Ms Smith and the Multicultural Game

Ms Smith, the teacher, is bubbling with fresh enthusiasm. The stressful competition, which had all the trappings of a cold war, has finally come to an end. She has emerged the winner. She is relaxed and happy. She wants to try out a technique, a kind of game, that will underline the joys of her success.

“As Americans, we all come from different parts of the world to settle here. This is why we have many different cultures that combine to make up the American culture. Now, I want each of you to tell the class where your people, your grandparents or great grandparents, where they migrated from to settle in America.” Many hands shoot up immediately. “There is enough time for everybody to talk, so we start from Bob at the end there.”

“My grandparents came from Ireland. That is why we have an Irish name, O’Cassey. We celebrate St. Patrick’s day with our people in Ireland on the 17th of March, every year. We also celebrate American Independence day on the 4th of July with fellow Americans.” A burst of spontaneous clapping greets Bob’s brilliant contribution.

“My people came from Italy. Italy is a great country in Europe. It is the only country in the world where the Pope lives. They have famous churches called basilicas but they do not have the White House as we do here in America.” Another burst of clapping. The children are very excited about this exercise. The history class has turned into a pleasurable game of racial identity and national pride. Each student is itching for his/her own turn to speak. Ross is finding it difficult to pin his bottom on his seat. He stands, sits, raises his hand and puts it down. He is impatient to tell the class about his English heritage: the kings and queens, the castles and museums with beautiful works of art and all the other things he had heard his mother recall proudly of her homeland. He would also talk about his father’s wing of the family that came from France which is very sophisticated in art.
and music and ... There is silence in the class. Only a moment's silence.

"Yes dear, where do they come from?" This is the teacher prompting the black girl to talk about her heritage. Some students try to suppress giggles. Again she repeats her reply. The class can no longer contain itself. A giggle here, a trickle of laughter there, then the full burst of hilarious laughter which mockery is enough to dowse the fire of the clapping that applauded the other two speakers. The girl looks around, shyly, timidly, almost in tears. Then she seems to smile briefly because she parts her lips showing her sparkling white teeth. But it is not really a smile. It is a betrayal of emotions from one who is in agony of disgrace. Nobody noticed the gap right in the middle of her upper dentition laced by her beautiful black gum. Nobody noticed the circular linings that are naturally ingrained on the skin of her neck as she strained her eyes in search of a friendly gaze to fix them on. Nobody noticed the tears that finally came snaking hurriedly down the face that looks like warm chocolate.

They are once again involved in the game. But, the teacher is uncomfortable. In fact, she is disappointed. She cannot pin down the exact reason for her disappointment. Is it the girl or the class? It does not even occur to her that she could be a part of the failure. However in her usual manner, she files the episode in her memory for future reference.

Far away across many seas in an Igbo village called Owa, another kind of history class is taking place. Young people are gathered around a story-teller who is one of the mothers of the household. Like Ms Smith of the American history class, she also wants to conclude the class by testing her students' knowledge of their past.

"Who can tell us why the school area is called forest of killers?"

"Me." "I." "It is because ..." All the children know the story. However, they all concede to little Ngozi. They also laugh in anticipation of the kind of disjointed story which the six-year-old Ngozi can tell.

"Theory-tory." In spite of her inability to say 'SSS' which made her "Opening" funny, they clap because she is able to remember to start with the formal opening.
"Thtory-tory," she says again. They reply, "story."

"Once upon a time," she goes on, "there was a sister of our big father, the father of the father of the big one inside." The children start clapping again. In the midst of the clapping, one of the young students, Udeala, decides to act a part. "I shall play Ikenga." Ngozi immediately abandons her role as story-teller. She has now seen a good opportunity to get into the part of her historical relation, Nneka, whom she admires very much and identifies with. At school she uses ideas in stories of people from other parts of the world, to decorate her image of her great relation. In her sketches, she has once given her model a black dot on the forehead as Indians do. This of course was in addition to the African body designs of the character.

"I shall be Nneka," she declares, running off towards the house.

"Okay, you act Nneka, I'll be the story-teller," replies Chinwe, her big sister from their father's first wife.

"I'll play a warrior."

"I'll play ..." And so there is a reversal of roles as the children share the parts while their mother, the original story-teller-cum-teacher, acts as the sole audience. It is only when Ngozi reappears with her waist beads and a bag that the others realise what she is up to. Her big sister begins to clothe her with the beads, rattles and other items in her bag. Finally the new story-teller, Chinwe, starts the story.

"It was another moonlight night long long ago ...."

"No!" Ngozi interrupts her. "You have not described Nneka and Ikenga." The others support her. "Yes. Yes."

"Okay, Nneka, step out."

"She doesn't have to step out, you know," their mother corrects the new story-teller, Chinwe. "You can describe the characters without calling on their performers to step out. After all, the historical characters lived in different homesteads," their mother adds.

"Okay. Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful maiden of our household, the sister of our big big father. She was very beautiful. They said that she was the most beautiful girl in the village." In spite of having been told earlier to remain where she was, Ngozi steps out imitating Nneka by displaying her beauty. She swings her arms and bony hips in imitation of the way adults
walk. The theatrics of the young actress fascinate the other children as well as the teacher and they ululate in applause. The story-teller is about to start describing the character's beautiful set of teeth divided into equal halves by a lovely gap when the children anticipating her next move begin a chorus that extols Nneka's beauty. Ngozi continues walking stylishly to the rhythm of the chorus:

When she smiled,
It was as if the moon was glowing.
When she laughed,
It was as if the sun was shining.
When she danced,
It was as if the palm was swaying.

The story-teller continues. "The natural lines on her neck were up to ten."

"No!" Ngozi interrupts her, "Ten are too many. They will make her neck too long and ugly like that of a vulture."

"Vultures don't have lines on their necks. They only have long necks," interjects Udeala.

"I still don't want ten lines," replies Ngozi.

"But you are not the one. You are not Nneka. You are just imitating her."

"It's a lie! I look like her. Her spirit was reincarnated in me. I am Nneka. She is my big big sister, and my big big mother." This last assertion is greeted with protests by all the other children. Udeala, who acts the part of Ikenga, is the first to protest. "Our great great grandfather's sister, Sister Nneka, belongs to all of us."

"Don't say 'my' but 'our' big mother," another adds. The teacher — the sole audience — waits to see how this issue will be resolved. Chinwe, the acting story-teller, finally resolves it.

"Okay. Nneka is the big sister and mother of us all and not just Ngozi. As for the lines on her neck, the story is that they were up to ten. But now, for the sake of our small sister, let us say that about five lines naturally adorn her beautiful neck."

Noticing that all is now quiet after this concession, Chinwe continues with her story. "As for her colour, it shines like palm kernel spread out in the sun. One day ..."

The teacher interrupts again. "What about her mother and father?"
Udeala who acts the part of Ikenga pleads to answer the question.

"Okay."

"Her father, the father of the father of the father of our great father's big father, was a great farmer. He was crowned the farm-king just before Nneka was betrothed to Ikenga. Our great mother, the mother of Nneka, was from Benin in Edoland. Her family were smiths who fashioned beautiful bronze works, many of which they said were taken to English museums by white people."

The original teacher comes in again, this time addressing all the children. "Look at the sky and see that the moon is receding? So, Chinwe, let me cut the story short now. Of course I am satisfied that you all know the story. You also know that Ikenga was from a family that was as great as our own. In addition, he was the leader of his age grade."

"I was also the leader of our age grade during its initiation ceremony." Ngozi says still identifying with her historical model in spite of the earlier protestations by her peers. Ignoring Ngozi's interjection the original teacher continues with the story.

"Yes, both Nneka and Ikenga were great. That was why they were attracted to each other. As the story goes, the family was assembling for the marriage feast when armed people suddenly invaded them. Our people were taken unawares. However, they fought back with all their might and killed some of the invaders. Many of our people were killed while others were taken away as captives. Nneka's body was among those that were not seen after the battle."

At this point, Chinwe starts a well known dirge. Ngozi leaves her position and merges with the group that is now singing the dirge.

Nneka, nne m-oo. Nneka, my mother-o.
Gini ka ina akwa? What are you weeping for?
Gini ka ina akpo? What are you screaming for?
N' akwa-a, n'akpo-o. Weeping, screaming.

As they hum the song, the teacher continues with the narration since Chinwe is still conducting the dirge. The remaining part of the story now follows the rhythm of the song.
"We buried the dead strangers in the forest near the school. That is why till today it is called 'Forest of Killers.' Many of our people also died in the battle. Many great people of our land ... but ... They held their heads high, As they joined our ancestors,... They died honourably."

"The saddest part of the story was the fate of those who were not found after the battle. Nobody knows what their captors did with them. Some say that they killed them for sacrifice in foreign lands. Others say that they imprisoned them in a big house by the great river. That was why Ikenga left this village in search of the big house to bring back his betrothed, dead or alive. He too never came back." Here the teacher also joins the others in humming the dirge which now rises to a crescendo.

Unknown to the teacher and her students, Nneka's captors did not find things easy with her. She had bitten off the right ear lobe of the man who tried to seduce her. "No man can touch me except Ikenga!" She had shouted and dug her white teeth into the man's ear. Nobody appreciated her act as a display of bravery. It was rather seen as a primitive display of savagery. As a punishment, she was whipped till she fainted.

These moonlight story actors will never know how Nneka struggled in the Smith plantation in Virginia. She was seen as a stubborn slave with a chip on her shoulders. Nevertheless she was eventually made a servant in the master's house. Other Africans in America used to call her 'Rainbow Lady' because in her house could be found many children with different colors: black, brown, pink, yellow, red, and so on. One of them was the great grand father of the black girl in Ms Smith's history class.

Back in her house, Ms Susan Smith is sitting at table. She is not eating but staring at the pizza before her. She had thought she would be very hungry by the time she finished her history class. So she had ordered for her favourite "pizza with everything" before the class and picked it up on her way home. But now she can only stare at the meal and its contents for she has
lost her appetite. "I pity her," she says as she contemplates the source of her present discomfiture which is the ordeal the only black girl in her history class went through earlier. "I encouraged her to talk," she reasons trying to convince herself that the failure was not a reflection of any lapse on her part as a teacher.

She leaves the dining table and walks to the window where she stands gazing at the horizon. The red and blue stripes of her skirt seem to blend beautifully with her white blouse splashed with golden spots of the rays seeping through the foliage of the maple tree. The orange, brown, red, and greenish colours of the spring wood blend with the cool haze of the golden rays, making the horizon look like a paradise. Susan is not thinking about the beauty spread around and before her like a book of Navaho art. Her mind has since left the hitherto palate-tickling pizza and is now trying to recapture the pathetic figure of the black girl contrasting it with the mirthfulness of her peers. Her face bloats with an indescribable surge of emotion and she instinctively knows that she has to calm her nerves.

She goes to the kitchen to prepare a hot cup of black coffee which usually does the trick. She tries to concentrate her thoughts on pleasant things. She moves to the window which affords her a vantage position to appreciate her favourite view of the wood. But her eyes fail to take in the silvery scene of spring colours, for her mind has raced back to her experience in her history class earlier in the day. She should be happy about her achievement as the teacher who designed and engineered a class that is now acclaimed as the best in the world. Her eyes narrow at the thought of that one dark spot, that episode, that is now making her very uncomfortable. She gulps down her coffee and momentarily enjoys the invasion of her throat by the now tepid liquid. But it does not soothe her. It seems to have lost its potency for calming her nerves. She runs her fingers through her hair and wonders, "Why should one black spot, just one out of the other successful ones disturb my peace?"

As a history teacher, she likes to dig into the root of things in order to find out why things are not what they are supposed to be, and how they can be improved upon so that the world can be a better place. This is why she loves history — especially what she termed 'historical engineering' which is her own self-devised method of negotiating events in order to manipulate the world. But it baffles her that the black girl could not disclose the origin
of her parentage even in spite of her patronage.

"Was it possible that she did not know her progenitors?"
Is it possible that she did not know?
Their country, the group, and culture area?
Why did she not know it or was she merely shy?
Ashamed? But, why should she be ashamed?
Maybe she was nervous or timid?
Why? Why? Why?

She ponders repeatedly with her eyes scanning the horizon and stabbing every direction without focusing on anything. The spring sun is receding.

A cool breeze, like the soft whistle of chirping birds, caresses her face and seems to assuage the troubled mind of Susan Smith. "Why should one black spot among so many disturb my peace?"
The question reverberates in her mind.

"One black spot." She echoes. A new understanding suddenly dawns on her.

"A black spot in my all-American class." "All-American!" she exclaims holding her mouth as if to strangle the expression that has flown out of it.

"All-American?" Realisation dawns on her. "The black girl should become all-American. The black girl is American? But what is her origin?" She wonders. Another phase of new awareness. Susan draws the window blinds and walks dejectedly to the dining table and slumps on the chair clumsily. She is at once annoyed and surprised at herself for failing to get at Ruth's background. Ruth? "Yes. Ruth Mathews." She re-echoes the black girl's name in her mind as her eyes now hit the neglected meal.

She pushes it away in annoyance, unable to give expression to the new idea whirling in her head. How ignorant she has been, she thinks. She regards the neglected pizza with a new understanding. She appreciates the different colours of the ingredients. The red tomatoes, the green pepper, the brown pasta, and the black mushrooms, all blend to give the pizza its remarkable quality. She dwells particularly on the contribution of the black spots of the mushrooms to the general rainbow-like outlook of the pizza. She appreciates the fact that it would lose much of its attraction if any of the colours including the spots of the mushrooms were absent. She picks out the black
mushrooms and notes how it becomes immediately obvious that their absence has resulted in a distortion of the harmony of the food’s aesthetic quality.

“For my class to be a true model that is worthy of the world acclaim it enjoys, it should be a whole, an amalgam of all shades and colours under the sun. It should not be tainted by ignorance, not even from its teacher. I am the greatest teacher. I must remain the best.” She concludes.

How will she deal with the riddle of the multicultural game? She decides to unravel it by learning about Ruth Mathews. “Ruth Mathews.” She calls the black girl’s name confidently and eagerly resolves to employ all avenues to probe her heritage.

“I must discuss with Ruth’s parents and that will be the first step in unravelling this multicultural riddle.” She declares and digs her fingers into the pizza as a new gust of fierce appetite activates her spirit.