

Foregrounding Foucault's discourse of power in Esiaba Irobi's
The Kingdom of the Mad

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Abstract

This paper uncovers the Foucauldian discourse of power in Esiaba Irobi's poem, *The Kingdom of the Mad* in relation to his homeland, Nigeria. Irobi belongs to the generation of Nigerian poets following the Osundare and Ojaide generation and Soyinka and Okigbo generation. It was a generation much traumatised by the repressiveness of successive military regimes and the worsening social and economic conditions. This paper studies, not only how Irobi's poem works as a discourse on the post-colonial distortions in his homeland, but also how the poet himself becomes the object through which power is relayed. The paper argues that Irobi's seeming innocuous business of penning down his private grief and frustrations in relation to the happenings in his country at a particular historical moment involved relations of power, and so studies the poet as an effect within the discursive field in which he is located in the late eighties and nineties in a multi-ethnic post-colonial society, that is, Nigeria.

Key words: Discourse, Power, Knowledge, Post Colonial Society, Nationhood

Discourse, an imported concept from the sciences, now constitutes much of the substance and rhetoric in cultural studies and contemporary literary criticism. It is a historically contingent concept, as Michel Foucault enlightens us, that produces knowledge and meaning, and so imbricated with power. It is a set or sets of statements that constitute 'the practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak.' Discourse thus becomes a way of organising knowledge. As a discourse fixes text with a specific meaning, it disqualifies other meanings and interpretations in a discursive process that eliminates differences which could challenge and destabilise its meaning and power. 'Discourse ensures particular meanings get regularly constituted around particular cultural texts and practices and makes them achieve the status of 'common sense', and acquire a certain taken for granted quality' (John Storey¹). In this way discourse puts under erasure the very facticity of its capacity to fix meaning and its ideological position.

The logic produced by a discourse is always structurally related to certain co-ordinates of knowledge (paradigm) within the specific historical context in

¹ Storey, John (1994) Mapping the Popular: The Study of Popular Culture in British Cultural Studies in *The European English Messenger*, 3(2) pp 47-49.



which it arises. Ultimately, knowledge and meaning are effects of the rules and categories that power enacts within a discursive formation of a particular historical moment.

For Foucault power and knowledge are inextricably related – knowledge is always an exercise of power and power an effect of knowledge.

There is no power-relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge nor any knowledge that does not pre-suppose and constitute at the same time power-relations.²

Foucault has very interesting takes on the concept of power. Contrary to previous assumptions bequeathed to us by Marxists that power was an asset held by political institutions, and dominant groups in society who use it to exploit the disempowered, Foucault posits that:

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere... Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society³.

Power, however, is not limited to political institutions nor is it always negative. In its relational and distributive dimensions power permeates all levels of social existence. Not only does power circulate, it also plays a very direct and creative role in our social life.

In *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *The History of Human Sexuality* (1984), Foucault traces the diffusion of power in the Western world from the monarchy to the bourgeoisie during which he believes power mutated from its physically cohesive nature into a capacity not only to have a hold over the others' bodies, so that they may do as one wishes but more importantly to influence their minds so that they act as one wishes. This is effected through specialised knowledge sanctioned by society's institutions and their experts. According to Frank Weng Foucault believes that:

Modern have succeeded in influencing the mind of the individual by turning the individual into an object of knowledge. Hence the glorification of knowledge lies not in its capacity to understand the objective world as commonly celebrated by Enlightenment thinkers but it lies in its success in microscopically analysing the internal and

² Hall, Stuart (1997) *Representation in Photography in Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall (ed). London: SAGE Publication.pp 16-40.

³ Foucault, Michel (1998) *The History of Sexuality: The will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin.

external conditions of individuals to allow better institutional coercion⁴.

Some scholars, Jurgen Habermas for instance, have pointed out certain inconsistent strands in Foucault's theory on power. Habermas dismisses him as a conservative who in diffusing power to everyone and everywhere, denies the really disempowered the goal for political engagement and resistance. Edward Said also chided Foucault for what he sees as his circular and self-defeating approach to power. But the fact that Foucault posits the omnipresence of power does not mean everybody has equal access to power. David Gauntlett explains Foucault's concept of power as a force of domination thus.

Foucault says that we may find 'states of domination' where power relations have become so entrenched that they can seem entirely one-sided and unchangeable. Nevertheless, Foucault says such situation can be resisted and changed.⁵

Therefore, Foucault does not consider power as a 'thing' held by certain dominant groups in a particular society as Marxists have had us believe in the past. He believes it is something exercised within interactions. It is something that flows through relationships or networks of relationships and always implies resistance. Ultimately since power is neither a thing nor a control of a set of institutions nor a concealed historical pattern, the aim of every researcher of power should be to discover how it operates in everyday routines at sites of all kinds and sizes by identifying and analysing the network of relations and practices which create technologies of power (Foucault's term). In this way Foucault 'shifts our attention from the grand overall strategies of power towards the many localised circuits, tactics, mechanisms and effects through which power circulates'.⁶

Poetry as Discourse

Poetry as an apparatus that is part of a large system of signifying practices, has its own power-effects, and can be appropriated to advance a particular political position. To Chidi Amuta (1989, 177) 'poetry can become readily instrumental in historical situations requiring the galvanisation of feelings and emotions in pursuit of a collective cause.' There is a way in which poetry reproduces at the cultural level existing social and political conflicts within society. And so it is implicated with relations of power. In this paper therefore we shall attempt to uncover the discourse of power in Esiaba Irobi's poem *The Kingdom of the Mad* in relation to his homeland, Nigeria. Irobi belongs to the generation of Nigerian poets following the Osundare and Ojaide generation and Okigbo and Soyinka generation. It was a generation much traumatised by the repressiveness of the successive military regimes and the worsening social and economic conditions. This paper studies not only how Irobi's *The Kingdom of the Mad* works as a discourse on the postcolonial distortions in his homeland but also how the poet himself becomes the object through whom power is relayed. Deploying some of Foucault's concepts on power, the paper argues that Irobi's seeming innocuous

⁴ Weng, Frank (1994) Comparing the Philosophy of Jurgen Habermas and Michel Foucault in *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse* 6(9) <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com>.

⁵ Gauntlett, David (2002) *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*. USA: Routledge.

⁶ *Ibid.* 16-40

business of penning down his private grief and frustrations in relation to the happenings in his country at a particular historical moment involves relations of power, and so studies the poet as an effect within the discursive field in which he is located in the late eighties and early nineties in a multi-ethnic postcolonial society that is Nigeria.

*The Kingdom of the Mad*⁷ is a poem that is in many ways reminiscent of Christopher Okigbo's *Path of Thunder* – an obvious influence on the poet – in its long impassioned dirge and vituperation against Nigeria. The poem has to be read against the background of Nigeria's long history of military brigandage, ethnic conflicts and war and the deplorable socio-economic conditions. It was written in the wake of the June 12 debacle and the subsequent rise and fall of General Sani Abacha. *The Kingdom of the Mad* is a dystopic reverse of Olu Oguibe's great poem *My Blood is Bound to this Land*, a poem in which the poet depicts the distortions and contradictions in Nigeria but with an abiding sense of love for his country. Irobi's poem is the reverse and written from the spleen. The poem seethes with so much incandescent rage that it now and then degenerates into prosaicism and sloppiness of line lengths. T.S. Eliot warns us to be wary of too much emotions in poetry. He famously opines that 'poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality. But of course only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things.' In *The Kingdom of the Mad* Esiaba Irobi's strong personality emerges in clear relief and the power of his emotions about the country resides in the fact that they implicate you as well.

I must here enter a caveat: however one reacts critically to Irobi's poem, it wrings one emotionally and wrenches something out of one. The poem is as intense a means for the purgation of the poet's powerful, long-simmering emotions as it is meant to agitate our own. Not only am I aware that my critical reaction to this poem is very much entwined with my interests and biases as Nigerian and Yoruba. I am also aware that in constructing a discourse on Irobi's anti-Nigerian poem, I am in some ways engaged in a discursive practice of exclusion, rendering the poet as deviant because he does not conform to the enunciated 'truth' of the normative discourse. It is Foucault's submission that in analysing any literary work, one should also indicate how one is implicated in one's discourses in relation to the work. Irobi's detestation of Nigeria with his defiant insistence to address himself as Biafran is well-known, and his ambivalent attitude toward his homeland is presumably shared in varying degrees by many Nigerians of his generation. It is often said that in studying the history of a nation at any particular time, one should read its poets, for it is invariably in them that the most intense feelings and emotions of that particular generation are mostly concentrated. There is no doubt that Esiaba Irobi incarnates in *The Kingdom of the Mad* the temper, the angst and ambivalence that many young Nigerians feel about their country in recent times – which is a kind of power.

Therefore, the discourse of power in Irobi's poem is an effect of a certain set or sets of statements, ideas, postulations and commentaries that are correlated

⁷ Irobi, Esiaba (2010) *The Kingdom of the Mad* in *Sentinel Literary Quarterly* 3(4), Accessed, October 8th, 2019.

and transformed to reflect the ways certain phenomena are talked about and comprehended at a particular historical period in Nigeria. The stark realities of primordial ethnic affiliations and all the sentiments associated with them that appear to conflict with the imperative of nationhood; the hegemonic tendency to absolutise discourse as unity in diversity, the mis-governance, corruption and outright perfidy that appear to be hallmarks of governance in Nigeria since its independence and the poet's troubled relationship with his homeland. These are the particular conditions that have shaped the poet and his discourse.

Irobi's power resides in his ability to raise and put forth certain fundamental questions about our existence as a nation. Paul de Bove in Ryszard Weslaw Wolny describes this power as:

The power of positive production that is a kind of power that generates certain kinds of questions, placed within systems that legitimate, support and answer these questions; a kind of power that in the process includes within its system all those it produces as agents capable of acting within them⁸.

Irobi displays some degree of self-awareness in *The Kingdom of the Mad*. In its opening section, he describes the poem as 'poetry of power'. This phrase seems to be used in two senses: first, power as a brute force held by the country's dominant political group against which all ire must be directed, and which must be dismantled, and second, a more diffused sense of power (Foucauldian) that permeates all levels of society that anybody can in certain contexts feel or appropriate. I explore mostly the latter in Esiaba Irobi's poem.

The Kingdom of the Mad begins at a point when the poet is airborne, about to join the growing number of Nigerian poets and scholars in Exile. The poet looks down on the country from whose shackles he has just escaped with utter disdain and disgust.

*The country spreads below like the carcass of a gigantic cow
rotting in the sun, its future a capsized canoe on the ox-bow
loops of the River Niger below.*

From the height 'empowered by the cheap red wine/the dazzling, blinding light/, the poet acknowledges the physical and symbolic power of the new position he now occupies in relation to his country, courtesy of a British Council fellowship. He has ascended to a certain social class that he has for a long time hoped and wished for. He feels the power of his new position and obtains an insight into what powerful men feel in their position.

*And suddenly it dawns on me that this must be What it feels
like, I mean the ecstasy of power. This is what seduces us
all. This feeling one can soar above it all.*

⁸ Wolny, Ryszard W. (2004) *A Cry Over the Abyss: The Discourse of Power in the Poetry of Robert Browning and Algernon Charles Swinburne*. Opole: Wyndawnenictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.

But in the real sense the poet (including the people he refers to) has not by any means been endowed with power. It is the context of his new location that makes him powerful as Foucault would have us believe; power is exercised, not possessed. Power is not the privilege of the dominant class but an overall effect of their strategic position.

The power of the poet's physical and metaphorical ascendancy over his homeland expresses itself in the way the poet views his country and his erstwhile compatriots as stuck, damned and powerless.

*Airborne now, I look down. How secure
and powerful it makes one feel to look down,
from these heights, and see one's own country
And people as damned, see them as toothed vulvas,
waiting to bite off and chew into pieces
whatever you put like a bone between their
gapping, yapping, flapping, oversized omnivorous lips
food, foolishness, manifestoes, your penis
Even urine from an aeroplane.*

The poet in his momentary delusion, usurps the power embodied in his country's political authorities, and regards his homeland like a spread out whore, waiting to be ravished within relations of domination and subordination. There is a suggestion of male virility and of male power, ready to abuse its helpless and powerless victim. The poet's power becomes set within the relationships of his sexual drives and desires as Freud enlightens us, and his sense of domination over his country. What we have above is a prime example of what Ryszard Wielaw Wolny designates as:

The discourse of the enforced entry, of violence of intrusion,
of transgression. It is also the discourse of power. Or more
precisely of the dream of an access to power.⁹

In the poet's eventual escape from the dire and asphyxiating socio-economic conditions in his country, in his attempt to step outside its hegemony and reclaim his free and autonomous being, the poet lifts himself manfully above a society of which is a minuscule part, and denominates it as *The Kingdom of the Mad*. But the joke is on him. He is the mad one. He is the one who has transgressed the bounds of the normal and the conventional in his Nietzschean endorsement of power. He is the one who has indulged in extreme emotions and posited the country's collapse as a solution to its manifold problems. He is the one who 'surveys all like Ozymandias, and smiles' gloating at his homeland's imminent disintegration.

*One day, this country will explode
With a terrifying force,
The voice with which the engine
Like the imagination, rage
Against the fuselage's and the wings'
Craving for the earth gravity.*

⁹ Ibid. 10-18.

*It will explode! in the hands and faces
Of its makers. It will explode! Like a crude Biafran bomb.*

The poet depicts his society as deviant and degenerate and himself as a knowing agent, aware and above everything. In doing this the poet (unwittingly?) underscores the effects of his power as generated by his poetic discourse.

As Foucault postulates, no social practice is inseparable from relations of power. That we see this society only through the poet's eyes and sympathise with the poet's condition, hints at the poet's symbolic power. The poet, however, can only derive meaning by virtue of his relation to the society of which he is a part because the society is an inherent component of him, his repudiation of it regardless. Therefore, the poet's authority can only be authenticated and legitimated within the discursive formation in his society from which he arises at a particular historical point. Irobi plays to the century-long discourses that have constructed the poet as prophet, lone-sufferer, critic, judge and lover, and so defines himself by exclusion. He reproduces and rearticulates the power about the perception of poets as different. It is nevertheless a legitimate attempt and one might add a typical one. For Stuart Hall ;

self-constructions are necessary fictions. We need them to
operate in the world, to locate ourselves in relation to others
and to organise a sense of who we are.¹⁰

Essential to the development of the self is the recognition one seeks from others. In *The Kingdom of the Mad*, Irobi summons certain prominent critics and writers – nine in all – as co-witnesses to the prevailing madness in their homeland, luring them into a discursive space that bears all the inscriptions of power. Cris Weedon describes this process as one that 'involves recruiting subjects to the specific meanings and values constituted within a particular discourse and encouraging identification'¹¹. The poet constructs a shared space between himself and these critics within which issues about the dysfunctional nature of the Nigerian state can be discursively projected. The poet's offer in his discourse of subject positions is not only to this elite group of Nigerian intellectuals but also to us, the reader as well. However, the subject positions he offers us are of a lower order, merely creating for us a space of identification and thus inviting us to participate in the discourse he himself has formulated and set the terms for our participation. We are thus being positioned to react in a certain way to the subject of the poet's discourse. If as knowing agents we try to act outside the hegemony of the poet's discourse, we would still be implicated by his discourse nevertheless.

According to Donald Matheson (2005:59), texts imply certain readers, providing spaces for actual readers to locate themselves with respect to the texts and thus shaping the selves they bring to them. In constructing a text of this nature, the poet deploys a politics that emplaces his identity and discourse in the context of power-ridden social relations. Not only does the poet excludes

¹⁰ Ibid. 21

¹¹ Weedon Cris (2004) *Identity and Culture: Narrative of Difference and Belonging*. McGraw Hill Education. USA, Open University Press.

himself from the madness in his society, he at the same time excludes his society from that realm of symbolic power in which he has placed himself and those he sees as his co-travellers. Power flows within the interactions and the network of relationships the poet constructs. It is in this way hegemony is produced and circulated and society's power-structures reinforced. Furthermore the poet has to imagine that the people he apostrophises, share the same attitude with him toward the country, before he can make sense of his alienation and ascribe power to himself. He references Biodun Jehifo, Odia Ofeimun, Benjamin Okri, Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotosho, Afam Akeh, Ossie Melody, Emmanuel Obiechima and Chinua Achebe in that order. All these people are institutional wielders of cultural capital. A Marxist critic like Chidi Amuta would situate them in their socio-economic and political context:

...as member(s) of the intellectual arm of the neo-colonial bourgeoisie. Although they may not own property or employ labour, the relatively easy access to power and privilege which their Western higher education confers on them would tempt us to place them in the group that Claude Ake loosely refers to as 'exploiters by class position'¹².

Some of the critics, the poet references in his poem were ardent Marxists in their younger days but now have become part of the architecture of power and their Marxist ardency has mellowed. The poet even joshes one of them in the fifth section of the poem.

*Kole, I hear you are now in South Africa,
Doing great adverts for mobile phones from the USA
How will Karl Marx feel in his grave now that you appear
On billboards for conglomerates, how will Trotsky feel?
Lenin, Stalin and Chairman Mao, how will they feel?
Have we betrayed them, Compesino and Comrade, have we?
But what else could we do? After the Berlin Wall had fallen...*

It is impossible to engage with Irobi's poetry generally without appreciating the nation's conflictual and fractured essence. Nigeria is a postcolonial nation of diverse ethno-nationalities unified into a single political entity by the British colonial will. The ethnic and religious tensions and cleavages arising from the enforced union have served to alienate the average Nigerian from their homeland. This ambivalence toward the country has been most pronouncedly felt by the people of the South East from where the poet hails. The issues of the conflict of cultural and religious values and the distributions of power have always been very contentious issues in our nation-building process. At certain times in the evolution of our country's history, one major ethnic group or another has felt alienated from the rest of the country. Obi Nwankama hints at this reality when he opines thus:

...the idea of 'Nigerian citizen' is quite often modulated by its embodying competing and multiple identities of the 'nation'
– the complex ethnic mix that defines and complicates the

¹² Amuta, Chidi (1989) *The Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism*. UK. Bookcraft.

terrain of nation. It is thus possible to be more Igbo, Yoruba or Berom than Nigerian and vice versa¹³.

Nwankama further on particularly asserts the specificity of the Igbo writers' national experience, positing this as serving as the creative focus for their writing. He writes:

There is today a 'doubleness' of Igbo nationalism – its radiating between cosmopolitanism and localism – a self-conscious existence at the margins of Nigerian postcolonial history. There is thus reflected in the nature of Igbo identity and its inscription in the contemporary Nigerian novel (and poetry) an ambivalent desire to imagine and constitute a nation within and outside these margins¹⁴

Nwankama's assertion above substantiates Foucault's postulation about the omnipresence of power and the fact that power can be challenged and resisted. In spite of Igbos (perceived?) existence at the margins of Nigeria's postcolonial history; they are able to exercise power in constituting their identity within and outside those margins, which Igbo writers inscribe in their literary works (production of knowledge, which is another kind of power). Moreover ethnic identities are not natural. They are products of culture, never of essence. They are discursive formations deployed in public arena in quest of power.

The public space especially of a postcolonial nation is always a terrain of struggles where meanings are inscribed in the ways in which different ethnic identities are presented and their subject positions articulated. Obi Nwankama's study of some Igbo novelists demonstrates the reality of the ethnic-differentiated qualities of Nigerian literature. The hegemonic tendencies to articulate national experiences from one's own ethnic perspective and consciousness are inevitable part of postcolonial literature. Chidi Amuta rationalises this trend thus:

The presence of aspects of ethno-philosophy and oral techniques in contemporary African literature testifies to the original ethnic-based structure of pre-colonial African societies... African writers are people whose childhood experiences are deeply rooted in ethnic cultures and consciousness. Their literary articulation of national experiences is bound to reflect this background.¹⁵

Nonetheless, this ethnic consciousness has now and again tended to degenerate into outright ethnocentric positions in the hallowed halls of our literature. The tendency in which one's ethnicity is given an ontological primacy in the 'narrativation' of our national experiences has grave consequences. At any rate one's ethnic provenance can never be the sole source of one's literary

¹³ Nwankama, Obi (2008) *Metonymic Eruptions: The Igbo Novelists, the narrative of the Nation and New Developments in Contemporary Nigerian Novels* in *Research in African Literature* 39(2) Conteh-Morgan (ed), Ohio, Ohio State University, pp1-14.

¹⁴ Ibid. 8

¹⁵ Ibid 64

inspiration and personal identity in a postcolonial multi-ethnic nation as ours. Rather the individual is constituted through a network of group affiliations as Esiaba Irobi's *The Kingdom of the Mad* clearly demonstrates. This is exactly what accounts for the contradictions we find in Irobi who unequivocally declares himself a Biafran, therefore an enemy of the state and yet some of the people he apostrophises in the poem are Yorubas – whom he addresses as his compatriots and who may hold slightly differing views concerning Nigeria's corporate existence. What is more, these men belong to a rival ethnic group in the context of Nigerian power-games. That Irobi still considers himself a compatriot for a country he has good reason to detest underscores the conflictual nature of the postcolonial subject that Nwankama delineates above. Nevertheless, the poet transcodes into fiery poetic terms anti-Nigerian discourses particularly popular in the south east, produced within the discursive field that constitutes his 'Biafraness'. *The Kingdom of the Mad* is clearly Irobi's articulation of his resistance against the hegemony of the North in Nigeria's political landscape.

Esiaba Irobi's level of political consciousness is conditioned by the country's harsh economic and political climate and more importantly by the dehumanisation of the people of the South East before and during the civil war between 1966-69, and their subsequent (perceived?) marginalisation from the country's power-centres.

With each literary persona he apostrophises, he depicts particular aspects of the distortions that have engulfed the country, immobilised her progress and ruined her hopes. In a relentless cascade of animal metaphors, the poet graphically underscores the predatoriness and cannibalism of the Nigerian ruling elite:

*The prison have been emptied
The parliament are full. The donkeys are neighing
The horses braying, the bulldogs roaring,
The hyenas throwing up. Meanwhile the hen
Returns to roost without her brood of chicks,
because a python lies at the threshold,
his stomach bulging with eggs and the bones.*

There are echoes of Christopher Okigbo's *Path of Thunder* and Kofi Awoonor's *Song of Sorrow*, but Irobi makes his point nonetheless. The poet's rhetorical strategies of apostrophising serve to mobilise the referenced critics' appreciation- including the reader's – for the conditions that have alienated him from his homeland, from himself and his true nature – a discursive process that produces the poet's subject position.

The Biafran war expectedly has continued to dominate the consciousness of writers from south east. The influence of this war and its aftermaths account mostly for the emotional power of Irobi's poem. The poet demonstrates his psychic pain and sympathy for the millions of his people massacred during the war. He writes:

*Ah, my compatriot, B.J., do you remember the beauties
of nineteen sixty-six exhibited as the masterpieces of our history
in the galleries of the North? Do you or do you not?*

*The human heads baked in an oven before they were fed to dogs.
The female breasts sliced off with axes and scimitars.
The vagina and male genitals scalped with rusty scissors, the spoils of an
incestuous war.*

The poet depicts the appalling realities of the war – the hunger, squalor, disease and savagery, the memory of which still haunts him several decades after.

*The monsters of the deep
are still feeding on my soul like the teeth
of a thousand piranhas.*

The poet particularly recalls some of the atrocities committed against the Igbos in the north in the months leading to the war.

*Do you recall the memory of the Igbo woman
who brought home like a trophy, in a suitcase
across the River Benue, across the River Niger,
by donkey and by bicycle, by head and by train.
The quartered pieces of her husband's body?*

The ethnic tensions generated by the coup and counter coup in 1966 culminated in massive riots in Northern Nigeria during which an estimated 30,000 soldiers, officers and civilians were killed, forcing thousands of Igbos living in the North and other parts of the country to head home. It was shortly after this that colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu declared the secession of South east from Nigeria which ultimately led to war. It is clear the poet is still embittered by that experience, more so because the issues that led to the war are yet to be resolved fifty years after.

The generation who has borne the most the burdens of that war and the country's continued miss-governance by military and civilian government alike is the generation of people who were born shortly before the war or after – the Esiaba Irobi's generation. There is no doubt that Irobi sees his poem, *The Kingdom of the Mad* as an articulation of the frustrations, despairs, privation, bodily and psychic pain that characterised his generation. He writes:

*...all you who are the remains of what
remains of my generation. We are those the future forgot
Beleaguered and despised, banished and dispossessed.
We who blinded before we were born. And branded thereafter.*

I have several times criticised the generation of Nigerian poets that emerged between the late eighties and nineties for not being inventive, for lacking any poetic styles and ideology that would denominate their generation and distinguish them from their predecessors – the Osundare and Ojaide generation. I attributed this failing to the persistence of the issues that both generations engaged with – bad governance, tyranny, worsening socio-economic conditions, etc. Only posterity can pass final judgement on that. But there is something that is with time becoming increasingly clear between the Osundare and Ojaide generation and its successor, the Esiaba Irobi's generation. The Niyi Osundare generation purported to write for the masses, to project and celebrate their struggles, hopes and despairs while advocating and hoping for a better country.

Their socio-economic position was of a far higher order than that of the masses they ideologically identified with, being highly educated and reasonably employed mostly in the universities. From this reasonably secure economic position, they could afford to 'attitudinise' their broad love for the country and her people in their poetry. But by the end of the nineties things had got so extremely bad in the country that the socio-economic position of the writers (poets) that emerged during this period could hardly be distinguished from that of the masses. And so if we seek any qualities that distinguished the verse of Esiaba Irobi's generation of poets from that of their predecessors, we find them readily as psycho-affective qualities. The poets of Irobi's generation display tortured psyches and excruciating solitariness in their verse. The dominant mood of their verse is one of saturated pain and indignation. They were poor, rootless and dispirited. Their feelings of ambivalence about Nigeria sometimes flared into one open hatred for a country that ruined their dreams and destroyed their future.

The last literary personage Irobi apostrophises in *The Kingdom of the Mad* is Chinua Achebe. In this section the poet's anger subsides and he explains and rationalises all the rage, vitriol and anguish he has poured forth at the alienating experiences he has had in his country. He writes:

*...I want you, my fathers to know and remember and recall
that at this point in my life and career, that I despaired
That as I write, something more profound than pain, more
primordial than mud, more destructive than rage or angst
More orgasmic than sex, something beyond words, some deep
seismic force, beyond the subtle serenades of the wounded heart
and the thousand agonies of exile, propelled this hand...*

He ends the poem by designating 'this force' as love.

Conclusion

In this paper, it is shown how Foucault theorises about power as not limited to political institutions but in its relational and distributive dimensions permeates all levels of social life. Not only does power circulate it also plays very direct and creative roles in our social life. Employing Foucauldian discourse in engaging with Esiaba Irobi's poem, *The Kingdom of the Mad*, it is shown how the poet in his poem becomes the object through which power is relayed while articulating his anger and frustration with his homeland, Nigeria. The poem written against the background of power as a brute as a brute institutional force has compelled the poet eventually to sever his ties with his country in order to seek his fortunes in Western capitals. The contention of this paper is that Irobi's poem is a way of producing knowledge about himself and by extension about his generation of poets and their complex and ambiguous relations with a country they have good reason to loathe.

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