In the new world I find myself the bully is king,  
 The scrotum rules waves with infernal scams (19).

She cautions:

Bride in transit  
 A pet of the road,  
 I will tell the tale on the sea  
 Tell the truth on hills.  
 If I meet a lass in a metal bird  
 I pull her ears for the salient tale.  
 That marriage is a cave  
 Marriage is a cage:  
 Marriage is a racket  
 In market of men

She goes on to acquaint:

I have seen animal men  
 Flogging their wives like goats,  
 Seen callous wives  
 Poisoning 'Darling husbands' like pantry rats (24).

The bride in *Night of My Flight* is vested with another postcolonial mission: that of decolonizing African poetry from the shackles of Eurocentric imaginative templates, while also electing for a humanist aesthetic that recognizes the contributions of every cultural and intellectual input. She however symbolically weeps and combatively seeks to deconstruct an alternative colonialism which issues from the dominant self-righteousness of canonical grand narratives, such as this paper foregrounds:

For the sake of my African flight  
 Let us dismantle the castle of canons  
 And give our dear poetry a human face

We re-invent the spirit of the odes of old  
 Which exude the beauty of the morning rose  
 Yet survive the critical thorns of the censoring sun.

For poetry is and poetry is not:  
 Coded verses

On open palm of every hand

Poetry is, poetry is not  
The irony of the rose  
The rose in the thorn

Poetry is, poetry is not  
Paradox of birth,  
Parable of death

Poetry is, poetry is not  
Folly of Hitler,  
Wisdom of Gandhi (5).

Her iconoclastic voice as regards a vastly de-canonized Nigerian creative space (which is also a protest against the othering of female voices within the canonical hierarchy) reverberates in the following:

The sky is tired  
Of thunder's monotone  
Earth weary,  
Of threadbare tunes of recycled larks.

To the conservative, morning can only come after its noon and  
/night  
But I belong to the caste of alternative thinkers  
Seeking a new dawn in the midst of dusk  
A bold sun in a baffled night (9).

The discourse of the bride in *Night of My Flight* inevitably expands into a realm of social criticism which casts a jaundiced look at a number of socio-political inanities in the Nigerian state, a mark of political commitment quite contrary to the biased claims of dominant old-guard criticism against the new Nigerian literary effort. One of these is the betrayal of the citizenry due to the irresponsible and empty promises of the ruling classes, which turn out to be mere ploys to consolidate their often rigged mandates. Thus, there are human and structural under-developments, more crippling than those during the colonial era. This atmosphere is characterized by administrative aloofness:

But because I have been a witness to budget scams,  
 When they promise water at night  
 I prepare my fate for drought at dawn

When they pledge a reign of moon  
 I brace up my destiny  
 For an eclipsed year

On the dwindling health sector (a metaphor of national decadence), the bride laments:

This night of my flight  
 Filled with horror of unfulfilled wages  
 Matrons have turned their backs on labouring wards:

This night of my flight,  
 The pope is home-sick  
 But the angels are still on strike (80).

The crisis in the education sector descends to the absolutely ridiculous:

The curriculum wobbles in  
 Via the gate of the class  
 Jets out through its open windows and open sky

Then, "Who wrote Macbeth?"  
 Queries the bearded satirist of the Orwellian ilk.  
 "Who wrote Macbeth?"

Students swear they are not the one  
 The teacher vows he, a whole graduate, could never have

As principal swears to innocence by his gaping loins.  
 Up, up upside down  
 The school is standing  
 Upon its roof (81).

But the phenomenal plague afflicting the education sector, which is felt in every facet of national life, is not only the consequence of unfocused planning, but more crucially, the scourge of an illiterate leadership. The bride regrets:

This is the season  
 This, the treason  
 When a graduate is cheaper  
 Than a basket of chaff

The school, a weeping night  
Of its glorious morn (84).

She continues:

This season of the anti-Christ  
This treason of the anti-book:  
I know a federal University  
Where a general is chancellor,  
Brigadier is vice  
And one epic noon  
A major zoomed onto the trembling varsity  
Flogged a troublesome prof like an erring serf!  
Up, up upside down  
The country is standing  
Up its roof (85).

In the final analysis, this conscience-scurrying bride avers:

What is my country?  
My country is a riddle, my land a myth  
My country is a no man's child  
He has the teeth of locust beans.

His green is grey  
His white is washed  
Tattered and battered his coat of arms  
His head a national stadium of giant lice (87).

Despite the sordid images of a failed nation depicted by this text's bride, there are grateful chants sung to celebrate some individuals considered praise-worthy in the society. The first in this category are the bride's parents, who represent the ideal parentage the country can not offer. The second consists of individuals whose contributions to the society have been avant-garde and in a huge sense, unorthodox. They include the living and the dead, the known and the unknown, the small and great, men and women. These consist of Oluwakayode Oladepo, the author's late primary school teacher and mentor; Bola Ige, the Nigerian Justice Minister assassinated in 2001; Kudirat Abiola, the martyred activist and wife of the late never-to-be President of Nigeria, Chief Moshood Abiola; Gani Fawehinmi, a colossal Nigerian Human

Rights lawyer and activist; Akachi Ezeigbo, a notable Nigerian female novelist and lecturer; Toyin, one of the author's 'songbirds' (female performance poets); Adekunle Ajasin, a late former governor of Ondo State of Nigeria; and Eddy Aderinokun, a Nigerian bank's Chief Executive and lover of the Arts. The bride also acts as the author's persona in appreciating nature, cultural varieties, regional peculiarities and some democratic institutional establishments. Comments on global issues also attract the bride's attention. The bride-persona in *Night of My Flight* may thus be seen as a male author's statement on woman's integral importance in society and a metaphor of challenged socio-political aspirations, attitudes that are particularly resonant in new Nigerian writing.

Lasisi's artistry in *Night of My Flight* allows the response of the bridegroom in 'Jemila.' This, thus, effectively makes the collection a dialogue. The groom, among other things, concedes his state of existential shallowness, aridity and lack of fulfillment in a rhetoric that tends to deconstruct male centredness in the ideal socio-cultural space and assigning the realization of male self-discoveries to the complementary impact of woman:

Sometimes through the lens of faith  
I dared to peep into space  
To see my fate-  
A classical farce in classical vain.

That was yester-night, Jemila, which today, seems like a century's  
/flight  
Now I can tell the dividends of tarrying in love  
As you have come in, an element of air,  
Ventilating the rowdy sediments of my stuffy sky (109).

From the foregoing, *Night of My Flight* arguably inscribes a novel dimension in Nigerian poetry with its seminal intercourse with Yoruba orature, its discursive and multi-thematic gaze, its fluid intertextual rendering and its signal statement on woman's integral position in the still evolving Nigerian nation state. It persuasively invites a timely critical intervention that would

objectively appraise the signifying peculiarities and difference(s) of the third wave Nigerian literary commitment and also challenges this present generation to present its own critics. Arguably, the lamentable lack of the latter is the unfortunate major failure crippling this generation of Nigerian creative outlook. And though evincing occasional slips in the handling of determiners (which might well be a deliberate stylistic slip in annulling the regime of the fixed, signifying in representation which has been suffered by the Nigerian literary other), *Night of My Flight* demonstrates an immense capacity for suspending the reader in a state of rhetorical hypnosis, which makes one wonder if the attacks on the new generation Nigerian writer are not actually meant for the critic, who is, to a great extent, absent. Hopefully, when the Nigerian critic of the era of the third generation assertively emerges and aggressively takes the pains to make a spirited critical inventory of contemporary texts, biases, and artistic outlooks in Nigerian writing, we shall be able to see that there exists a very noteworthy development in the present dispensation, with a statement of its dominant characteristics and differences.



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