

ABIOLA IRELE: A TRIBUTE TO THE MASTER¹

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v6i1.7>

Odia OFEIMUN

Nigerian Poet and Literary Critic

In 1986, a tribe of Nigerian writers, journalists and academics were in Stockholm to celebrate the award of the first Nobel Prize for literature to a writer of African descent. A prime denizen of that tribe was Professor Francis Abiola Irele who was then superintending at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of Ibadan, and whom many of us would have given the Nobel prize for literary criticism if there was such a prize. The main site of the celebration was a hotel lobby where the resident pianist was having a virtual sit-down strike, pelting the cold winter night with little ditties, until the horde from Nigeria gravitated towards her and the roof had to be (literally) raised to accommodate the noise. We had a joyfully executed stampede which tested but proved the virtuoso skills of the pianist.

The night began in earnest when Abiola Irele was importuned to a performance, a sing-along Italian song, which drew out Francesca Emmanuel, that delectable soprano whom no one ought to allow to get old. After paying his European dues, perfectly discharging his acclaimed closeness to Puccini and Donizetti and justifying the "lyrical delicacy" of his younger days when he rendered *Ina Furtiva Lagrima*, *Your little hand is cold* and *Come back to Sorrento* at University concerts, he turned to traditional Nigerian songs and highlife music. Alone or in good company, Irele sang better than Tunde Nightingale, the highlife maestro, reminding all of us of the tale told by Wole Soyinka, one of the singers of that night of revels, of how, in their days of holding the night to ransom at Bobby Benson's Caban Bamboo in Lagos of the fifties, Irele would take over the night when it was time to welcome the dawn.

Irele's voice welcomes the dawn even in everyday conversations and carries its sing-song quality very well into the art (or is it now a science?) for which he is best known: literary criticism. Come to think of it, music is a fitting metaphor for Professor Irele's embroilment in that art. Rendering arguments in essentially narrative modes, he brings to it a modulation of language and ideas which thrives on the surprise of evenness and authoritativeness, never allowing a discordant note to pass without contrapuntal pruning. His ease of navigation between different languages and disciplines is his main asset in this regard. What he

¹ In honour of Late Professor Abiola Irele (1936-2017), Nigerian Literary Critic and African philosopher!

professes, being in European languages, may seem irrelevant to identifying an active note of his natal Ora, a dialect of the Edo language, in his performances. The Yoruba language may be considered more like it because he has drawn attention to it in his studies of the Yoruba writer D.O. Fagunwa in relation to the Anglophone writer Wole Soyinka, who, by an insider stretching, is regarded as a Yoruba writer. A complex melding of forms, I believe, is involved: as his Ora dialect, interweaves with Yoruba in the manner that his Yoruba intervenes in his French and English/ the two pillars of his engagement with the literatures of francophone and Anglophone Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas. He has brought all of them together in seamless transactions across disciplinary boundaries - from anthropology and political science to linguistics and philosophy - and in ways that affirm his quintessential role not only as an interpreter of what writers write, but of how what they write inter-relates with our past, present and future. With Irele, so to say, literary criticism rises to the level of a philosophy of culture in the best traditions of, as Biodun Jeyifo has argued, "scholar-critics from other societies and periods like Dr. Samuel Johnson, Mathew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, George Luckacs, Walter Benjamin, and Eric Aubach". He is in this sense often distinguished among a distinguished run of African literary critics who include Eldred Durosimi Jones, Michael Echeruo, Emmanuel Obiechina, Dan Izevbaye, Isidore Okpewho and of course Biodun Jeyifo himself.

In his essential practice as a critic, Irele has covered, with a scholar's doggedness, what may be called the commanding heights, the canonical works, in African and Caribbean literatures especially Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire, Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. His interventions in the major altercations in African philosophy, as witnessed by his introduction to Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, are like his involvement in contemporary discussions of directions and mis-directions in African education: seminal, comprehensive and as rigorously enlightening as when the deep calls to the deep. Never inclined to discount knowledge in favour of fashion, Irele remains one of the most astute defenders of the historical validity of Negritude in the face of the carping sendup that has become the norm in Negritude criticism. Similarly, he has refrained from sitting on the bonnet of post-modernism and its disconnection of critical sensibility from engagement with author and literary text. As readers of his book *The African Imagination* can attest, Irele accommodates the excitements of new tropes in cultural studies, deploying a firm grasp of the classics within elucidatory practices that remain stubbornly literary. Perhaps, I should note that the most remarkable part of his general practice is his essential appreciation of the need to re-invent Africa's intellectual

resources, not just by going to the source, or as Negritude wished it, through a culture-clash dialectics, but having the imagination and boldness to turn colonial alienation and the pressures of a globalizing world into founts of creativity and weapons of integration.

It is not surprising therefore that Professor Francis Abiola Irele, has been very concerned about creating rooms for new experiments, new adventures if need be, beyond the pursuit of commanding canons. Biodun Jeyifo has dated this turn in Irele hermeneutics to that point in 1983 when he delivered his inaugural lecture at the University of Ibadan IN PRAISE OF ALIENATION. It was not so much a break, not such a fundamental rupture but a re-tracking of give-away idiolects, ideas that were always there but subsumed under grand frameworks that had Negritude and its sub-texts of culture clashes sorted under the rigors of a Senghorian zeal that had a place for the concept of cultural mulatto. Irele had grown beyond such datum, beyond the distinction between Them and Us to a de-racializing of viewpoints that did not remove drawlines but minded the logic, not the geography of ideas. Standing on common grounding with the philosophers and critics of the Western world that he had always celebrated and virtually luxuriated in, it was time to go swimmingly with them into a common whirlpool. It was in a way like seeking freedom from the constraints and restraints of colonial history but re-using the instrumentalities of ideas and ideals that, within the European context, once transgressed geography. Rather than distancing away, at the level of thought, from the Gauls, the Saxons, and the Visigoths, Irele opines "The necessary effort of understanding our alienation and coming to terms with it justifies all forms of scholarship devoted to European culture and Western civilization, considered as totality.....the Hellenic and Roman Civilization have a direct significance for us". Even before he expressed it in these formal terms, this was already the context in which his intellectual odyssey was viewed by many of his work-a-day assessors. Many scholars who encountered him through his editorship of *Research in African Literatures* would, I assume, agree that it was this reprieve of alienation in its positive reconstruction that made all the difference to his scholarship. That he had begun to make a programmatic fare of it is really the point that Jeyifo seemed to be making in relation to a heightened cultural activism, at the seething centre of which was the translation of francophone African writers into English and setting up outlets for younger writers shortchanged by the doldrums in African publishing. It is fair to say that Professor Irele's penchant for good deeds had to shift base or be overtaken by the travails of a continent that soon ran into a near reversal of the preconditions for the levelling of the landscape of interaction between the West and the rest of us in

modalities that made for the beneficency of alienation. It just happened to have occurred at the point where Africa, a continent not yet near optimum in the production of academics, became a bullish exporter of intellectuals. As a star in the international elite corps, Africa's gift to the global academic circuit, in the past four decades, Abiola Irele has become as much an advertisement of the best minds that Africa produces for the self-aggrandizement of the developed countries as well as a personification of that very dilemma of the have-nots in the throes of expatriation.

No question about it: it would have been more than tragic if expatriation had led him, as it has led some, to a refuge in silence, or turning their backs on African studies. Thankfully, whether in his Chair at Harvard, or at Cambridge before it, Professor Irele has consistently pursued a practice that puts Africa in the reckoning. True, the home front remains bereft of the synergies that so much expatriation has occasioned. But the kind of involvement that Professor Irele has made the very mark of his academic interests promises that someday when Africa shall have done away with the rude regimes and their principals in the international system that have reduced her to, and kept her on her knees, there would be quite a bank of creativity to draw upon in the process of reconstruction.

Over a decade ago, I had speculated that his lecture on the occasion of Wole Soyinka's 70th birthday would be a part of that process of reconstruction; if only because it was impossible to engage that devotee of Ogun without encountering the necessity to break through dead ends, build new roads, clear the way, through impervious gulfs, for the affirmation of some new directions. Well, that was before he moved his stool to the Kwara State University where, among other things, he was reworking a base for a journal that it appeared his stay in the United States had removed from practical considerations. There was a sense in which it implied a burst in a new enough direction to set a format for return to old turfs and abandoned projects. There was a reason to feel some exhilaration at the notion of the Master, having traversed the world, returning home, with all the wisdom of the indigene and the cosmopolitan intermixed in his pouch. Wistfully, one wished it was possible to have all those avatars of academia who expatriated returning to enjoin a truly critical mass that would revamp the doldrums that swallowed up the world that they were building!

Not that one could be sure that the very *abiku* syndrome that plagued earlier efforts would not intervene. And not that anyone, knowing the debilitating tertiary climate across the Nigerian University system, could be sure that every such effort would not end in sheer projecteering and a permanent wait-and-see experimentation without a sense of the

conclusive. It kept too many alarm bells ringing across Nigeria's academia! Whatever it was that could enthrall him to beat a retreat, return from the land of the golden fleece, as it were, whether family issues, professorial re-think, or delayed ideological re-awakening, the general feeling was that it would be good for the national Ivory Tower. But, and it mattered to ask — would it be good for the Master? Who would want to see Professor Abiola Irele, in his prime, experimenting where there should be an edifice in glorious sky-writing regaling us with a bullish tradition of the old Mohican, sustaining a battle-ready generation of younger academics who need to be weaned off the work-a-day skinting that had become the pattern across Nigeria's tertiary world!

The tragedy of our national situation is that Abiola Irele had not returned to a country any different from the one he left three decades earlier. Across the board, the same old questions were still being asked; the kind of questions that, for three decades, hastened the exodus of the best in our midst to off-shore havens. Not to forget: the expatriation to the United States began in the decades when professors were being rusticated for teaching what they were not paid to teach and members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) had stickers on their jalopies depicting the Government, as a clowning employer, who paid a take-home pay that could not take anyone home. A seeming improvement materialized between the years, with leeways for the University class to join the jeep-riding classes guzzling oil money across the country. It was a sop that left everyone in doubt as to whether the devaluation of the University System was now being affirmed by a bulging pay-packet that demoted academic freedom by adding routine decimation and degradation of facilities to the usual forms of official indifference; giving rise to strikes and closures of the University. As if to prove the point that the more things change the more they ape the past, the University System, especially as it relates to the state-owned tertiary institutions, entered the era of labour Armageddon in which there are actually universities owing teaching and administrative staff up to six months salaries in arrears. It is impossible to appraise the circumstance! That Abiola Irele returns home to a country that begs a devastation in the nature of the submission to ghosts that the off-shoring of two decades ago appeared to have exorcised, at least, at the level of the individual! Sadly, it has spelt a narrative of Afro-pessimism that holds no indication of abating.

Quite intriguing is that we are back at the fort of old questions, so to say, that have remained hideously clamant. They are questions, looming large, even larger than they did when they came to the fore at the Symposium organized in April 2004 by Professor Richard Joseph, my

old Political Science teacher at the University of Ibadan in the seventies who had become the Director of the Center for African Studies at Northwestern University, Illinois. It was what may be called a *culture risk symposium*, the kind aimed at finding exits from a dilemma that ends up yielding a recrudescence of the crying issues.

The Symposium was preceded by pre-Seminar circulation of papers by Professors Abiola Irele, Micere Mugo, and Biodun Jeyifo, before the seminar encounter with Soulaymane Bachir Diagne. As I reported it at the time: they were *"Two Nigerians, one Kenyan and a Senegalese... eminent representatives of one side of the coin of Africanism: that is, Africans who entered the stream of African studies from the inside rather than as outsiders from the West - but who, before they really had time to establish and entrench viable space for alternative paradigms, found themselves relocating to the West due to the destruction of the economy and political freedoms in their countries. In their midst, at Evanston, I was the lone non-University intervener at the Symposium ..."* What the interaction revealed to me, as someone without professional familiarity with the debates, is that there may be less difference between Africanists and native academics in diaspora beyond the fact that those who should never have left their turf were forced by one reason or the other to vacate their trenches.

Specific to the area of imaginative literature: the intriguing part, at the Symposium, from this distance in time, is that Abiola Irele put his finger on the node of crisis by delineating the quandary of his expatriation. With alienation fully consummated, as it were, the claims of cultural geography were being exacted by an environment that would not let him forget where he was coming from. The heart of the matter is that he who had pontificated in his *In Praise of Alienation*, was being hedged by it, overwhelming his sense of balance. He had, he said, generally refused to allow that "structuralist and deconstructionist approaches are necessarily the most productive in rendering a proper sense of literary texts in their fullness of being, involving a proper conjoining of form and reference"; but he had now to look back with rueful nostalgia at his own essays written during a period in which, in his own words, "I have been removed from my habitual environment, a condition that has involved a physical and mental distance from the primary audience that I assumed I was addressing during an earlier phase of my professional career in Africa".

He was actually adverting to the makings of a real tragedy. Not just an issue of his distance from "an audience constituted by the local community of students and scholars". It was also that it irked him to pursue "the profession of scholarship in exile" ...where African literature, his primary concern, is considered a very narrow area of

studies and of specialization and is “largely marginal to the interests of the scholarly and intellectual community” within which he has to operate. It led him to broaden out, pay obeisance to the reigning idols of the post-modern academy, in a way that forced a shift in the cursor of concern from what he would normally see as more primary issues. Inexorably, in the face of this need to share turf with the post-modern Argonauts, Irele found that he had to treat structuralist and deconstructionist approaches as African literature-friendly; a matter of abiding the “transformations in the Western Academy through which imaginative literature has come to be regarded less as purely aesthetic phenomenon, enjoying an ideal status in an autonomous realm, that is essentially a mode of discourse, a common ground in social experience and cultural practices”.

The hard reality is that Irele's dilemma was not a personal one, but a feature of a national, and continental travail. As it turned out, his contribution at that symposium was coincident with Biodun Jeyifo's discussion of de-territorialization (best viewed in line with Tanure Ojaide's title ‘when it no longer matters where you live’) as a fact of our post-modern globalizing times. Within the de-territorialized space, as Jeyifo perceived it, there is a widening of the horizons of literary studies. Except that this has to take place within an exuberant displacement of the aesthetics of and the space for ‘minority discourses’. He brought out the implication that the dispersal of Africa's intellectual elite had become a virtual requirement of turning the back on Africa. And this was at a time when that dispersal had also become “the most salient historical and social basis of the production and interpretation of texts in nearly all post-colonial societies, but more acutely so in Africa”. This is simply a statement of fact: constituting a loaded admission that “both the producer and the interpreter, the writer and the critic, the artist and scholar, belong to a structurally and demographically tiny cultural elite members of which, ...in the words of Chinua Achebe's essay, “lived in the same place”, until recently, with the post-colonial societies of which they constitute a nascent elite”.

What it presupposed is that the massive movement of this tiny elite – those who were best placed to write their people into history – was leaving a vacuum that drew unsullied guilt in some quarters but could still be blandly extenuated by mere academese or sheer theory. No one was more aware of this at that Symposium than Jeyifo who in the form of some extenuation argued that: “Since writers and scholars can write anywhere in the world and indeed sometimes find that exile, enforced or voluntary, often fuels their creativity and productivity, “living in the same place” with one's society has never been a matter of literal co-habitation. He pressed the argument to the effect that: “neither those

who have relocated nor those who have stayed “live in the same place” with their society. This was indeed the rub but only superficially true. It called for weighing up a society that has a B.J, and an Abiola Irele sitting at their posts and being merely dependent, in the exercise of their grand *feel* for home, on missives sent from outer space to obviate loss of presence. A case for representation or presence, make your pick.

There was a sense in which having come to the Symposium from Africa where the absence of BJ and Irele was a transmogrifying lacuna in our intellectual space, I tried not to be hard on what I thought was becoming too much of an extenuation. It got to saturation when Micero Mugo took the position I would only have agreed, too readily with, if she spoke anywhere in Africa. In a way that was certainly not a consolation for Irele's unredressed nostalgia for where he was coming from, she went magisterial: "unlike the European situation where language and nation tend to sit together, there is in the post-colonial circumstance a ‘divergence from the natural relationship between language and literature and between literature and nation’". She was driving it home when she added that "African Academics and intellectuals who are most often obliged to use the languages that are legacies of colonialism are already distanced by that very fact from their people in a manner that removes them from their communities. Writing literature, writing their people into history in languages that majority of the people do not understand, the writers, she argued, are already like exiles in their own country. She then added the matter of life-style, in which the average native academic is in exile even when at home. The life-style of the University-based intellectual, ensconced within the cloistered atmosphere of the Ivory Tower, sedately distant, far from the madding crowd of the peasant and slum dweller, could well be easy to take on as part of the issue in Africa. At Evanston, it became so much less the issue. Because: emphasizing the class dimension that virtually, ontologically, removes the intellectual and the academic from the mass to which he and she belong, turned into an abstraction, a mere matter of academic disquisitions as to "their apartness" and un-"connectedness to the community... .Their 'alienation', as Irele may have retorted from an earlier incarnation—was now much less the frightful issue than the absence of even that basis for class distinctions that had been savaged at the expense of the very idea of the University. In the course of the Symposium, Jeyifo appeared to be pursuing this at another level, when he noted that the most profound sense in which a writer or scholar in diaspora “stops living in the same place with her society is when her work, her productivity is cut off from her society, most especially when this happens not by censorship or total loss of contact through enforced exile, but because of the banal and pervasive collapse of the institutions

and infrastructures which would make her work available to the mass of readers and interlocutors in her society.” Yes! This was it. For the academic at home as well as in diaspora, the sense of exile deepens, because according to Jeyifo, society, “that “society”, under the combined assault of seemingly larger-than-life internal and external forces, seems more and more beyond recognition and, more importantly, beyond the power of the progressive, radical fraction of the elite to intervene productively in the historical process in their own societies, let alone the world-historical process of advanced global capitalism”. Jeyifo added: “This seems to be exceptional to the African post-colony..... it is in reality merely an exacerbated instance of patterns that are widely, though differentially distributed throughout virtually all the postcolonial societies of the world”.

At this point, the conversation was like a painting of the threatened extinction of the species, making the phenomenon of exile, no matter how pictured, an implacable loss-making conundrum. It shifted the phenomenon of intellectual dispersal from a factor of choices that had to be made by members of the elite for their own survival, to a causal frame identified with the textures not only of post-colonial societies but the interstices that Africans are allowed within the diaspora communities in which they operate even in exile.

The short of the argument is that in the de-territorialized space available to them, there may indeed be a widening of horizons for literary studies in general. So much more about Africa may manage to be produced and to travel. Except that it removes nothing of the reality: that the movement into Western Academies by prime producers of African scholarship spells an opportunity cost, missed engagements, that, had they materialized, could have created synergies beyond the commonplace for the abandoned society. The paradox, as it might be claimed is that, but for the grace of the exit-taking that saved the day for many, so much of the extant scholarship could have perished, product and producers destroyed, or so much in deterioration; and so much more slated for extinction by the rude circumstances of the homeland. Which, so to say, offers no consummate extenuation, but hyper-inflates the cultural losses to Africa of the exit-taking into offshore havens by its prime producers. In the nature of incalculable losses, it is about the disruption to work-a-day intellectual life in the home country as well as in the displacement of that critical mass without which major transformations in cultural economies become easily reversible.

The tragedy, and this is the core issue of this intervention, the tragedy, is that to see Irele come back to Nigeria and then return to the United States at a time when the infrastructure for the defence of education is in the throes of another degradation even more pulverizing

than the original one that prompted the First Exodus, turns Afro-pessimism from sore to abscess. It may yield some sense of reprieve to talk about the afflictions of African scholarship being reduced or offset by the reality that so much of our history continues to take place outside Africa where incommensurable spaces superior to home-based sham may well be yawning and waiting. The truth nevertheless is that it implicates more than is implied when it is said that so much of British history happened outside Britain – in the empire. Britain, at least, was in control of that history in a way that Africans are not of theirs. The whole issue of *exile and the kingdom*, as it might be called, boils down to Africans not being in control of their own history and therefore, whether at home or in diaspora, are bedeviled by an absence of requisite physical and mental infrastructure for exercising will, and fostering normal conversation. Basically it is a function of economics – the fact that societies trapped in currencies that are not convertible cannot operate on equitable terms with those that are more bullish. By the same token, University teachers in such societies necessarily operate at great disadvantage in relation to colleagues offshore. Quite some good romance therefore when an Irele chooses to stay for any length of time for the half-way house solutions to the hash of home-based academia in the form of sandwich performances, sabbaticals, and publications in common journals. Other arrangements enable academics in diaspora to make side-kick research visits to home-based Universities for a while before returning to base. But these are mere gap-fillers. Too random. They cannot make up for the real thing – having Universities in the neo-colonies that can attract professors on their own terms in competition with universities in other parts of the world. To surmount this calls for taking on the whole cultural economy in the country, one in which a Professor Abiola Irele can be home, decidedly tenured, without the banality of grand presence in a University run by a State government that may not be able to pay salaries for six months... . It is a fate too worse off for discourse, especially around a man at 82, still intellectually productive enough to be imagined at the height of his power.