“The way the Irish asylum system turns people into un-human is my problem”: An Interview with Ifedinma Dimbo

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Abstract. Ifedinma Dimbo was born in Nkwelle-Ezunaka, in the Igbo-speaking region of eastern Nigeria. She studied Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Nigeria Nsukka. She first went to Ireland as a graduate student in 1995 to obtain an MA in Sociology of Development from University College Cork, and during that period in Ireland her son was born. They went back to Nigeria in 1998, but the Dimbo family decided to return to Ireland in 2002, thinking that being parents of an Irish-born child gave both Ifedinma and her husband residency rights. However, they had to experience the Irish Direct Provision system first-hand while they maintained a legal battle with immigration for three years. It was during her experience as an asylum seeker that she had her literary calling.

One of her stories appeared in the 2008 publication *Taking the Wise Man*, a book published by SPIRASI, an Irish organization set up by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit that works with asylum seekers, refugees and other disadvantaged migrant groups, with special concern for survivors of torture. In 2010, her short story “Grafton Street of Dublin” appeared in the Irish Writers Exchange’s compilation titled *Dublin: Ten Journeys, One Destination*. This anthology includes ten short stories, the common factor of which is that they revolve around the city of Dublin and they are written by writers who live in Ireland. Some of the authors are Irish-born, like the critically acclaimed writer Nuala ní Chonchúir, while others were born in places as diverse as Sweden, Germany, the US or, as in the present case, Nigeria. In her short story, Dimbo tackles the issue of deprivation while in Direct Provision, with a walk through one of the most commercial streets in Dublin, Grafton Street, as seen through the eyes of a Nigerian female asylum seeker who has to live on the institutionally granted allowance of 19.10 euros per week. In 2012, the Irish Writers Exchange published Ifedinma Dimbo’s first novel, *She Was Foolish?* Once again, the protagonist, named Gift, is a Nigerian woman who seeks asylum in Ireland. However, the length of the novel allows the author to delve in Gift’s past and how she got to her current situation as an asylum seeker, including an abusive partner who led her to become a prostitute in Italy, all of which takes its toll in the protagonist’s emotional and psychological well-being.

Ifedinma Dimbo currently lives in Dublin, where she works and researches for her PhD in Medical Sociology. The Nigerian-born, Irish-based writer was kind enough to answer my questions via e-mail between the months of August and October 2014, with some final elaboration in January 2015. Ifedinma Dimbo’s writing, as well as her answers in this interview, are an invaluable testimony to a reality that is currently taking place in Ireland and has often been silenced. Now that Irish society is beginning to be aware of the unfair
treatment that refugees and asylum seekers receive at the hands of the Irish system, it is high time to let people who, like Ifedinma Dimbo, have made Ireland their home, have their voices heard in the field of Irish Studies. In this interview, Ifedinma Dimbo very sharply shares her views on writing, immigration, religion and Irish society.

Key Words. Ifedinma Dimbo; Direct Provision; Irish Immigrant Authors; Catholicism; Contemporary Irish Literature; Irish Writers Exchange; Asylum Seekers.

Resumen. Ifedinma Dimbo nació en Nkwelle-Ezunaka, en la región Igbo-parlante del este de Nigeria. Estudió Sociología y Antropología en la Universidad de Nigeria Nsukka. Al licenciarse, viajó por primera vez a Irlanda en 1995 para obtener un Máster en Sociología del Desarrollo en University College Cork, y dio a luz a su primer hijo durante ese período en Irlanda. Regresaron a Nigeria en 1998, pero en 2002 la familia Dimbo decidió volver a Irlanda, pensando que al ser padres de un hijo nacido en Irlanda, tanto ella como su marido tendrían derechos de residencia. Sin embargo, una vez allí tuvo que vivir en primera persona el sistema irlandés de Direct Provision, mientras lidiaba una batalla legal contra el departamento de inmigración durante tres años. Fue durante su experiencia como solicitante de asilo cuando sintió la llamada de su vocación literaria.

Uno de sus relatos apareció en la publicación de 2008 titulada Takinga the Wise Man, un volumen publicado por SPIRASI. SPIRASI es una organización irlandesa fundada por la Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Congregación del Espíritu Santo) que trabaja con solicitantes de asilo político, refugiados y otros grupos migrantes desfavorecidos, con especial atención a los supervivientes de tortura. En 2010, su relato corto “Grafton Street of Dublin” apareció en la antología titulada Dublin: Ten Journeys, One Destination que publicó la organización Irish Writers Exchange. Esta antología incluye diez relatos cortos que tienen en común su temática, centrada en la ciudad de Dublín, y el hecho de que sus escritores viven en Irlanda. Algunos de los autores son nacidos en Irlanda, como la aclamada escritora Nuala ní Chonchúir, mientras que otros nacieron en lugares tan diversos como Suecia, Alemania, Estados Unidos o, como en este caso, Nigeria. En su aportación a esta antología, Dimbo trata el tema de la carencia económica en el sistema de Direct Provision, con un paseo por una de las calles más comerciales de Dublín, Grafton Street, visto a través de los ojos de una solicitante de asilo político que tiene que vivir con la prestación institucional de 19.10 euros semanales.

En 2012, Irish Writers Exchange publicó su primera novela, She Was Foolish? La protagonista, llamada Gift, es de nuevo una mujer nigeriana que solicita asilo político en Irlanda. No obstante, la mayor extensión de la novela permite a la autora profundizar en el pasado de Gift. De este modo, se muestran los motivos que la conducen a su situación actual como solicitante de asilo, entre los que se encuentra una pareja abusiva que la induce a la prostitución en Italia, todo lo cual repercute negativamente en el bienestar emocional y psicológico de la protagonista.

Ifedinma Dimbo vive actualmente en Dublín, donde trabaja e investiga para su doctorado en Sociología Médica. La escritora nacida en Nigeria y residente en Irlanda tuvo la amabilidad de contestar a mis preguntas vía correo electrónico entre los meses de agosto y octubre de 2014, con unas últimas aclaraciones en enero de 2015. La obra de Ifedinma Dimbo, así como sus respuestas en esta entrevista, son un testimonio invaluable de una realidad actual de Irlanda que se ha visto habitualmente silenciada. Ahora que la sociedad irlandesa comienza a darse cuenta del trato injusto que reciben los solicitantes de asilo político por parte del sistema irlandés, ha llegado el momento de que las personas que, como Ifedinma Dimbo, han hecho de Irlanda su hogar, tengan la oportunidad de hacer oír sus voces en el campo de los Estudios Irlandeses. En esta entrevista Ifedinma Dimbo expone sin tapujos sus ideas sobre la escritura, la inmigración, la religión y la sociedad irlandesa.

Palabras clave. Ifedinma Dimbo; Direct Provision; autores irlandeses inmigrantes; catolicismo; literatura irlandesa contemporánea; Irish Writers Exchange; asilo político; refugiados.
Sara Martín-Ruiz: First of all, I wanted to ask you about your choice of using English for your writing. I am aware that, due to its colonization by Britain, English was imposed in Nigeria and nowadays it is widely used in your country of origin. However, I know that your mother tongue is actually Igbo. Why did you choose English as your literary language?

Ifedinma Dimbo: Though we have our different mother-tongues and culture in Nigeria, as one country we have to be able to communicate with each other and so the English language was adopted as the nation’s lingua franca. It never occurred to me to write in my mother tongue because then my readership would be narrow as it would be read by only the Igbo-speaking people, and probably only by the educated ones.

SMR: Regarding the issue of language in Nigeria, do you think that it is similar to the case in Ireland, with English being the language of the majority while Gaelic has been relegated to a minority position?

ID: I am not too sure that it is comparable in the sense that the British rule in Nigeria was only for a relatively short time and did not involve forcing the citizens to lose their native language or cultural characteristics. The English language was introduced for the convenience of British rule, that is, to enable them communicate to the natives and then for the natives themselves after the amalgamation in 1914, English became the official language to enable the disparate citizens of the country to communicate among themselves. So they were never forced to stop speaking their different languages and up till today we all speak our languages and revert to English when in the presence of people who are not from your tribe.

SMR: One of the characteristics of your writing is your depiction of dialects and accents, as well as the use of Igbo words and expressions, sometimes without translation. What made you choose to do that?

ID: Sometimes ideas carry more weight when spoken or written in one’s language and not translating it forces the reader to interpret and arrive at meaning of what was being said in the reader’s own way – this can be accessed from what was written before and after the word or sentence.

SMR: You began writing short stories and have moved on to publishing a novel. Which genre do you feel more comfortable using? Do you see yourself in the future writing novels, short stories, or both?

ID: I will probably do both depending on how much the story line will lend itself to robust expansion. I feel more comfortable writing novels as it’d give me room to explore ideas.

SMR: Do you believe that the reception of your works has met with differences depending on whether it was a short story or a novel? Especially taking into account that, in the case of your published short stories, you share space with many other writers.

ID: To be honest I have not considered this, however I am not a fan of short stories as I am a long-winded person, that is, I like to tell stories and the longer the better. As for the reception of my personal novel She Was Foolish?, I believe that the sales was affected by lack of exposure through promotions and marketing as a result of cost; as well, not being a concrete Irish (native) may have its impact but I am not going there.

SMR: Something that really called my attention when reading She Was Foolish? was the fact that the narrator shifted between a first and a third person, sometimes even in the same paragraph. What effect were you trying to achieve through that curious device?

ID: Telling a story in the first person for me makes it more alive but when I shift between 1st and 3rd person it helps me to create a more vivid but contrasting imagery.

SMR: I find that your writing has a strong oral quality to it. The Irish people are known for their story-telling skills. Is this also something valued in Nigeria?

ID: Yes, it is very much valued as our earlier histories, traditions and folklores were transferred to us orally from childhood before we encounter formal education.

SMR: Religion, and more specifically Catholicism, seems to be something important for your characters, which helps
them go through the hardest situations. I understand that Catholicism is actually wide-spread in Nigeria, so I assume that perhaps Catholicism has also played an important role in your life, especially in your experience as an immigrant in Ireland. If so, do you feel that the fact that you practice the official religion of Ireland has helped you integrate in Irish society?

ID: Being born into and brought up as a Catholic paved the way to robust moral grounding. How this plays out in my life, that is, how I use that to create and sustain boundaries, is a different ballgame, but at least I have it to fall back on to.

I am not aware that I have integrated into the Irish society on the basis of religion, or anything for that matter. Yes, initially the idea of living in Ireland was not daunting because as Catholics what can go wrong? But having arrived and lived among the Irish I’m not so sure. Now to the actual question – in real terms the Irish practice of Catholicism is what I will call ‘a matter of fact’, that is, it seems dispassionate, cold and formatted, from what I knew. In general, as an African, the Irish are more interested in making me a ‘recipient’ of whatever they have to offer than using it as a unifying and welcoming factor.

SMR: Another question about religion. As you might know, Spain also has a very strong Catholic tradition. However, I find that the kind of Catholicism practiced in Spain is somehow different to that of Ireland. Have you also noticed some differences between your native, Nigerian Catholicism, and the Irish one?

ID: Yes, the tenets may be the same, but in practice the Irish way is more of ‘a matter-of-fact’ – by the book if you like —, while that of Nigerians is more involved and embracing and robust.

SMR: A recurring topic in your writing seems to be money. In “Grafton Street of Dublin”, the asylum seeker protagonist carefully saves the little income she has so that she can buy some treats for herself, and she dreams of what it would be like if she had a lot of money. In She Was Foolish?, the protagonist leaves her native Nigeria to work as a prostitute in Italy, mainly out of love for her abusive partner, but with the aim of making a fortune. Does it have to do with the Irish economic boom, known as the Celtic Tiger? It has been said that the Celtic Tiger transformed Irish society from being highly religious to becoming utterly consumerist. Do you share that view? Is it something that worries you?

ID: As a Nigerian born and brought up, I watched our people push the moral boundary beyond recognition because of money, so much so that the questions are no longer asked about how ‘clean’ is one’s money?; the bottom line becomes that one is rich QED. Consumerism breeds unscrupulous behavior and the Irish was not spared, but I did not start off with the Irish in mind. However, they are also implicated.

Growing up… Education is supposed to liberate us from poverty; offering one the opportunities to not only make a good living but to live quality life. Today, however, ‘chasing’ money has taken over that position for the worse, but perhaps that is the way of the world now?

SMR: Your own experience under the Direct Provision system has been reflected both in “Grafton Street of Dublin” and in She Was Foolish? As of lately, it seems that the Irish media are beginning to voice out the inadequacies of that system. However, this is something that writers such as fellow Nigerian Melatu Okorie and yourself had already exposed in a literary form. Do you believe that literary authors have a moral obligation to raise awareness of this kind of human injustice?

ID: As citizens of the world we all are called to raise awareness of any circumstance that is inhuman. Awareness of injustice of any kind may either be ameliorated or eradicated, so if it’s not highlighted perhaps it may continue to be perpetuated. For me, however, the inadequacies of the asylum system in terms of provision of services is not important, but rather the way it turns people into un-human (a form that is featureless) is my problem.

SMR: In She Was Foolish? you also offer a very negative depiction of Osahon as an asylum seeker. Are you not afraid that this might perpetuate the already negative image that some people have of asylum seekers as spongers?
ID: Asylum seekers being spongers is created by the asylum process/system itself; if the process is made more transparent and the time frame made shorter – asylum seekers will still have the zeal for life when they receive their residency permit. Instead the process takes so long and the policy implementations are so de-humanizing that, by the time one leaves the system, they are already turned into helpless vegetables. So what you see in Osahon was the outcome of the asylum policy and process: asylum seekers are exploiting the loopholes which they may not have had time and opportunity to explore if they come and go as quickly as is possible.

SMR: Regarding your personal experience under Direct Provision: there have recently been some studies that show that food is a very problematic issue for people living under that system. Food is also a recurrent theme in your writing. Does it have to do with your own experience with food under the direct provision system?

ID: Perhaps it comes across as such, but I am not sure that I have a problem with food provision in the asylum system; it is the monotony or the sameness of daily living for so many years that is the problem. As a matter of fact, they have loads of food in the system, but if you stay in one place for over two years eating the same things rotationally – and you do not have a choice about what to eat and when to it, it dulls the mind, and this bring it to your above question really. The time frame should be shortened so that people can go out and fend for themselves as life is meant to be.

SMR: In She Was Foolish? Gift goes to therapy to try to overcome her traumatic past. However, the narrator does not seem very keen on psychological therapy, which is regarded as a typical Western practice. Gift finally finds solace in religion. Yet, you have actually used literature to transform your dramatic experience as an asylum seeker in Ireland into something positive, which might be regarded as a kind of therapy. Do you think that writing can be therapeutic?

ID: Writing for some is therapeutic and for me it certainly helped, but writing alone is not enough, because as a Christian one must have deeper faith, trust and belief that the God whom you worship would give you relief one way or the other. Writing being therapeutic? Yes, but, what informs the strength to even write, what kept me going? Perhaps if I hadn’t stayed in the asylum hostel I may not have had the tranquility to write, but the strength to write and endure during my time in the system came from my belief in God and not from writing in itself.

SMR: Are you currently working on a new piece of writing? When will we be able to read it?

ID: In my head yes, however working on my PhD and a full time work plus taking care of my family are wreaking havoc on my literary intentions. As soon as I put the final dot on my research I will write and write and write…

SMR: Are there any native-Irish authors that you personally like?

ID: I read light novels – chick lit – heavy tomes for me, at this time. I read Marian Keyes and Maeve Binchy, because they are funny, fast-paced and quirky.

SMR: You are part of the Irish Writers Exchange group, a great initiative which is giving voice to writers from all over the world who are currently living in Ireland. However, at least from my position as someone not living in Ireland, sometimes it is difficult to know about new Irish immigrant authors. Can you recommend some?

ID: There are a handful of writers but it is really difficult to publish, as publishers are not always interested in ‘new’ writers, except, of course, if the story is ‘extremely’ interesting. Having said that, here are some names, but I have not read their work as yet: Ebun Akpoveta’s Trapped: Prison Without Wall and Unforgettable Woman, JB Rehnstrom’s Bebove and Roslyn Fuller’s Isak.

SMR: From your own experience as a Nigerian-born, Irish-based published author, what is your view on the reception of writings by immigrants in Ireland? I mean, not only from a sales perspective, but also socially, politically, culturally…

ID: Living in Ireland for some time now (continuously for 10 years) I have come to understand the Irish psyche or so I believe.
will always be an immigrant and the Irish will expect you to go through or gently nudge you to such channels as Integration Ireland or Immigrant Council or the likes to explore or showcase yourself or your activities of whatever form and in that respect their charitable nature will come to play as you ‘need’ to be helped. Perhaps I am biased because of what I went through to regain my residency but it is what it is. So the Irish are happy to welcome you into their midst in so far as you know your place, and it is within the daily lived experiences that embody intergroup relations, that is telling about the ‘other’. Anecdotal evidences claim African people of colour are the least employed in Ireland despite being the largest among the immigrant groups and well educated, and when said jobs are secured, promotions and advancement will be extremely difficult as a host of many issues will come into play.

Culturally, as an African person of colour, you do not expect to blend as to become a full member of the moral community; our skin colour demands that we must have a different worldview, different behaviour, different ways of doing etc., from the Irish. Setting people apart, ultimately impacts on them making it impossible for them to access the limit of their aspirations.

Politically, I will say that the media feeds the Irish public with information as they deem fit and to my knowledge no government agency has gone on air or broadsheet to counter any negativities put out there in respect of the new members of their society so the intergroup relations is fraught with suspicion and mistrust. It can be argued that African people of colour in Ireland do not experience ‘in-your-face’ racism. However, the nuanced racialization of these people that seems to be embedded in the fabric of the micro and macro structures of the Irish society is more insidious. Perhaps, I do not have empirical studies at hand to support my observations but anecdotal evidences of real lived experiences of these immigrants abound and tell a different story. And in recent times, there is record migration out of Ireland by these immigrants as they receive their citizenship and this I believe is a reaction against discrimination.

To answer your question, I do not know of a published immigrant author, especially an African person of colour, whose book has been received well and is therefore relevant in Ireland, never mind their views. When I published mine I was told by a reputable bookshop that nobody is interested in what a Nigerian has to say, but then Nigerians are the worse off immigrants in Ireland and group identity has its draw back. Again, within my immediate circle of influence, my book was bought so who are these Irish who are not interested in what a Nigerian has to say? Life is a mixed-bag!

SMR: I for sure am interested in what you have to say, though I am not Irish… Perhaps we should tell those booksellers to reconsider their position, but well, it’s their loss! Finally, would you like to talk about the books or authors that have influenced you as a writer?

ID: Chinua Achebe, especially his Things Fall Apart; John Steinbeck’s East of Eden; and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus, Half of a Yellow Sun, and Americanah.

SMR: Thank you very much for accepting my interview request and taking the time to answer all my questions, I really appreciate it. Would you like to add anything else?

ID: My final thought: I aim to write so that readers can feel, taste and wear the texture of my words, not sure though that I have achieved that so far but I will keep trying! I thank you more for believing that She was Foolish? is worth any form of analysis in the first place. Good luck and God bless you.

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