

**Postcolony as a Charade:**  
**Signposting the Uganda's Disillusionment in Harriet Anena's**  
***A Nation in Labour***

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**Abstract**

The paper contends that Harriet Anena's *A Nation in Labour* provides a dissident reading of the postcolonial Uganda. While Anena does not take delight in the ongoing sufferings borne by most of the masses, she does not fail to invoke the poetics of lamentation to express Uganda's mismanagement of the postcolonial political dividends. The poetic strength of *A Nation in Labour* lies in the extravagant use of symbolism to capture the 'sickening' Uganda's nationhood. Arguably, Anena understands the import of word, which is relentlessly, abundantly, harnessed to speak to the unspeakable, diminishing, oppressive system, and for the profiling of the loss of a nation. The paper will illustrate how *A Nation in Labour* further constitutes a socio-political site where the meaning of a nation is subverted and contested. Deploying semiotics of disillusionment situated in truculent poetics, Anena in the collection, provides an insight into a nation trapped in unremitting contradictions.

Key words: a nation in labour, arrested growth, semiotics of disillusionment, Uganda, Harriet Anena

## Introduction

Horrific, provocative and humorous, *A Nation in Labour* is a reflective affirmation of Harriet Anena's disillusionment with the postcolonial Uganda. The myriads of disillusionments expressed in *A Nation in Labour* are structured by the experience of failed nationalism which have delineated the tortuous, Uganda's nationhood trajectory. Arguably, rather than creeping into a shell of paranoid terror, Anena's poetry provides alternate, emergent, and oppositional voice in the vibrant Ugandan literature. Significantly, Anena in her poetry, not only speak for and of herself as a woman who is on the receiving end of totalitarian regime in Uganda, but speaks for the marginalized, the poor, the homeless, both men and women who have been incapacitated by the oppressive political gambit in the country. Niyi Akingbe has argued that "it is sufficient to state that postcolonial Africa, being ensconced in the throes of leadership deficit, educational decrepitude, economic degeneration, and social collapse, could only require an unconditional intervention by its army of writers and intellectuals to lead a campaign of total liberation by any means possible" (Akingbe 2021:169). Consequently, *A Nation in Labour* constitutes an arena for the expression of dissident poetics that constantly adapting, appropriating, and reflecting new influences trumped up by the Uganda's political equations.

Nationhood and Anena's relationship with the postcolonial nation of Uganda provides a means for the unlocking of the hidden meanings of a nation in the poetry collection. According to Kenneth W. Harrow, "the nation-state in Africa today is in crisis. Misrule and corruption have danced across the land, provoking widespread skepticism towards the mechanisms of government and a sense of resignation over the inevitable indifference of the wealthy and the powerful to the enormous social problems at hand" (2001:33). Drawing from Harrow's observation, Anena's acute consciousness of the accrued flaws of Uganda affirms a pubertal objectification of the country as it forever struggles to attain a political maturation. The symbolism of a 'nation' allows Anena to introspectively objectify the Uganda's nationhood from 9 October 1962 when it attained independence from the United Kingdom to date. Bordered to the east by Kenya, to the north by South Sudan, to the west by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to the South-west by Rwanda, and to the south by Tanzania, Uganda has experienced decades of political impasse benchmarked by the Idi Amin Dada's eight-year -long military dictatorship, and the present, Yoweri Museveni's civilian dictatorship. Using historical inferences and antenatal symbols of labour room, stillborn and stunted growth in *A Nation in Labour*, Anena manipulates social disorders as signifiers for the analyses of Uganda's complicated nationhood. The paper is preoccupied with a semiotic analysis of a struggle for

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survival in a post colony for the ramification of a vast tableau in which deprivations, frustration and authoritarianism are engaged to essentialize the Uganda's depth of despair, arrested growth and a loss of nationhood. For its analysis, the paper engages with the New Historicism theory.

### **New Historicism and *A Nation in Labour***

Given its status as a critical mode which emphasises the relationship between a text and the society that produces it, the literary theory known as New Historicism has been chosen as the framework for the analysis of this paper. It is a theory which evaluates the assumptions and attitudes governing how events are seen differently by the author and individual readers of a literary text. It relates a text to other texts produced at the same period in each society. Thus, literary, and political connections can be drawn between the aesthetic elements embedded in *A Nation in Labour*, and the cultural, social, and political realities that obtain in the Ugandan society (Tyson, 288).

New Historicism is pre-occupied with the examination of literary texts from the perspective of their being embedded within the social and economic circumstances in which they are produced and consumed. For new historicists, these circumstances are not stable in themselves and are susceptible to being re-written and transformed. From this perspective, literary texts are part of a larger circulation of social energies, both products of and influences on a particular culture or ideology. New Historicism proffers an eclectic approach to literary study. As such, it incorporates many aspects of other critical viewpoints, even if it does not agree with them in totality. For example, it obtains from New Criticism the approach of seeking the interconnectedness that underlies any work of art (Selden 192). It shares with Reader-Response theory the view that a work of literature can impart different meanings to different readers (Booker, 137). From Postmodernism, New Historicism appropriates the critical doctrines of discontinuity, eclecticism, heterogeneity, and decentred authority in narratives. It rejects Derrida's notions of intertextuality in language and puts forward its own concept of the intertextuality between culture and society. Like psychoanalysis, the theory explores the notion of power struggles and similarly advocates that power produces individual subjects. New Historicism shares with Marxism the notion that literature tells the story of the past. However, while Marxism advocates the complete liberation of the oppressed as a critical objective, New Historicism returns to the stories in the texts to find out how they affect society. These extensive borrowings from other theories have given it a flexibility that enables it to adapt the analytical tools and perspectives of other theories to suit its own purposes (Akingbe 2011: 72).

The overt concern of New Historicism with power relations among social classes in each society makes it particularly appropriate to this paper. Influenced by Michel Foucault, new historicist critics are interested in “concerns of power, authority and subversion at work in texts” (Carlson 526). Selden also emphasises this pursuit when he states that “the New Historicists believe that Foucault’s work opens the way to new and non-truth oriented forms of historicist study of texts” (161). New Historicism’s concept of history is diametrically at variance with those of the old historicists of earlier periods. For these predecessors, “History is a homogenous and stable pattern of facts and events which can be used as background to the literature of an era” (Abrams, 184). For the new historicists, however, history is actually:

a dynamic, unstable interplay among discourses, the meanings of which the historian can try to analyse, though the analysis will always be incomplete, accounting for only a part of the historical picture. (Tyson, 287)

Consequently, the interpenetration of history is patently relative and involves a negotiation of meanings between competing groups rather than its imposition by a dominant group. New Historicism is unique in its recognition that history is the history of the present, always in the making, and radically open to transformation and rewriting, rather than being monumental and closed. New historicists argue that any “knowledge” of the past is necessarily mediated by texts of different kinds. Consequently, there can be no knowledge of the past without interpretation; the “facts” of history need to be read just like any other text. This reinterpretation of the past is invoked in Anena’s *A Nation in Labour*, when the poet interrogated the past by indicting the political elite of having squandered the Uganda’s political fortunes in “Tears and Laughter”:

Flames waved at us yesterday;  
made ash out of everything  
we held dear  
& dared our voices to rise  
above the carnage. (*A Nation in Labour*, 45)

Within the context of mismanaged postcolonial fortunes, history is appropriated to reference the initial euphoria following the country’s attainment of independence in 1962 which has now been described as been “made ash out of everything” in the poem. Niyi Akingbe has emphasized that

“as the euphoria of independence continued to wear off and the peculiar problems of many countries in the continent became increasingly intractable, many African writers felt they had no option than to incorporate socially relevant issues into their texts...” (Akingbe 2013:125). Anena’s referencing of the past evidently reiterates a plausible pretext of the inevitable tension between the literary concerns of writers as they attempt to deconstruct the competing patterns of reality mediated by the conflicting social and political circumstances witnessed in the postcolonial African countries (Gikandi 2001:1). Lamentation in “Tears and Laughter” reverberates the current conditions bedeviled by the civilian dictatorship associated with the long-running Museveni’s regime, and the social deprivations suffered by many of the Ugandans. Hayden White suggests that knowledge of the past is determined by narratives, configurations, or stories. As he states:

Histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that ‘liken’ events reported in them to some form with which we have already become familiar, in our literary culture .... By the very constitution of a set of events in such a way as to make a comprehensive story out of them, the historian charges those events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensive plot structure (91-2).

The additional relevance of New Historicism theory to this paper lies in the way in which it conceives of social conflict as inescapable, a feature which is in consonance with the focus of poetizing disillusionment in Anena’s *A Nation in Labour*. New Historicism perceives society as being made up of many different social classes and interest groups with differing and often competing interests. Given the unequal distribution of power in most human societies however, many of these groups are unable to properly articulate their concerns or have them incorporated into the grand narratives (including literature) that societies create about themselves to project a distinct identity. Indeed, it is the class that is dominant at any one time in each society that is able to impose its perspectives upon the others in such a way that it is normalized and accepted as the worldview of everyone, even when it is only representative of only a group. Dichotomy of the two opposing classes is reiterated in “Forgiveness”: “/Mama’s tongue was chopped/& dropped in the pot/that cooked our dek ngor./Akec was snatched/from Mama’s nipples &/thrust against a tree./Papa’s lips were sealed/with padlocks/meant for their jail cells./God & his son sat sky-high/watching/as our homes were torched/ by men-turned-beasts/You tell me to forgive/&all I see are heaps of sand/sitting mockingly/on remnants of my skin/”(A *Nation in Labour*, 57). “Forgiveness” employs a concept of class consciousness to speak to the dominance of the Lord’s Resistance Army. The

LRA's soldiers are singled out for mentioning, as the harbingers of body mutilations perpetrated on the personas mentioned in the poem. The mutilation of Papa, Mama and Akec, indicate that the LRA occupies a dominant class while their victims are situated in a subordinate class.

Class constitutes a significant concept in New Historicism. Thus, most societies have adopted an "us versus them" approach to creating a group identity – the Greeks divided the world into civilisation and barbarians, placing themselves in the former category, and everyone else in the latter category; monarchies propounded the divine right of kings as the natural order of things, rather than as an attempt to secure their power and influence; both Christians and Muslims demonise each other as "infidels" and other religions as "idol worship" in order to secure the loyalty of their own followers rather than because those other faiths are intrinsically evil; autocratic rulers throughout history have equated opposition to their rule with treason, regardless of whether such opposition is justifiable or not. New Historicists argue that any "knowledge" of the past is necessarily mediated by texts, or to put it differently, that history is in many respects textual. Several major consequences follow from this assertion. In the first place, there can be no knowledge of the past without interpretation. Strikingly, the conflation of oppression and misery remains an abiding worry as it is succinctly examined in *A Nation in Labour*: Misery is given expression in "Scratching Destiny":/The sun rises/& sheds its radiance/onto the earth/The wind blows/across hills & valleys, /over rocks & mountains;//bringing hope & joy/to everyone on earth./But not so for the Acoli child/born in the bush/living in IDP camps/year in, year out./20 and over./Surrounded by terror/in a land of misfortune./Weeping & wailing/mourning & groaning/are your life's companion/"(*A Nation in Labour*, 53). The poem reflects Anena's recollection of the horrifying experience of the destruction of Gulu in the Acholi sub-region and other parts of the northern Uganda, as an aftermath of the guerilla warfare waged by the Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. The devastating effect of the war is further affirmed in Anena's words:

I am a politically conscious person as you can see from the title –

'*A Nation in Labor*'. This is a politically laden title. When we were

growing up, we didn't sleep at home at most times but we would sleep

in swamps because we would fear being abducted by the

Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels whenever they attacked the

town center. If you don't hear news that rebels have attacked, then you  
stay and sleep at home that day. (Interview: [www.black star news.com](http://www.blackstarnews.com))

Just as history texts need to be read, so do the "facts" of history. From a new historical perspective, any reading of a literary text is a question of negotiation: a negotiation between text and reader within the context of history or histories that cannot be closed or finalised. Literary works are to be understood in terms of negotiation rather than in the conventional sense of a pure act of untrammelled creation. This implies negotiations which are a subtle, network of trades and trade-offs, and a jostling of competing representations. The work of art is the product of a negotiation with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society.

New Historicism, as a conceptual framework of this paper, examines the significance of semiotic of meanings in the delineation of Uganda's nationhood in Anena's *A Nation in Labour*. New Historicism in its recognition that all history is the history of the present; that history is in the making, that rather than being monumental and closed, history is radically open to transformation and rewriting. This rewriting is invoked in "We Planted Lies":

We planted lies in our backyard

& they grew into mountains

that now tumble on our heads

like landslides of Bududa. (*A Nation in Labour*, 2)

To deal with an integrated concern with the Uganda's nationhood, Anena berated the pledges by the successive rulers, to transform the country to be just rhetoric, since these promises have consistently failed to become realities. The poem illustrates the signification of "Discourse" as an important concept in New Historicism. Lois Tyson defines discourse as a "social language created by particular conditions at a particular time and place, and it expresses a particular way of understanding human experience" (281). Each social stratum has its own discourse that makes it distinct from others. Often used in the same sense as ideology, discourse "draws attention to the role of language as the vehicle of ideology." New Historicism studies discourse in particular settings to understand the "dynamic, unstable interplay" among them as they compete with one another in a state of flux negotiating exchanges of power (281). Discourse is not stable because it is dominant if

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a particular social group retains power, even as it elicits opposition to its hegemonic tendencies. The poem articulates the discourse of the ruling class in comparison to the discourse of the working class which constitutes the opposing camp in *A Nation in Labour*. Thus, an evaluation of the dialectical relationship between the two classes is highlighted in “We Planted Lies”.

### **Poetics of Lamentation in *A Nation in Labour***

Anena deploys subversive language to lament instability in the Uganda's nationhood, which is captured in *A Nation in Labour*. Jack Finnbogason and Al Valleau have asserted that without the resources of ideas, concepts, insights, attitudes, values, and sentiments encapsulated in words and expressions, writers will have no access to the depth of the subject matter embedded in their writings (2000, 241). Again, if language serves as indispensable vehicle of literature, words have always been harnessed to tease out embedded imagery and symbolism in Anena's poetry. Oyekan Owomoyela has argued that “literature is inconceivable outside the context of language. Questions pertaining to language routinely arise either implicitly or explicitly in any discussion of the subject” (1996, 4). This connection is established in “*A Nation in Labour*”:

The Republic is in Labour,  
screaming,  
pacing the political ward,  
cursing the colonial midwife  
for telling her to push (*A Nation in Labour*, 37)

Beyond the spasms of disillusionment registered in “*A Nation in Labour*”, language is deployed as the ultimate tool of delineating the problematics of the Uganda's nationhood in the entire collection. Anena has eloquently harnessed language as an appendage of culture, to caricature, satirise and portray the tottering Uganda's nationhood. Clara A.B. Joseph enthuses that “language carries an ideological burden that interpellates communities” (2001:59). Within the ambit of New Historicism, the thematic concerns of *A Nation in Labour* are analysed with a view to drawing out these connections and discussing their significance within the expected analytical concerns of disillusionment. Reflecting on the monotony of wearisome journey through the Uganda's nationhood, characterized by disorder and brigandage perpetrated by the successive governments,

Anena laments the Uganda's nationhood failure, thirty years after her independence from the United Kingdom.

Emmanuel Yewah has claimed that “for many women writers...contesting various boundaries has often come through their way of framing what might be considered personal, individual, local issues, everyday life stories in ways that transcend the boundaries of their imagined communities” (Yewah 2001:46). Anena believes that the Uganda's independence was hastily secured, which has rendered her vulnerable to the manipulations of its past rulers, who have continually plunged her into needless wars and crises. Anena's lamentation in the poem fittingly underscores Niyi Akingbe's analysis of the interventionist role of the writers in the political affairs of the postcolonial African countries. Akingbe reiterated further that when facts intersect the historical events in a writer's work, it is often necessitated by “the unequivocal urgency of documenting historical facts as the underpinning literary strategy for the decoding of the embodied signification of terror...” (Akingbe 2015:129). Hence, Anena's lamentation of a loss of nationhood in “*A Nation in Labour*” is further pursued in the subsequent stanzas:/Her head is spinning,/vision blurred,/mind inside out./She drinks counterfeit morality/&blubbers a prayer of hope/for the stillborn baby./The Republic is a headless chicken/with a body that can only flip/& flap in labour./She curses the future/for coming too soon,/clings onto a grandfather clock/that's out of tune,/hoping it'll correct a future/that's gone askew/.From the foregoing, generations of the Ugandans have lived with the reality of delusional nationalism to affirm what Finnbogason and Valleau have referred to as a situation where many times that a culture can survive misinformation and false opinion often disseminated by the authorities of run-down African nations(253). Anena's lamentation in “*A Nation in Labour*” as rooted in poetry has achieved the power to essentialize literature, as a veritable platform for articulating grievances and for a ventilation of pent-up anger.

Michel Foucault, a prominent influence in New Historicism, contends that power is not merely a physical force but an ever-present human dynamic that influences how a person relates to others. Thus, power concerns human relationships and the perception of such relationships by the persons or institutions involved in them. Foucault has further stressed that “the individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces (1980:74). Power and hegemony as a formidable concept of New Historicism is further interrogated in “A Rotten Forgiveness”:/The rim of a gun is on my forehead./I feel a bullet run through/even before the trigger/is pulled./I don't flinch./We wronged you, killed your mother,/your father, your sister, your brother/they say./They don't say that I was killed too;/

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don't know I'm a cracked shell./They can't fathom why/my body doesn't quiver/at the sight of guns anymore./They don't know that death plays/in my head daily./We can't bring back lives lost. Spit out/the anger, swallow the hurt, they say./I dig up memories & names/from beneath my tongue/& hurl/damnation/unto their faces/”(A *Nation in Labour*, 49). “Power” and “hegemony” are major new historical concepts manipulated in Anena's *A Nation in Labour* to evaluate the relationship between those who wield power and the masses. The power wielded by the Lord's Resistance Army rebels in the poem in this sense, is synonymous with influence and control, especially the type achieved through manipulation and chicanery. In other words, “Power is the ability of its holders to exact compliance or obedience of other individuals to their will, on whatsoever basis” (Bullock and Trombley 1999: 678). Hegemony is often a term associated with this form of power. “A Rotten Forgiveness” deftly uses the leitmotifs of power and hegemony by the LRA warlords to manipulate and subjugate the Ugandans living in Gulu and other geographical spheres under its control. The wanton killing of the hapless Ugandans by the LRA bandits climaxed in “I Envy the Dead”:/Now I stand/ on the edge of Got Moro,/envying the dead/whose graveyards are unmarked./”(A *Nation in Labour*, 56). While the Ugandan masses are left stranded in the vulnerable space of liminality between life and death, certainty, and uncertainty, hope and hopelessness, the LRA soldiers are ostensibly profiled as accomplices who perpetuated the maiming, killing and other debasements in “I Envy the Dead”. Power and hegemony have been defined as “the predominance of one social class over others” (Bullock and Trombley 1999: 388). The issue of power relations between the LRA soldiers and their victims in the poem has further illustrated the LRA's campaign of terror in Uganda.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has examined how Harriet Anena's *A Nation in Labour* serves as a symbolic site, for the lamentation of the difficulties associated with the Uganda's nationhood after it attained independence from the United Kingdom in 1962. The paper has acknowledged Anena's vibrancy at articulating the subjugation of the masses by the successive postcolonial Ugandan governments. It is important to state that Anena in *A Nation in Labour*, has repeatedly indicted Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, for an orgy of mutilations, maiming and killings perpetrated in Gulu, and other parts of the northern Uganda, where the rebel group's influence holds sway. Utilising New Historicism theory's concepts for its analysis, the paper has elucidated how the poor and the down-trodden Ugandans only exist as a collective phantom. Being intimidated and trapped in subsisting

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quagmire of misery, the Ugandan hapless masses have been consigned to the passive space of helplessness where they can neither assert nor negate anything.

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