



## Filia-The New City Girl: A Study of Ekwensi's *Iska*

Ujhala Devi

PhD Scholar, Dept of English, University of Jammu, [Ujhala.sharma@gmail.com](mailto:Ujhala.sharma@gmail.com),  
9797640201

**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to look into the newly emerged city women of newly independent Nigeria in general and Lagos city in particular. In this paper we will analyze Cyprian Ekwensi's novel *Iska*. This paper traces the trajectory of a life of a woman named Filia Enu, who migrated from village to the Lagos city where she finds everything easy and tempting. She changes number of roles in the city and turns out to be a cunning lady from an innocent girl. She realizes it late that city life is not fit for her and she succumbs to the ills of city life.

**Key words:** Lagos city, Ethnicity, Colonialism, Culture, Religion

Studying the urbanities of the life styles of Nigerian people in a neo-colonial environment, Cyprian Ekwensi in 1981 published an urban novel named *Iska*. The novel catches vividly the atmosphere and mood of Nigeria in the post-independence era. *Iska* is a Hausa word which means 'wind'. This word is synonymous with Ibo 'Ogbanje' and the Yoruba 'Aibku' which stand for an unsettled life and a kind of restlessness, a wind that frequently blows across the world. Ekwensi maintains the attitude of disillusionment following independence as in the previous novel. He focuses on the contradictions, failures and ironies in the politics of Nigeria and highlights the hollowness of Nigerian unity which never transcends the tribal boundaries. The nation is shown to be in the hands of people whose business is to capitalize on anything, any situation. The future is bleak and almost hopeless and the author has no illusions.

The heroine of the novel, Filia Enu, is identified with the characteristic of wind. She is identified with wind which is blowing strongly in whole of the Africa with an intention to destroy all the old stuff and at the same time preparing it for new as the newly independent Nigeria was undergoing a huge change after independence. Novel presents different facets of society; a picture of Nigerian society from economic, political and religious angles. We get engaged in the novel with the rapid urbanization of modern Africa and its impact on the people along with the themes of politics, ethnicism and tribalism.

Filia moves to the melodramatic city of Lagos after her boy-friend's death. She is sure that moving to the city will wipe away her memories and enable her to make a fresh start. Filia, is among many rural women who are oppressed by their families and long for freedom and self-independence. She had spent eighteen years of her life in the convent of Kaduna. A convent educated girl, Filia is much familiar with the English culture than her own. "I do not know the Oदिनी, the custom, the tradition, because I grew up in Hausaland" (*Iska* 59). The modern ways and ignorance of their

own culture made the young generation more vulnerable and a misfit in the village. Earlier in the novel Filia is not allowed to marry Dan kaybi, who is a Northerner but she does marry him after much of opposition from her family. Such incidents make her feel more oppressed. She talks and thinks of freedom. Though she is an Ibo girl, she doesn't want to live in the Eastern Nigeria:

While moving to the city, Filia has high hopes from Lagos. She is interested in the field of fashion. She desires to appear in newspapers, television and magazines and on the stage. Lagos appears to her to be a perfect place to fulfill all her deep hidden desires. She thinks of a new and fresh beginning in the city and is ready to face all the challenges. Dan's father Musa Kaybi who has heard about the evils of the city tries to warn her:

I do not know about Lagos, but they say it's terrible place. Everything is dear, even water to drink is dears ... I go there only on business. And then I always want to get back quickly. Life is more peaceful in Kaduna. No rush. (*Iska* 76)

Ekwensi highlights the fact that how the western impact in getting high on the heads of the modern generation in the newly independent Nigeria. Though the condition of the city is not worth living but it charms the youth. They are ready to live in unhygienic cities because the lure of jobs, food and curiosity of the city life is hard to resist. However, each such endeavour is met with disillusionment. Filia finds the city life very fast. Even the basic necessities like safe drinking water are not available in the city. There is a tough competition in the restless city with no peace. Such conditions of the city do not stop the strong willed Filia. She is all set to get settled in the city. Lagos is a growing and over-crowded city. People who come to the city with hopes soon get disillusioned. Uneasy at first, they soon get absorbed in the fast life of the city to such an extent that it becomes tough for them to leave the city even for a single night. They become habitual of "the noise, the island club and the races, the ceremonial parades and the sirens, the business meetings and the pretty girls. It's a great place." (*Iska* 84)

To begin with, Filia is excited about her life in Lagos. A new sense of independence come in and she feels herself very much amused while thinking of herself as a working girl amongst the typewriters, file papers, coffee and gossip. But the reality soon dawns on her. In search of a job, Filia meets a girl named Remi who makes her aware of the truth of the city. Remi tells her about the great difficulty she herself faced while adapting to the city life as she lacked self- confidence. Filia comes to know how tough it is to get a job in the city. Scarcity of jobs and their high need of money exploit the job hunters who work in the day and night and that too on a meager salary. Ambitious enough, Filia is ready to work day and night so as to fulfill her dreams. Filia succeeds in getting a job of selling cosmetics in Lagos and shifts to Remi's place.

Filia closely observes and understands the melodramatic city of Lagos in the company of Remi. Ekwensi gives an image of the free and independent women in the city who roam freely at any place they want and at any hour of the day. Remi is the

counterpart of the character of Jagua. Every night Remi goes out with a different man in big cars and Filia feels amazed at the confidence of Remi with which she steps in the car as if it belongs to her. Analyzing the situation, Little writes, “Remi knows how to keep men dangling. She takes one lover after another, and, when Filia comments somewhat critically on her acceptance of ‘presents’, Remi says Filia is ‘too young and provincial’. It appears, nevertheless, that whatever Remi has actually acquired in terms of self- assurance is somewhat superficial” (23). Remi invites Filia to the night parties but to begin with she is reluctant and finds it very insensible, “what is the sense in this ‘going out’ every night?” (Iska 93). Filia too wants to enjoy this life but she hesitates.

The clear and far-sighted Filia’s heart soon steps in the corrupt and mean world. She believes in every word of Remi and gradually adopts ways without any moral conscience. After much hesitation, Filia agrees to accompany Remi to one of the parties. Things are larger than life for Filia, she is amazed at the night-life of Lagos. There are many cars of all lengths in the parking. The party is full of women of every kind. They are slim, fashionable, Nigerian and American. Everyone is busy eating and dancing to the music. It is all the more a different atmosphere for Filia. Remi tells her that she has slept with half of the men present in the party who were with their wives at that time. Wives are not aware of their bed rivals. This is the secret society of the bourgeoisies. This immoral practice of concubinage is the legacy of the colonial masters which is being continued by the neo-colonial masters.

Filia manages to get a clerical job in the Ministry of Consolation. Filia’s brother-in-law introduces her to Gadson who is the Senior Assistant Secretary. Filia is very excited to get the job. Honest and sincere, Filia does more and more work in the first month of her job but slowly she learns the way. The office is empty most of the times and the reason behind it is ‘not on seat’ irrespective of the length of the absence of a person from his chair which varies from three minutes to three months. She learns how to keep on reading the clock and to pack up one hour before the time and start yawning. She learns that once you have shown your face in the morning, the boss of section can let you go out of the office for an unlimited time.

She once goes for girls for a television show. The girls are required to model the new fashion dresses designed by a Nigerian dress designer and Filia is chosen among the girls. After her successful performance in the show, she gets a job in the newly founded boutique by the chief of society women, Mrs. Jolomi who is looking for girls to model her new creations from a Nigerian cloth hand woven in Eastern Nigeria. It is a stable job which Filia is looking for. The good models are to be selected permanently to display her fashions at cocktail parties and other occasions and the promising ones would be further groomed.

In the boutique she enters in the new life of fashion. She is surprised to know that how fashion has gripped all the Nigerian women. It is unbelievable to her to see the women doing all kinds of different things just to remain in fashion. Artificial looks and the bleached bodies of women is the common scene in the boutique. Women’s page in the *West African Sensation* is much looked after. Filia also hears of

a gossip in the boutique that there is a highly placed woman, mother of four children, who is fasting and living on sleeping tablets just because she wants to be fashionable so as to retain her husband. In her pursuit of becoming fashionable and slim she collapses in her kitchen and is taken to the hospital. In such an environment, Filia herself doesn't realize when she too becomes one among the glamour girls that shine.

Everything she does to herself was eye catching in a way. She learns to keep a fixed smile on the face and to make graceful movements. She fixes her wig in a manner so as to make men stare at her. "Combined with well-manicured hands, the accessories to match her Akwette (dress), flowers in the right places, and above all the deportment and fluidity of movement and stance... ." (*Iska* 105). All these qualities give Filia a new kind of power and make her the favorite of Mrs. Jolomi.

Filia soon becomes popular among magazine photographers and producer-directors of fashion shows. She starts doing many commercials. Her life is totally changed. She is all busy with posing for magazine covers, the living in hotels and rest houses, clubs at the races. Soon her face is seen behind sewing machines, cold drinks, special fabrics, toilet soaps and many more things. Though she is not offered much but it is the steady inflow of money. She is successful in realizing her dream of becoming a model. As she now owns a house of her own, she decides to call her mother to the city but at the same time fears that her mother would not approve of her job.

Filia, true to her name, is always drifting through the novel in search of something she never finds. She keeps moving from depression to determination and is ever ready to face the challenges of the life. She has transformed from a young protected woman who insists on going home to seek parental consent before marriage to a woman who desires to be an actress, to appear on television, to model dresses or to be in newspapers.

Filia is not an average girl. She has the traits of wind, if one startles her she flees out like wind. She needs to be treated gently. The hard and mean world outside is quite below her expectations. After all the bitter experiences of the city life, she decides to leave everything whether it be the big house of Nafotim or her new found love, Dapo from whom she is three months pregnant. Everybody has betrayed her in one way or the other. She decides to live in a new place with her mother. She, however, must be consumed by the prevalent decadence. While on her way back to home, one day, she is misled by a taxi driver and is taken to a strange and lonely area where she is looted of her belongings, raped and left unconscious and naked so as to succumb to her injuries.

**Conclusion:** Filia realizes that city is not a perfect place for her to live. But she is too late to realize it. Ekwensi has not allowed her to go back to her village instead she succumbs to the ills of the city. Filia's death "was the result of pressure, persecution, denial of opportunity which her generation offered to anyone who was not with it" (*Iska* 217). Tragedy of Filia is not an ordinary one. Her tragedy is tied to a noble cause which has denied every chance of survival. Ekwensi's pessimism is

underscored by Filia's death. She was kidnapped and drugged to death by her country's leaders. He intended Filia to be viewed as being murdered by the nation because she strove to live down to the last letter what everyone else paid mere lip service to, namely, that Nigeria is one.

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