The Parlour Wife – A Review

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Foluso Agbaje's remarkable debut, *The Parlour Wife*, is likely the first novel many will read that focuses on the impact of the Second World War on an African population, with African characters squarely at its centre, and by an African author. The main setting is Lagos, the coastal city that was at the heart of British colonial administration in Nigeria. Spanning the timeline of the war and starting on the eve of the 18th birthday of a set of twins, the story opens peacefully enough, with protagonist Kehinde on a banana boat with her fisherman father. The rumblings of war are in the air, and hostilities will soon commence in distant lands, reverberations of which will be felt in the far corners of the British Empire.

A deftly plotted book, *The Parlour Wife* is told in four parts and an epilogue that seems destined for a movie scene one day, as an addition to WWII film genre. At play, this time, are African characters and the dramas and passions of their lives. Part One sets the scene with an epigraph taken from the *Journal of African Military History*, noting that Lagos was "a prime trade nexus for British West Africa," with the value of commerce in excess of one million pounds circa 1939. So, we are firmly in the realm of historical fiction here, and Agbaje not only breaks new ground, she does so with gusto, in charting Kehinde's journey.

From the off, we are clued in to the divergent paths ahead of Kehinde and her twin, Taiwo, as the family cannot afford to keep them both in school. It is decided that Taiwo will be the one to proceed with his education. Being male, "he is the obvious choice, the child worth investing in," never mind that he has his heart set on joining the Royal Air Force. The adults plot to marry Kehinde off into the polygamous household of Mr Ogunjobi, a bigwig with ties to the colonial administration. But as Madam Titi later observes of Ogunjobi, and the reader discovers in graphic detail, "Men like him will never understand why women need to have their own voice."

Kehinde hopes to take up an offer to write a women's column for the *West African Pilot*. She

regularly voices the desire to be a writer. “I’ve never met another writer before,” she tells Emeka on page 95. And though Kehinde buries her head in the novels of Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, writerly ambitions seem a bit of a stretch for a young lady in wartime Lagos, at a time when the pioneer texts of Nigerian writing in English – or even the Yoruba novels of D.O. Fagunwa – are still way in the future. (Kehinde is gifted a copy of I.B. Thomas’s *Itan Igbesi-Aiye Emi Segilola,* the authorship of which Agbaje misattributes to the titular Segilola.) Perhaps the protagonist’s “I want to be a writer” is an element of authorial presence in the text. Whatever the case, the shadow of the future, extraneous to the fictional world painted by Agbaje, bears down on the narrative, and is one of the weaknesses of *The Parlour Wife*.

Kehinde’s personal woes are inextricably linked to her disquiet about the larger canvas of life in colonial Lagos. “Their economy was run by the British, and with zoning regulations set by the colonial administrators, they couldn’t even reside where they wanted in their own country.” In the protagonist’s own eyes, “She was like Nigeria, silently screaming about her rights to parents who thought they knew better.” With the outbreak of war comes an unfortunate event that radically alters the family’s fortunes, and Kehinde is married off to Mr Ogunjobi, a.k.a. Baba Tope, to stave off impoverishment in uncertain times. Nonetheless, “Kehinde made a silent vow to hold onto her dreams, even as she felt them floating away.”

She soon finds that her dreams are at odds with Ogunjobi’s expectations of a wife under his roof. “Writing is a job for a middle-class man, not a woman of your station,” he tells her. “It dawned on her that she might never amount to more than a parlour wife, doomed to please her husband as he saw fit.” Kehinde’s new role was cut out for her: “To sit in the parlour, looking pretty, like a new piece of furniture that Baba Tope wanted to show off. An acquired doll to be shared with his friends, one that had been trained to remain silent, to keep smiling even when it had been handled roughly.”

Ogunjobi profits from his proximity to the colonial government, holds clandestine meetings in breach of curfew, and proves himself capable of spurts of violence against those that incur his wrath. The tension builds, and Kehinde decides that, “She would be much more than a parlour wife… she would put fear aside and put herself first.” Crucial to this awakening is female solidarity, which is a big theme in this novel. Whether in the Ogunjobi household, or her store at Sandgrouse Market, or in her activism with the Lagos Market Women’s Association (LMWA), female solidarity becomes a potent catalysing force.

Things are heating up in Lagos: the colonial administration has decided to tax market women in a bid to boost revenue for the war effort. According to the fictionalised Governor Bourdillon, “It’s time for the women of Nigeria to play their part.” A chance encounter with Madam Titi, leader of the market women, draws Kehinde to the forefront of the women’s resistance. And so begins an amazing adventure that brings our heroine face-to-face with Bourdillon, and takes her further than she ever dared to dream. In drawing Kehinde’s arc, Agbaje astonishes the reader, every stage of the protagonist’s journey a gift that keeps giving.

But the novel runs into choppy waters in its treatment of class. The depiction of Kehinde’s family confers traits and tastes more akin to members of the colonial clerical class. Kehinde’s father lingers on his cup of tea before picking up his jute bag of fish to take the ferry out – yet the house never smells of fish. The mother, who starts out selling part of the catch at Ereko Market, rustles up her daughter’s “favourite meal” – beetroot salad, no less – to this reader’s incredulity. The salad comes with a dressing of oil infused with lemon and thyme, and sometimes includes spring onions. A nonindigenous vegetable grown in their own garden, in a fisherman’s house during WWII. Even in the globalised present, it might be instructive to conduct a straw poll of how many ordinary Lagos residents know what beetroot is. Frankly, these are the upper middle-class culinary tastes of a later era, rather than the period of this novel.

The same can be said of avocado references in the text. Same with words such as "superpower" – which was yet to be coined. Same with the consumption of food such as Jollof Rice, which hadn't acquired its present-day ubiquity in Nigerian cuisine. Same with Fried Rice, a dish of Chinese origin that still needed to cross the ocean to this side; as unlikely as fictional characters eating Chicken Tikka Masala in England during WWII. Same as "Zobo" on the drinks menu among the colonial smart set on racing day at Racecourse. Or modern lexical phrasing such as "It is, right?" and "It's a lot to take in." Or Nigerian urbanisms such as "Eya."

And then there's Kehinde's mother, despite the deprivations of the war, saving up to buy a refrigerator, a home appliance that did not become affordable to most UK households until the 1950s; and which is not shown in the upper crust Ogunjobi residence. Interestingly, the Ogunjobi household – its many-peopled domestic bustle, and the appearance and texture of its inner spaces – are better realised.

Which brings us to the shadow of the future, the authorial hindsight that has Kehinde describing Brazilian architecture as "historical buildings" in the Lagos of 1939. This can only come from an overbearing sense of the real-world present, the 'now'. And yet, the narrative voice is not looking back at WWII events from a later vantage point in time. On the contrary, the narration is very much contemporaneous to the time-period of the story, and for this reason, the future-conscious elements make for a jarring read. They also throw up a number of historical inaccuracies in *The Parlour Wife*. For instance, one character talks about joining the Nigerian Army, which didn't exist. Glover Memorial Hall appears to be erroneously described in its latter-day incarnation, as "a big blue building."

It is important to make an observation concerning the description, several times in this novel, of a type of attire worn by Yoruba women, as "Oleku" – typically an old-style short-sleeved buba (blouse) and short wrapper. A sartorial term that has no place in a WWII narrative, because it is a relatively recent label that reinscribes a piece of classic styling. I would suggest that the Yoruba phrase "O le ku" (proper spelling) only gained wider currency after the Battle of Ọrẹ (1967). It was Tunde Kelani's 1997 film adaptation of "O Le Ku" – a 1970s' novel by Akinwumi Isola – that popularised the vintage style, worn in the movie, for a new generation. In short, the classic dress became known by the name of the film. In this regard, *The Parlour Wife* is about 60 years off the mark.

The spellings and diacritics of short Yoruba phrases sprinkled through the book, are similarly off. The novel's depiction of London during the Blitz, on the other hand, is realistic enough; and the dialogue is syntactically organic to the setting. A commentary, perhaps, on the familiarity of WWII London in the popular imagination, thanks to a plethora of books and movies, aided by vast records and archives. World War II Lagos, however, poses the challenge of unknowability for fiction writers; what limited records there are, are likely to be from the perspective of Europeans writing about Nigeria. An author must therefore invent the minutiae, the small details in the fabric of people's lives. This requires a keen eye for socio-cultural and lexical nuances, idiomatic expressions specific to the time and location; and with sensitivity to how these evolve over time. Words have their own trajectories, their own social contexts; and the voice in Agbaje's novel is undercut by its shifting register. Which is why, reading *The Parlour Wife*, one pauses when *The Daily Times* is described as "more kosher" than its competitor.

Where the novel excels is in the story itself, and the way the author sketches the progression of the war and its effects on Lagos and its inhabitants. The ration queues, the bomb drills, the lack of salt in the market, the dearth of staples like garri. And the growing defiance of the market women. "Every day I wake up and hear there's a new law that nobody has asked me about, in my own country," says one.

The Parlour Wife also celebrates the redemptive power of love. If there was an award for the best sex scene in a Nigerian novel, *The Parlour Wife* would win it, for its perfectly choreographed love scene that thrums a note in a nod to the faraway war. Also beautifully rendered is a birth scene outstanding for Agbaje's capacity to slow down the action to weave a symphony on the page. The author ties up virtually all loose ends; several secondary characters have their own arcs; seemingly minor details acquire greater significance as we read on. The tension ratchets up in the concluding chapters, and just when we think it's reached breaking point, Agbaje raises the stakes. Part epistolary, with letters filling in the gap between Burma, Lagos and London, the novel builds up to a satisfying ending. Despite its flaws, *The Parlour Wife* is quite a debut for Foluso Agbaje, who, with this novel, sets a respectable benchmark for historical fiction in Nigeria.

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