in-depth biography of Okigbo. Another task for Ezenwa-Ohaeto perhaps!.

Other material in the same interview prompts enquiry into the most remarkable development in Achebe's 'later novel' - the presence of powerful women. Achebe told Wilkinson: 'I have been worried about the woman's role for some time, although I didn't have scope for it in A *Man of the People*.' (Lindfors, ed. 149) During the years when he was silent as a novelist, there was not only abundant opportunity for Achebe to appreciate the abilities of his wife and daughters, but also extensive discussion of gender issues.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto is not an 'official biographer' but he did approach his sometime teacher who, after indicating that he knew ' a sense of seriousness' would be brought to the project, gave his 'general approval.' A sense of seriousness is one of Achebe's own characteristic qualities. It is seriousness without solemnity, and a most attractive part of a very impressive individual. The Igbo novelist is such decent, generous, principled, reliable person, what he has to say is so tough and cogent, so deeply infused with gritty integrity, that time spent in his company is time well spent. In different ways, both Lindfors' collection and Ezenwa-Ohaeto's biography provide opportunities to spend time in the edifying, witty, intelligent company of a man who has important things to say and remarkable gifts of expression.

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In Search of Character

Odia Ofeimun

Nadine Gordimer, WRITING AND BEING, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995, 145pp.

Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo, OLUSEGUN OBASANJO: IN THE EYES OF TIME, Africana Legacy Press, Brooklyn, New York, 1997, 207pp.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto, CHINUA ACHEBE: A BIOGRAPHY, James Currey, Oxford & Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997, 326pp.

IT does not require special pleading to put *Writing and Being*, Nadine Gordimer's first collection of essays since winning the Nobel Prize for literature, in the same bracket as the two biographies under review. The three books are connected by a thread which may be accessed from the not-as-trivial notation that Nadine Gordimer is one of the authoritative voices - the other being Nelson Mandela, President of South Africa, Helmut Schmidt, former German Chancellor and Lord Callaghan of Cardiff - whose insights are deployed on the blurb of the Obasanjo biography. Gordimer's description of the former Nigerian leader, one of Africa's most revered statesmen as an 'honourable and courageous fighter for justice wherever it has been endangered' was scored while General Olusegun Obasanjo was in jail for alleged involvement in the 'phantom coup' uncovered by late General Sani Abacha in 1995. Hers is a testimony by one denizen of the frontline albeit, a writer, about another, a soldier, who, incidentally, joined the race for the presidency on being released from jail in June 1998. Thus the blurb easily connects with preoccupations that have become, so recognisably, natives of Gordimer's person, concerning individual involvement in the construction and sustenance of truth and justice in society. How such involvements add up in the moral sphere of collective action, that is, within the common backcloth of needs that define our common humanity, is the core issue across the six-chapters of *Writing and Being*. It so happens that one chapter, the fourth, is devoted to Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe's last of five novels to date, in which one of the not-so-central characters, the Oldman of Abazon, provides a 'vigorously lyrical disquisition on the place of '...the poet, and writer in the struggle for social justice'.

More importantly, across the collection, Gordimer concentrates on the relationship between reality, 'real life', the very fishpond of biography, and the fictions of the writer's

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imagination which are quite commonly but not always justifiably, perceived as 'looter among other people's lives'. The consequent rumination on fact and fiction offers Gordimer a lawgiver's opportunity to draw out the limitations of biography and the limits of novelistic fabulation which may be transgressed wilfully only by the writer of fiction.

Thus, we are obliged to understand why, as she admits in her first essay titled 'Adam's Ribs: Myth and Realities', she has had to resort to the use of biography to settle more than a literary score as she did in her novel *Burgher's Daughter*. In that novel she paid a 'coded homage' to a revolutionary hero, an

Nadine Gordimer

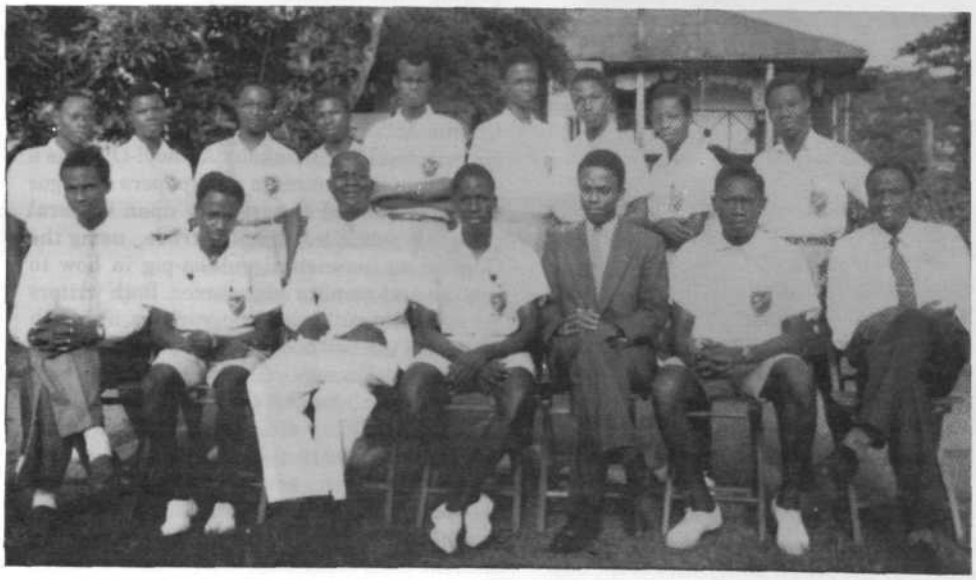
'anti-apartheid activist who had died serving a life sentence, his ashes withheld from his daughters by the prison authorities of the day' . Her homage consisted in among other things reproducing 'an existing document, part of the speech made in court by an actual personage, a South African communist, when he was sentenced to life imprisonment'. Thumbing her nose at the racist authorities who had banned the words of certain people from public airing, Gordimer drew more than an ordinary mileage before the publication of her novel by showing it to the daughter of the hero who had been one of her models for the characters and who said, 'This was his life'. This, an acceptance of the fictional as a fair picture of what the author may have had no inkling of in reality, raises the question of how much like biography fiction and vice versa.

This of course would accede to Toni Morrison's contention that 'The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self... is the test of their power'. Yet, the issue is for the reader to be able to say 'this was our life'. There can be no dispute that imaginative writing has to owe as much to testimony as biography and autobiography must. This is the issue tackled in the second chapter of *Writing and Being* entitled 'Hanging on a Sunrise: Testimony and imagination in Revolutionary writing'. Whereas in the age of apartheid, 'much was not spoken and much was not written' because of 'the many categories of offence decreed by the censorship laws that silenced people and because "the necessity for secrecy" silenced those engaged in revolutionary action', the end of apartheid ushered in an era of alternative testimonies. Part of the struggle of memory against forgetting in Millan Kundera's sense of man's struggle against power has, after apartheid, raised the matter of 'what we never knew' even more than the question of not forgetting what we tend.

Against this prefatic background, we come upon the two biographies written by proteges who clearly adore and are intent on celebrating their subjects. While Ezenwa Ohaeto was Chinua Achebe's student at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo was a reporter at the Guardian newspapers in Lagos who had zeroed in virtually upon General Obasanjo while learning his trade, using the General as his virtual guinea-pig in how to acquire and monitor his sources. Both writers are evidently authorised biographers, although readers of the two books will get the sneaking feeling that Ezenwa Ohaeto had more cooperation from his subject than Adinoyi-Ojo could wheedle out of the retired General. At any rate, public documentation of Chinua Achebe's activities as a writer are so well annotated and his spoken and written testimonies about his own life and works so much more accessible than the lived experience of a General who was notorious for his dislike of journalists and who, after his retirement, treated reporters as out of bounds at his Otta farm retreat. Besides, although the General had become something of a writer in retirement, making an autobiographical excursion into his role in the civil war - indeed he being the war commander to whom the Biafran forces surrendered on the third anniversary of the January 15, 1966 coup of which Chukwuma Nzeogwu, his bossom friend, was one of five leaders - he was not freed from the mask that public roles impose. It was certainly more difficult to break through the mask in order to go beyond the books that the General had published: all of them emphasising his public persona. As with the testimonies by South African revolutionaries under Apartheid,

there was still so much to hide and too many untold stories in Nigerian history around the General.

One evident purpose of the biography of the General is to put on display a stylistic performance that would make a good reading out of an otherwise prepossessingly dull-looking General. More than the biography of Chinua Achebe by Ezenwa Ohaeto, *In The Eyes of Time* is closer to the idea of biography as a work of story-telling. It is less weighed by research; less motivated by the need to capture the depth and complexity of the General's most strategic roles than it is by the need to present the drama of his life in personable terms. The biography takes off virtually from the middle, the high noon of the General's life; from that juncture in the high art of coup-making in Nigeria's history when the most popular military Government that Nigeria had yet had - General Muritala Muhammed's three month old regime - was gored but not toppled in an attempted coup. The reader is taken into the maw of the raw, virtual hand to hand muzzling that led to the literal panel-beating of the then Brigadier Olusegun Obasanjo to accept service as Head of State of Nigeria. He is presented as a reluctant leader, who, although next in line, was so devastated by the death of his commander-in-Chief that he had virtually packed his bag, ready to turn his back on the army, when he was cornered and cajoled to take office.

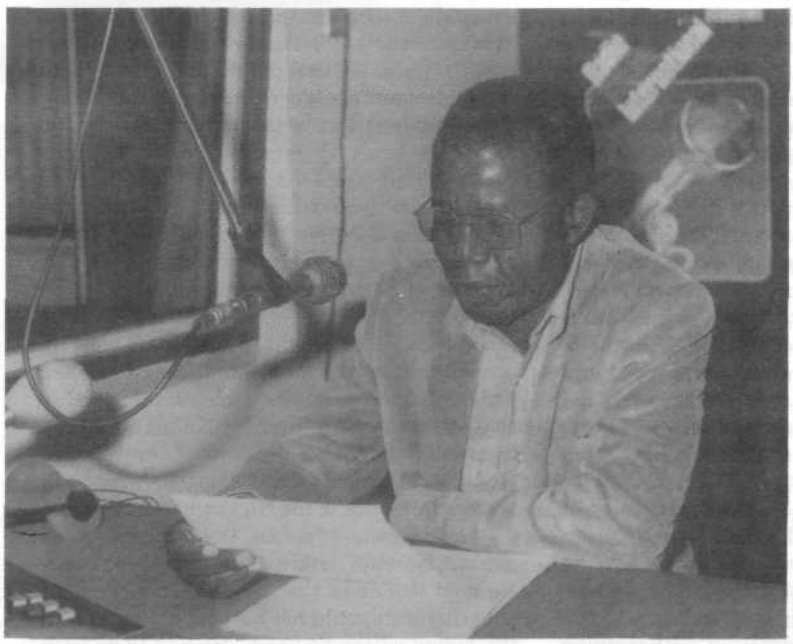


Olusegun Obasanjo (standing extreme right) with classmates at Baptist Boys High School, Abeokuta, in the mid 1950s. Moshood Abiola is seated sixth from left

After meeting him at the peak of his politico-military career, we encounter him next literally in diapers in Owu, Abeokuta, and thenceforth a lineal tracing of his rise from secondary school, where he certainly did not demonstrate soldierly qualities, to a cadetship in the army. We get the drama and the self-empowering sense of occasion that explains why the stone which builders reject becomes the conerstone. It begins to get evident, with time, that not having the easy gregariousness of his peers nor the loud skills that would readily distinguish him as the leader, Obasanjo almost self-punishingly revels in being the underdog whom no one gives a chance but who would, cinderilla-like, carry the prize. So, he, the bumbling youngster of no much visibility of aptitudes, joins the army, and the Engineers Corps which never had preeminence of authority on its side. From this side-kick of fate, he manages to command troops in the civil war, displace more sensationally applauded commanders, scheme to and receive the surrender documents from the defeated Biafran forces, and becomes an effective workhorse in post-war Ministry of Works, gaining a centrality that made him available for higher office.

Easily, the most valuable part of this biography is its adhension to a certain private personality beneath the public personage. The Obasanjo who begins with self-doubt but warms up to the challenge of the task at hand. The Obasanjo who schemes is not so much presented as implicated through post-facto redoubts that he constructs to put his stamp on situations. He clearly belongs to that generation of Nigerians who drew a line between public and private sphere but knew when to allow a blur for the purpose of self-advancement. Like all soldiers in power, who are particularly adept at making such a blur for the sake of effect, Obasanjo knows how to savage his environment, displace the rules, and generally place himself on top of the national agenda. In this regard, Adinoyi-Ojo is painstaking in presenting his reaching for security both material and otherwise, in his private life, within his generally adventurous embroilment in military duties that would take him to the Congo and Nigerian civil wars and headship of the state. A man of devastating cunning, the underbelly of his style is perhaps better unveiled in his

relationship with his first wife, Oluremi, whom he had wooed, against jibes and insults, with a tenacity that he would display in much of his public undertaking. The marriage made for model relationship between husband and wife enters a testy period that becomes unmanageable as the man's rise in the world virtually takes him into an unbridled tail-hunting that belied the public image of a disciplined almost stait-laced soldier. As he goes on an almost self-dissipatory binge of woman-hunting, which his Commander-in-chief could not stem in the face of his wife's apparent distress, separation became inevitable. Nigeria had to make do with a bachelor Head of state. The single most redemptive element in the General's life would appear to be his pursuit and eventual overcoming of his wife Stella, whose rather puritan upbringing put the General to a deserved test that appears to have cured him of emotional dissipation. Actually it is in retailing these facts, the General's almost war-ready approach to his amatory pursuits, complete with deceptions, tenacious displays of a skin ready-made for outrageous barbs and snobbery, that the biographer upstages whatever public image already subsists for the General.



Chinua Achebe, recording a programme on CBC Radio International, Canada, 1985

In the end, it is the smallman striving always to rise higher that we see in, *In The Eyes of Time*. Humanised to the point of likability, Obasanjo emerges not without warts, but simply as a dutiful human being. He is a man of duty, readier to shine than he is to be charitable to other stars.

The biographer captures this-personal-in-the-public dimension without neglecting to spike unwarranted myths in national history. Bold incisive vignettes emerge in the sheerness of drama as when the myth that Ibrahim Babangida was the prime agency for snuffing out Dimka's failed coup that brought Obasanjo to power is categorically nailed. The surprise is that Ibrahim Babangida was not court-martialed for disobeying orders. Another such vignette comes to hand when Muritala Muhammed (on page 176) told Obasanjo 'we told you not to end the war the way you did so as to sort things out; you went *gaddam gaddam* (Hausa expression for heedless rush) and finished it; now you have a lion in your hands, a lion that does not roar, bite or claw, absolutely inefficient and ineffective'. It is a fleeting glimpse but a volcanic glimpse of the basis for the eruption that led to the coup of July 29, 1975 which brought Murtala Muhammed to power as head of state. It does suggest that beneath the dilly-dallying and halting prosecution of the Nigerian Civil war there is still an untold story of how political calculations interfered with the war effort. It does leave the impression that there is a short gun approach to the history in which Obasanjo played a seminal role, which has made in-depth incision on situations rather out of form. True, Adinoyi-Ojo does not dwell too lingeringly on the other side of the story. Although the style of the writing is breezily creative, and also quite arty with the gregariousness of creative writing, the voice it gives to other points of view in the contentious events being narrated is never loud. Not hearing the other voices in the life that had affected so many, gives the impression that adulation is superintending over the truth of the events. For that matter, the corruption and rudderlessness of the Gowon era is presented more in the scabrous critique made by the would-be coup-makers. The July 1975 coup makers judge the Gowon period which they toppled but are not judged by what they did or did not do. The bottomline, uncontestibly positive in favour of General Olusegun Obasanjo, is that the successors to General Yakubu Gowon made good the promise which their predecessor baulked to hand over power to an elected civilian Government. Disagreements there would always be as to whether the task was performed in a way that would make democracy possible. The biographer sees the process however through the prisms of the official line on the matter: a fact which leaves room for a redress beyond the text.

Such redress becomes a screaming requirement after a close reading of *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* by Ezenwa Ohaeto. This biography of Africa's most acclaimed story-teller is distinguished less by its fabulist disposition than the essayistic stress of it narration. Its language in relation to the subject is placid and unhurried with the self assurance of the faithful at rosary. The style matches the virtual count-and-number approach to research which it displays with authority. Threshing context with more verve than we find in Adinoyi-Ojo's engagingly drama-suffused narrative, the environment of the life is even more of a character in the biography than the author-subject. Thus there is no escaping the anthropological emphasis of the narration; after all this is about the author of *Things Fall Apart* and the biographer is an old student who is essentially empowered by an insider deal at the level of cultural background. In effect this book provides a special angle to testimony with an authorised stamp that foregathers the issues that are already so much public, but dispersed, properly.

The life is pursued with a diarist's dexterity, combing dates and events: tracing background, schools attended, exams passed, honours won, or not won; speeches delivered, seminars attended, interviews given, books published or awaiting publication. The scholar on Achebe's trail is offered standard road maps unparalleled in its annotative breadth and absolutely reliable in marking the mileposts and stations of Chinua Achebe's life. From Chinua Achebe's hometown Ogidi to Government college, Umuahia, the University of Ibadan where he read English, the Nigerian Broadcasting Service in Lagos from where he went to head the Eastern Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, Enugu, back to Lagos to run Nigeria's external Broadcasting, with training sessions inbetween that took him to London where his literary prowess first received its promissory pat on the back, the road map does not falter in linear amplitude right through to the Eagle On Iroko gathering at Nsukka which marked the novelist's 60th birthday.

Not unexpected, the context of the writing of each of Achebe's books is drawn to elicit the author's interface with sources and influences. The hassles of publishing and media access runs through the book, the most dramatic and breath-taking for lovers of Achebe sure to be the story of *Things Fall Apart*, whose original manuscripts was lost by an agent in London and would probably never have been found but for an almost cloaks and daggers search by the fledgling author. Needless to say, there runs through the biography an adulatory picture of the writer which, ineffable in parts, becomes almost a blinker distorting the placidity of the picture. Especially where the narrative touches on others whom Chinua Achebe has had differences with, a too strenuous striving for an uncontested myth of the man and his unshaken literary reputation disposes the biographer to literal savaging of whoever is on the other side of an argument. Other reputations are humbled; such that there is a long list of drubbed voices. The most obvious of these, because they are actually identified as providing instigative or motivational pulls in Achebe's creative urge, relates to the writer's place in the nationality question at the core of the Nigerian argument. Of the lot, not requiring a checking out as it gawps from virtually every chapter is Achebe's positioning against the politicians who took over from the exiting colonialists. The bone of contention is ostensibly their ethnicity-laden or tribalistic disposition. The instance that proves the point for both the subject and the biographer is narrated thus: 'One incident left a lasting impression on Chinua Achebe: Obafemi Awolowo's use of the Action Group, founded as a political party to introduce ethnic politics and destroy the aspirations of an overarching nationalism'(p.48-49) The corroboration actually comes from *The Trouble with Nigeria*, a pamphlet written by Chinua Achebe two decades ago in which he noted that 'As a student in Ibadan, "I was" an eye-witness to that momentous occasion when Chief Obafemi Awolowo 'stole' the leadership of Western Nigeria from Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe in broad daylight on the floor of the Western House of Assembly and sent the great Zik scampering back to the Niger whence he came'.

As the event is retold, the Yorubas voted against Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo, and the acclaimed leader of the nationalist movement who therefore could not become a premier in the region where he lived. He had to go back to his region of origin. The biographer glossed over the fact that Azikiwe then ousted the premier of the Eastern Region who happened to come from a minority ethnic group in order to become the premier. Tribalism supposedly existed only in the Western Region where, even as Azikiwe's *West African Pilot* reported it, Azikiwe's party did not win at the polls. The truth is that Azikiwe's party merely lost in the cannibalisation of the seats won by independent candidates who had 33% of the seats. This was the position before the inaugural meeting of the Western House of Assembly where the carpet-crossing was supposed to have taken place. Incidentally, the Hansard shows that only three people crossed carpet on the floor of the Western House of Assembly in January 1952. None of them was Yoruba. The Yoruba and Otu-Edo candidates who voted against

Azikiwe belonged indeed to ethnic and tribal organisations but they certainly did not have to cross any carpet from Azikiwe's party to vote against Azikiwe. The truly fictional account of that event which was sold by supposedly 'enlightened Nigerians' has helped ever since to dredge ethnic prejudice and hardened the animosity between those who have peddled the fiction and those whom the fiction wronged. But a biographer or historian who does not even attempt to take a hard look at the other side of the controversies but makes an impervious case out of a fiction - pandering to the established rumour industry-hurts credibility. Where ever Chinua Achebe's understanding of his country's politics is said to derive from that stereotypical event of carpet-crossing, it strains the respect that we grant to the 'words of our elders'. The truth is that the carpet-crossing took place in the rumour industry, not on the floor of the Western House of Assembly. So we must feel sad that so much ethnic dross and bile has been expended for decades on fictions that so many have died and are still dying for. Its goring to see it being made into such a fare in a biography that has an authoritative body language.

The evidence is not of sloppiness but a matter of blindspot. The same is obvious in encounters with critics and creative writers with whom Chinua Achebe has crossed swords: Ayi Kwei Armah whom Chinua Achebe had sent up in highly uncharacteristic stricture in a review of *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is not allowed a fair hearing. We are not allowed to know what Armah considered so unfair to warrant the emotional outburst in his encounter with Achebe when they met in Lagos. Armah is treated like a grumbler for whom an Olympian could hardly find time. In similar manner, Wole Soyinka, who incidentally shares too many common positionings, and has taken too many common stands, with Chinua Achebe in politics and literature is given a carpy distancing. A particularly subjective reading of the 1964 African Writer's Conference in Nairobi executed by Lewis Nkosi, which made a hash of reported speech, is latched upon as a basis for the distancing of the two writers. All it required was for Soyinka's 'a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude' to be separated from ' it pounces' for an interpretation to emerge which has wrong-footed so much discussion of African literature. It so happens that keeping alive the distance between Achebe and Soyinka has become a pattern of ethnic-griping which follows the same logic as building deaf walls between Azikiwe and Awolowo.

It needs then only to be flavoured by bricbats over style between Achebe and Soyinka over the matter of 'relieved competence and unrelieved incompetence' to buoy up later post-Nobel disquisitions as to who is the Asiwaju (Yoruba for leader) or Ogbuefi (Igbo for chief) of Nigerian literature. Of course, a spoiling for competition can be gleaned between two famous people. The lining up by all sorts of desultory positioners behind them is not to be discounted. Ezenwa Ohaeto, in his biography, manages to maul the even flow of his writing by appearing to be simply lining up instead of exploding the untruths and setting matters in their proper perspective. A clear case is the manner he dispenses with the controversy over the sourcing of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The dimension unveiled by Achebe's access to colonial reports through an interface with the colonial governor is enlightening. But it does not preclude the beneficence of the manuscript written by Simon Nnolim, Charles Nnolim's uncle. It could never touch the solid reputation that Achebe had made even if an acknowledgement of the manuscript was made in the manner prescribed by Nnolim. If the resultant misrepresentation of other people in the face of any perceived differences with Achebe is supposed to be a defence of his reputation, it turns out not to be so. On the contrary, it dims the light that rightly belongs to Chinua Achebe. He becomes like a family fetish to be ignored because we dare not let it be touched by our irreverent saliva.

Indeed, as Chinua Achebe gets older, it yields something of a panic in many who care about African literature and the development of a philosophy of culture in Africa, that we have not challenged or argued enough with him and so have not caused him to engage all of us and himself as much as he has the capacity, wit and intellectual acumen, to do. The evident loss to our societies, all in dire need of its best minds, is exacerbated by any performances which make short shrift of what is knowable. It undermines the willingness to address Nadine Gordimer's notion of the unsayable and the revealing of the concealed side of life. The unsayable bodies out more ineluctably when, in fiction, biography, and faction, the quarrels that we have with ourselves is coextensive with the arguments or quarrels we have with others. To repress either is to short-change the unsaid as if the already said becomes the unsayable. Put differently, testimony becomes skewed and the truth of art suffers when the room for argument is constricted by the need to make obeisance.

Ofeimun, writer and journalist, was until recently president of the Association of Nigerian Authors