Phalluses in a Rage of Antithesis

Mother palmed the table, spitting on the concrete floor, her face glowing red. A couple of stainless steel plates and cups rattled and slipped off the table, leaving a stream of clatter to dribble into our ears—mine, my sisters', and my dad's. We all flinched in response, frowns etched in our faces. Dad reached for the fallen utensils and picked them up—silently. Mother was leaned over, fat hands pressed against the table, glowing black hair locks framing her square and crumpled face.

I pulled my hand away from my mouth. My fingers held the morsel of Ewédú-coated amala which I was going to swallow but now found impossible, thanks to Mother—the Matriarch, our family's sole representative of the goddesses of Ijebagi, our dear land. I returned the morsel into the soup plate and rinsed my hand in the wash-bowl. Eyes were eating at me, and I knew it. How could I rinse my hand before the Matriarch did? How could I return a soup-coated morsel that already touched my mouth? How could I—

"Jaiye," Mother called. "Shove that amala back into your mouth and swallow it immediately."

I nodded and rinsed my hand and picked up the abandoned morsel, pressed it with my five fingers into a smooth lump, soaked it in the Ewédú soup and slipped it in my mouth as though it were a death pill that I had to munch with a straight face. I heard a gurgle in my throat and felt the lump slide down my insides. Once I was sure it now rested inside me, I glanced at Mother. She nodded, easing her attention back to someone else: the one who triggered this mess.

Dad.

Dad too had stopped eating, but he was yet to rinse his hand, because he dared not—lest he be struck by the goddesses of Ijebagi. In Ijebagi, no one rinsed their hand after eating except the Matriarch first did—except you were in the line of Mothers, except you were a female. Women cooked. Women were first. They washed their hands first. They left the table first. Men weren't men. They only had to use their strength to help with one hard thing—that thing like creating babies. As for the rest of things, our women were strong enough to do them. War. Chores. Hard work. Name them. Lording the house.

My sisters licked their *souped* fingers and rinsed their hands and rubbed them dry with a napkin. Then they sat back and watched. They were privileged after all, just like Mother was privileged to wield power over everything that concerned our family—everything, including Dad.

"But," Dad spoke, a croaky wounded voice, rearing his head to look at my fuming mother. "Think about it, Matriarch, we have just one son. Just one!"

"Stop it already, Bankole. Stop it!" Mum palmed the table again. This time, nothing rattled, except my mind. Dad was pulling the legs of trouble. But did he know it?

Mother sat down. Finally. She reclined in the chair. The foam-stuffed armrests sank beneath her strong arms. "Baba Jaiye." *Jaiye's father.*

"I'm here, Matriarch."

"Have you been studying other people's culture?"

Dad frowned. These days, he always frowned, but today it was more of curiosity than worry. Curiosity about what the Matriarch was driving at. He growled, punctuating each question with a characteristic head-swing. "How do you mean? What other people?"

Mother gazed at him. I traced the gaze like it were a visible line. It ended in Dad's eyes. When he couldn't endure the scrutiny, he looked down, then gulped water. I suspected what Mother was worried about, but I didn't speak. I only swallowed.

Mum shook her head. "You've been learning new things, haven't you? You've been studying, trying to change things. We are different from the other lands, the other tribes, Bankole. Nothing can change this fact! Not even the books you read!"

That last morsel, the one that already rested inside me, sprung up, rushing up my throat and filling my mouth with gritty sourness. I expected to see Dad frown in defeat, but he argued on: "What are you talking about? Weren't we discussing a different thing just now!"

But Dad knew what Mother was talking about, else he wouldn't have complained about our family having just one son. And he wouldn't have subtly begun to skip the title 'Matriarch' when addressing Mother. He was beginning to rebel and I knew why. Yes, I recently caught him reading a novel titled, 'The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives'; then after about two days, I caught him strongly engrossed in another book, titled 'Things Fall Apart'. He slipped it behind him once he saw me coming, but the book fell down the stool he sat on. I pretended I saw nothing, but the lines of worry etched into Dad's face seemed to have originated from the contents of the book he had been reading. So I stole *Things Fall Apart* and the other book from his drawer later that night and finished the latter but read over two hundred pages of the former—till I fell asleep then woke up to discover they were missing.

Did Mum find the book?

If she did, then did she consider that there was no way I, a broke seventeen-year old boy from rural Ijebagi, would get some cash and spend it on books that were seemingly older than my mind—that I was too immature to pull such a stunt? Was that why she wasn't all that focused on me?

I caught Mum's eyes floating towards me. *Oh no.* I swallowed. She pointed at me. "Jaiye! You understand the situation, don't you? It's all over your face, unlike your shameless father who is afraid to show anything except his cowardice."

"I won't take this from you any longer. Enough of this!" Dad spluttered—a trembling cackle. The 'Matriarch' title missing again. "I'm a man. You're a woman. A goddamn woman." Then he spat. And he spat again. Beside Mother.

A tang filled my mouth and heat rushed to my head, causing me to itch all over. My sisters muttered an 'ah', their eyes glowing in their gaping sockets, assuring me that this was no mishearing. Dad had, for the first time in my existence, rebelled against Mother, rebelled against the sacred feminine. My lower jaw jerked. Now, Dad would have to take back his words else he would be banished from

Ijebagi. Our tribe didn't tolerate a man defying the feminine figure—especially when the defied one is the family's Matriarch. But I understood: this wasn't a spontaneous reaction; Dad had learned it from the book; he had learned the way of rebellion from those two books he had been reading. Didn't Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* sound this way? Didn't that man always shout at his wives? Wives—yes, there were more than one mother in his home. His home—yes, he had a home, a gathering of people he controlled and ordered here and there. And Baba Segi, that abominable father, he was the Lord of his own family, amassing mothers like they were children, lording over them like he had all the right to (but, didn't he?). *Ah.* U*nlike* this parodical system where people like Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* had no or tiny balls, this place where my Dad and all the males of Ijebagi had to live a life of ironies—of swapped positions. No man of Ijebagi would read those books and feel no challenge to his identity. But tradition… was tradition. And culture, as long as it wasn't harmful, should remain appreciated.

I looked at Mother. Her forehead already turned pleated, and I imagined the three or four pleats morphing into six or seven or thirteen folds. If that happened, perhaps she wouldn't be able to keep gawking at Dad but would, instead, snatch him by the collar of his buba and spit in his face for swapping his original balls for a pair of bigger, corrupted ones—ones offered to his groin by the pitiful spirits of Okonkwo and Baba Segi. But Mother didn't attack Dad. She only giggled—her eyes unblinking, as if she had no words to say, as if Dad's rebellion were nothing to worry about. As if—

"Did you learn this rubbish from those books? Did you learn how to defy reason, how to defy tradition, from those books?" Mother's cold inquiry shoved my lazy stare at Dad's face. His brows creased, like it were his turn to frown. Like it were his turn to fall silent and plan a harmless offensive. He definitely didn't imagine Mum knew about the books he'd been reading. Not that I knew, either; but like Mother said the other time, I was smarter than Dad—or I only appeared so, due to my noticing the disappearance of the book and relating it with this dining room ruckus.

Dad flattened his lips, his eyes dancing over his unwashed hand. He wouldn't do what I was thinking. He wouldn't. He wouldn't complicate this further. He wouldn't anger the goddesses of Ijebagi. But the head that was fated for a knock would shake off even a metal cap. The head that was fated for a knock would push through the window of a vehicle. Dad dipped his hands into the wash-bowl and rinsed his hands and wiped it with the napkin. Then, he sat back and stared at

nothing, probably aware that our eyes were gnawing at him, asking questions, probing why he had to go the way of damnation. Mother's pleated forehead had strangely relaxed, but her lips were parted, heavy with unspoken words, and her eyes were glistening. Things didn't have to change like this, she probably was thinking. Dad didn't have to go all out like this just because he read two books of fiction that appealed so real he got sucked into it and probably would never recover. Mum rapped her fingers on the table. My sisters' breath breezed into my ears in this portentous silence and wrapped around me, around us. This didn't have to happen, they too must have been thinking. No, Dad took it too far. Now I probed into his empty eyes and caught a glitter of relief. One who did what nobody had ever done would see what nobody had ever seen. But if we continued to shy away from making dares, wouldn't we remain uncertain about what would or wouldn't change? Dad's lips twitched. Curled into a tiny smirk that wilted immediately. He looked satisfied. Just for a few seconds. A few seconds, really. And I wished he had more time to relish this taste of rebellion before he clawed his own chest, coughing. Coughing like it was all he needed to be redeemed.

My sisters rose first. Daughters were the closest to their fathers, weren't they? They rose as though they knew the cough wasn't a simple reaction to some nasal or laryngeal irritation. They huddled around Dad and began stroking his back as though they understood the cough must have been a scourge from the goddesses of Ijebagi. Then, Mother eased up her feet, shaking her head, her Matriarchal pride wilting like saggy, worn-out breasts. I remembered one of Okonkwo's wives, the one who carried her only and sick daughter and travelled, trekking far away to seek healing for her, refusing to speak to anyone on the way lest she lost her only chance to restore the girl's health. At this moment, Mother was like that mother. And seeing the ashen ambience spreading across her face which was earlier red with rage, I suspected she must have also read Dad's rebellious book, that one called *Things Fall Apart*, and had assimilated that caring mother's motherliness. She always lived like the Egyptian goddess, Isis, who, despite always being hot with rage, warring with Seth, a frigging misogynist god of the earth, still had so much conjugal and motherly love for her dear family—so much she would fight Heaven and Earth to protect them.

“Bankole," moaned Mother when Dad wouldn't stop coughing but decided instead to egress blood from his aching lungs. “Bankole!" She latched onto Dad's buba and ripped it apart, so easily I was distracted by her strength. She pushed her strong hands against his bare chest and began rubbing.

"Give him water," I found myself saying. I said it and then wondered what made me speak. I didn't think water was necessary at this point—Dad was in discomfort and wouldn't even open his busy mouth to take in anything). But I spoke nonetheless, probably because I was the only one who hadn't sported or given a reaction to this twist. But no one answered. No one tried to give him water. They only kept rubbing and stroking his chest and back. All six hands. Hands of the women he had rebelled against. As if it were a ritual, as if they were certain this would restore him back to healthiness. What did Dad learn from those books? What did he really learn? Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* wasn't weak! He would never allow himself to be so sick and weak he'd be surrounded and pitied by women like this!

I stood up and snatched up a half-drunk glass of water. And I joined the huddling women. But I refused to do the rubbing and stroking. I wormed my hands through a space they were yet to stuff with their bodies and reached a hand to Dad's jerking face, holding his jaws in my firm grip. Mum cackled. My sisters snapped. But they didn't want to stop their ritual. I shoved in my second hand, the one holding the glass of water and turned it over, forcing the water down Dad's throat. He gargled and coughed and gargled and shivered. Then he turned still. And let out a final cough. The women stopped their ritual. And I put away the cup. Dad had lived. But he wasn't active to see what mess he was in and how hard everyone had tried to save him. Especially me, the smart one.

When Dad woke up the next day, he took to silence, as though he had been to a forest of ghosts and demons and had been too bedevilled to open his mouth, lest he opened it and expelled demons into his family.

Mother checked on him on the seventh day of his silence. She sat by his bed and felt for his throbbing forehead. I knew it was throbbing because it had been like that since that night: hot; throbbing. My sisters who took turns taking care of him mentioned that, too. "When are you going to talk?" Mother said, retracting her hand. "They will banish you tomorrow, Bankole. But it's just for a year."

Banishment?

I wondered what Dad was thinking at this moment. But now, I remembered: that Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* was also banished for committing an abomination. However, Okonkwo was a brave man, stubborn to death. Dad wasn't going to imitate this, too, right? He wasn't going to insist on a '*me, too*' till it all crumbled, was he?

I opened my mouth to call *Dad*, but air began to fill my mouth. Air of more abomination. Because Dad finally spoke, and his words were bad, too bad Mother fumed and then abandoned him so that he could remain silent till he departed this peculiar tribe of Ijebagi.

Dad had said lazily, yet with a hint of pang and the uncanny sleekness of a dirge, which he must have composed and rehearsed during all those seven days of ghostly silence: "How could you all rid me of my masculinity? How could you all make me a subordinate? Me. A man with an active phallus. A man who is universally on top. How could you all deceive me? I reject the goddesses of our land. I curse the sacred feminine."

Mother didn't say a thing at first. Only listened to the recantation, perhaps hoping it would yield a twist—a surprise ending where Dad would acknowledge his rebellion and seek penance. But when the final declaration came out, Mother palmed the mattress and spat. Then she walked out fuming, my sisters following her silently. Like they had tried their best but just couldn't save him.

Only I stood there, watching, swallowing questions. Several questions like, why did Dad have to get so sucked into another people's world? Why did he have to see a sudden significance in his phallus? Why did he have to rebel?

He growled. Kicked. Bawled. He cursed and cursed and cried and yowled. Till I ran out of his room, his cries of injustice coursing after me: “Give me back my phallus! Cursed be the goddesses!"