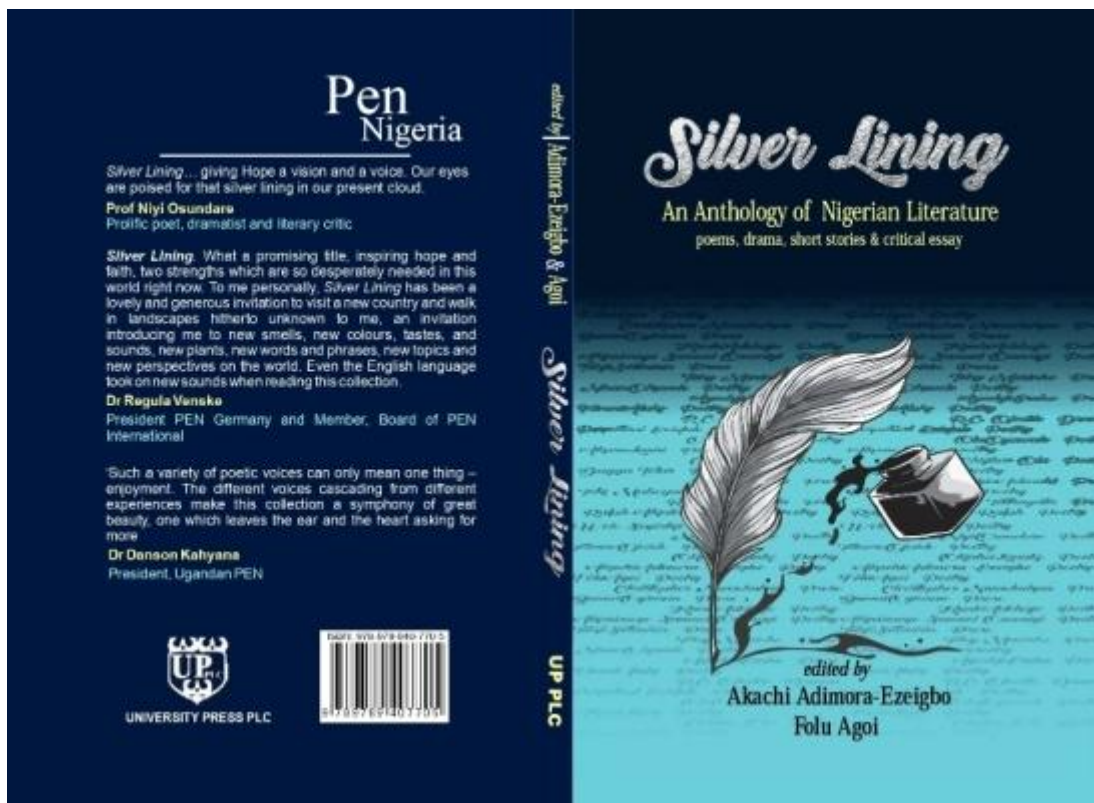


BORDERS REVIEW OF THE 2019 PEN ANTHOLOGY



SILVER LINING



Folu Agoi, Pen Nigeria President

In 2003, the Nigerian chapter of PEN International published *Melody of Stones*, its first anthology of Nigerian writing. *Silver Lining*, is PEN Nigeria's second anthology. Published by University Press Plc in the second half of 2019, Pen Nigeria President, Folu Agoi and Professor Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, the editors, spoke in their Editorial about the need to



Professor Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo,
writer & editor

put together a ‘robust’ work of Nigerian literature; one which will project, as ‘one vibrant voice’, an intergenerational caucus of artists and thinkers: early career, mid-career and veterans. No legislated themes or approaches: writers were asked to make their own choices about what to express and how.



Launch of *Silver Lining* at Lagos Book & Art Festival (LABAF), November 2019

Before I begin my review of *Silver Lining*, I would like to take a quick look at examples of the world-wide campaign to mainstream African literature. It continues to gain ground. France-based *Nakiri – Rights Solution* and digital distributor, Italy-based *StreetLib*, two stakeholders in the success of African publishing, have come together to scale the sale of foreign rights and distribution of francophone books across international and linguistic boundaries, leveraging expertise in rights trading and cutting-edge digital technology. Individual linguists across Africa and community resources such as the *Red Sea Cultural Centre*, Hargeysa, Somaliland, are translating books and short stories into local languages to encourage consumption of African literature by the widest possible local audience. The *Mabati Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African literature* was inaugurated for the purpose of translating texts from, between and into African languages and to promote writing in African languages. Fellowships and residencies hosted locally and overseas are on the rise. With and without international guest-lists there is momentum behind the spread and upgrade of literary festivals, book fairs and writers’ conferences on the continent. It is clear that as our self-esteem has grown, so has the vision of the community of writers which PEN represents, to sustain vigorous conversations around literature between Africans at home, Africans across our borders, Africans in the Diaspora at the same time as our books are being integrated into the world’s biblio-diversity.



Launch of *Silver Lining* at Lagos Book & Art Festival (LABAF), November 2019

Momentum is rising behind cross-cultural and cross-border collaborations to facilitate the distribution of African writing; to mainstream it. With their capacity to project a multitude of diverse voices, a high premium is being placed on anthologies. Examples: *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* (ed. Helon Habila. Granta (UK)); *New Daughters of Africa* (ed. Margaret Busby. Myriad Editions (UK)); *Migrations: New Short Fiction from Africa* (eds. Helen Moffett, Efemia Chela, Bongani Kona. Short Story Day Africa (South Africa)); *Limbe to Lagos: Non-Fiction from Cameroon and Nigeria* (eds. Dami Ajayi, Dzekashu MacViban, & Emmanuel Iduma. Goethe Institute (Nigeria)); the annual Writivism anthologies (Writivism. Uganda), the annual Caine Prize anthologies (co-publishers: New Internationalist (UK); Interlink (US); Lantern Books (Nigeria) Kwani? (Kenya); Sub-Saharan Publishers (Ghana)); amaBooks (Zimbabwe); Huza Press (Rwanda); Mkuki na Nyota (Tanzania); Red Sea Cultural Foundation (Somaliland, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and UAE), *Safe House: Explorations in Creative Non-Fiction* (ed. Ellah Wakatama Allfrey. Cassava Republic Press (Nigeria)) and *Best 'New' African Poets 2018 Anthology*, edited by Tendai Rinos Mwanaka, published by Mwanaka Media and Publishing (Zimbabwe) and distributed by the world's largest marketing and distribution firm of Africa published books, African Books Collective (Oxford, UK).

While PEN Nigeria laboured to make its own anthology happen, Regula Venske, President of German PEN and member of the Board of PEN International, waited in Germany to receive *Silver Lining*. In her generous Foreword, she introduces Germany's LitProm and its website which lists about 108 entries from Nigeria out of an existing 1,000 entries from the continent. She explains LitProm's goals: under the auspices of Frankfurt Book Fair, LitProm encourages cross-border learning and dialogue through the promotion of literatures of the world, namely literature from Africa, Asia, the Arab World and Latin America. Venske expresses the hope that *Silver Lining* will be added to the titles from the canon of new Nigerian literature that have been made available in Germany by dedicated translators. They are still too few. She makes special mention of *Das Wunderhorn*, led by Manfred Metzner and Indra Wussow. Since 2010, the Frankfurt-based publishing firm has undertaken *AfrikaWunderhorn* which she describes as 'a courageous endeavor to translate young writers from Africa'.



Regula Venske, President of German PEN

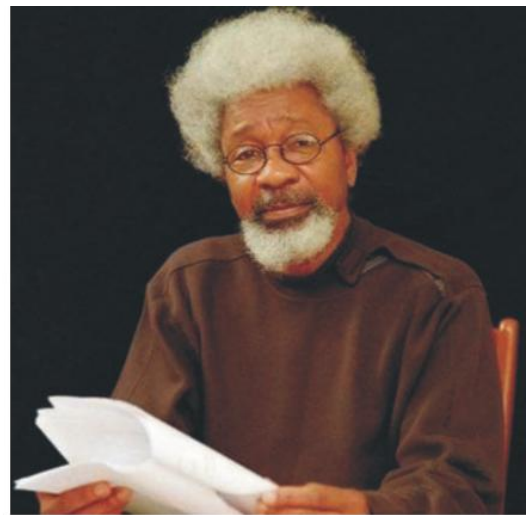


Ralph Tathagata
Author, *Nursery Rhyme and the Truth of Poetry*
(critical essay)

There are 21 poems, 10 prose entries, 1 play and 1 critical essay from 33 authors in *Silver Lining*. Ralph Tathagata, author of the critical essay, *Of Nursery Rhyme and the Truth of Poetry*, moderated the panel discussion during a World Migration Day 2018 program organized by PEN Nigeria at CORA House, Lagos. Many others are names I have never have heard of until now including Olu Oyawale (*A Homeless Fellow Contemplates Suicide in the Thames*), Kayode Adaramoye (*Migratory Flight*), Toyin Adenubi (*The Outcast*), and Ethel Ngozi Okeke (*I come to see you, Mama*) and playwright R.C Ofodile (*A Magical Meeting*). Here they are, showcasing ability which ranges the spectrum

on a stage shared with celebrated artists including a winner of the NOMA Award for Publishing in Africa and the first African Nobel Laureate of Literature.

Leah Sharibu is the schoolgirl who has remained a hostage of Boko Haram for refusing to renounce Christianity in exchange for her freedom. For Wole Soyinka who provides the powerful opening to the collection, secular humanism is the antidote to the religious extremism which led to the abduction of the schoolgirls of Chibok, Bornu State and Dapchi in Yobe. *A Humanist's Ode to Chibok, Dapchi – for Leah Sharibu*, is his poem exhorting ‘new minds (and) new-attuned’, to reject and consign to ‘mice and termites’ ‘enslaving texts’, ‘gospels of death’ ‘forged to chain humanity to minaret and spire from crib to grave’



Professor Wole Soyinka
*First African Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1986),
 Author, A Humanist's Ode to Chibok, Dapchi - for Leah Sharibu (poem)*



Tanure Ojaide
*2018 Joint Winner of the
 Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature,
 Author, For Jamal Kashoggi (poem)*

Joining him to denounce the terrorism Boko Haram has unleashed on the North-East of Nigeria, are Funmi Aluko with *Ballad for the Forest I, II and III* and 2018 Wole Soyinka Prize winner, Tanure Ojaide, with *Head Count*. The poem mourns the decimation of nature, wildlife and ‘*thriving settlements*’ by the combined forces of marauding Fulani herdsmen and ‘*selfish overlords*’ at the helm of an industrialization which rides roughshod over the needs of the people who derive nothing from so-called modernizing activity but suffering and dispossession of the little they possess.

As Nigerians we know the universality of greed and corruption. Which one of us has not experienced their corrosive effects? They drive the political life of our nation, spill into organized religion and war against our personal outcomes. Greed, corruption and their spawn - desperate poverty and migration – are the dominant features of much of our literary art and this anthology by the writers of PEN Nigeria, is no exception.

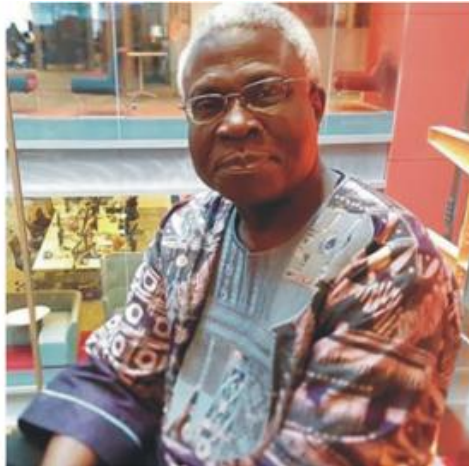
Professor Niyi Osundare, 1991 NOMA Award winner has contributed several poems one of which is a lofty exhortation: *Let Distribution Undo Excess*, and takes as its title, a quote from Shakespeare’s King Lear, Act 4, Scene 1. Ralph Akintan-Ralph’s Christian poem rages at the *Merchants in the Temple*. Folu Agoi evokes an infamous

moment in Africa's relations with the United States in his '*fantastically rich, fantastically famished*' *Shithole*. Akeem Lasisi's *Udeme: Constituency Project* is a punchy satire:

*'You will be my only constituency project, Udeme
If I can wriggle my way into Senate House.
When others talk about poverty projects
I will dualize the road that leads into your heart.'*



Akeem Lasisi
Author, *Udeme: Constituency Project* (poem)



Niyi Osundare
1991 NOMA Award winner
for publishing in Africa,
Author, *Dare to be Different* (poem)



AJ Dagga Tolar
Author, *I Can't Breathe* (poem)

'*Let the crime of the century be etched on every conscience*' is the declaration which opens *For Jamal Kashoggi*. Tanure Ojaide's condemnation of the murder of the Washington Post journalist and A.J. Dagga Tolar's *I Can't Breathe*, quoting Kashoggi's last words, are loud accusations and (with the possible exception of Toki Mabogunje's *Adamawa*), the only pointedly political poems of the book. Dagga Tolar indicts the '*terror-hero*' of the '*Saud House*' for '*the forgotten unending front line of death at Hodeida (Yemen)*'; for killing Jamal Kashoggi, for jailing the blogger Raif Badawi, for sentencing, Ashraf Fayadh, (fellow PEN member), to death for apostasy.

PEN Nigeria's objective to rally behind writers regardless of culture, creed, religion and political affiliation is tied to PEN International's Charter which declares for a free press. Writers must speak truth to power, denounce the persecution of journalists and oppose governments which flout the laws of freedom and justice. These are the principles underpinning Niyi Osundare's stand about African poets: they have no choice but to be political. In *Silver Lining*, Tanure Ojaide and AJ Dagga Tolar have outdone the older poet with their radically political poetry. Without *For Jamal Kashoggi* and *I Can't Breathe*, - their fearless contributions - PEN Nigeria's anthology would be far less polemical, far less like PEN; a weaker composition.

I went in search of my silver lining, finding glimmers in the flash fiction of Bunmi Oyinsan. *A Private Kind of Death*, one of her 3 contributions, is a sophisticated piece, introducing a lonely, complicated Nigerian immigrant in Canada. It is a strange picture of dignity. *Dare to be Different* is Niyi Osundare’s rebel writer manifesto. Tony Marinho’s short story, *Touch Me*, has an unusual setting and a nostalgic ending with a gently piquant twist. I found *The Outcast*, a love story by Toyin Adenubi, refreshing. *Even if the Road to the Cemetery is Closed* by Akeem Lasisi, is a moving elegy on the death of Dr. Stella Ameyo Adadevoh who was selfless, heroic at the time of Ebola, a terrifying moment in our nation’s history. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo celebrates heroines also: Alyssa Milano of the liberating ‘*Me Too*’ movement and Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, who has recently won the Global Citizen World Leader Prize. Writing as Okinba Launko, Femi Osofisan has contributed 4 poems. The first is a touching celebration of his friendship with Odia Ofeimun, distinguished poet and Hornbill House publisher. Two others are slow, gentle reflections about women friends who have passed.



Bunmi Oyinsan
Author, *A Private Kind of Death* (flash fiction)



Tony Marinho
Medical Doctor, Education Activist,
Writer, Short Story Contributor,
Author, *Touch Me* (short story)



Femi Osofisan (Okinba Launko)
Celebrated playwright & poet



Niran Okewole
Author, *The Conceit of Flora* (poem)

There are 33 writers of *Silver Lining* representing a wide range of professions. There are economists, IT engineers, lecturers, teachers, statisticians, lawyers, playwrights,

actors, medical doctors and an interesting admixture of business and poetry, Lagos State Chamber of Commerce's new Director-General, Toki Mabogunje. Niran Okewole is an Abeokuta based psychiatrist and a poet of impressive, muscular capacities. *The Conceit of Flora* is his poem about a girl, her puberty and puppy love in a run-down class-room in an inner-city Lagos school alive with rambunctious pupils. It is masterful and for me, the stand-out piece of PEN Nigeria's 2019 anthology.



Reviewer, Olatoun Gabi-Williams