TRANSLATING THE WOUNDS OF THE BIAFRAN WAR

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Abstract: The Biafran War (6 July 1967 – 15 January 1970) wounded deeply the Nigerian nation. The continuous fight among political exponents triggered a bloodshed ending in millions of deaths and a social and political nightmare. Hatred and distrust fragment the national conscience of Nigeria, and the would-be reconstruction of the post-war period came as a further proof of the profound levels of anomy in which the war had thrown "the African giant." Those years have drawn a dramatic canvas in which children with deep sad eyes die without having lived, mothers out of their minds caress the heads without bodies of their children, and politicians continue to make promises not meant to be fulfilled, a period of de-fragmentation and meaninglessness, a social turmoil in which not only the weapons wound, but also the empty look in the eyes of the executioners. Wole Soyinka foresaw the perils of yet another armed conflict in a country already crushed by political belligerences and social incongruity and in his novel Season of Anomy (1973) *Wole Soyinka exposes the darkness in which the social actors live their fears and shed their tears. Famine, malnutrition and death are coordinates on which only a deeply marred society may be constructed. Nigeria, the bright hope of the post-independence period, becomes a wild, frenzied social beast, biting its own flesh and struggling to annihilate its own identity. A harsh study in the consequences of war, written in the bleak conditions of a Nigerian prison, by a profound humanist on the brink of depression,* Season of Anomy *speaks with the voice of the dead, in an attempt to inform the present and the future of Nigeria, which must first of all heal its profound wounds, learning the lessons of the Nigerian genocide, in order to re-write the story of the African giant.*

Keywords: Nigerian war, anomy, genocide, Orpheus' myth, social elite

Season of Anomy was published in 1973, and constitutes "a prime example of a literary exploration of post-traditional life-worlds".[1] The novel is a harsh reading of the militarized state in Africa, as one of the choices for a post-independence society. The African "dilemma," as Joseph Obi called it, revolves around the possibilities of a political program for social reconstruction on the background of a "predatory" state.[2] Soyinka's later works revolve around the "new breed" of interpreters and their psychological and social processes of interpretation, channeled by "[the] messianic calling… to assume the guise of Ogun and bridge de contradictions",[3] even if their attempts would fail in shaping a new social order.

The historical context within which the question of power and its backlashes must be read refers to the militarized period of Sani-Abacha's government. This violent conflict claimed not only the thousands of Igbos, real or perceived, in a killing spree, but also, as Robertson reports,

[1] Frank Schulze-Engler. „African Literature and the Micropolitics of Modernity: Explorations of Post-Traditional Society in Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy, Nuruddin Farah's Sardines and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions." *Matatu* 35 (2007): 21-35,215-216. http://search.proquest.com/docview/215054621?accountid=15533, p. 23.

[2] Joseph Obi. „Art, ideology, and the Militarized African Postcolony: A Sociological Reading of Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy." *Neohelicon* XXV.2 (1998): 403-415.

[3] Brenda Cooper. „The Two-Faced Ogun: Postcolonial Intellectuals and the Positioning of Wole Soyinka." *English in Africa* 22.2 (1995): 44-69. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40238810p. 57.

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two million lives[4] in the actual war. Nnedum presents a terrifying canvas, difficult to conceive for the 20th century; and these images uncannily resemble the anomy in Soyinka's world, the inhumanity and regression of social structure:

> Before, during and after the Biafran war in the current Nigeria, millions and millions of Biafran Igbo people were rounded up in several regions, states, cities, towns, and villages in northern and western Nigeria and "slaughtered". During the 1966 Biafran war, their young girls were first gang raped by scores of men and then carried to Leper colonies to be raped by leper patients before being killed; the Biafran nursing mothers had their breast cut off; while their men when caught are buried alive. Satisfied that the world did not react to these heinous war crimes against marginalized innocent people, the then Nigerian leader General Yakubu Gowon declared a war of genocide on Biafran Igbo people – a war that made the Somalian Genocide look like a mere ethnic clash[5]

Even if any conflict which sacrifices the lives of the innocents is morally unjustifiable, this particularly bloody explosion, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), was triggered by a number of historical events which left Nigeria in a state of confusion and social-political turbulence.

After the departure of the British or British-named rulers, a regional battle started on ethnic grounds. The politicization of the ethnic avenue became evident in the "mere scrambling among the ruling regional elites for power on the basis of regional or local ethnic loyalties".[6] Nigeria was characterized by party fighting, corruption, electoral malpractices and economic retardation. On January 15, 1966, "the African giant, a title Nigerians had proudly accepted, seemed about to collapse… from the hemorrhage of political assassination".[7] A group of young army majors (mainly Igbo officers), led by Major Chukwumma Kaduna Nzeogwu, overthrew the civilian government of Prime Minister Abubaka Tafawa Balewa.[8] As Perham recounts:

> "[…] I saw on a television screen the Igbo officer who had just murdered the Northern premier, the Sardauna of Sokoto, and his wife, still holding his gun and boasting of what he had done. I felt a sense of horror and foreboding as I seemed to visualize all the terrible results which might follow, now that with the multiple murders of that night the keystone of the federal arch had been struck out".[9]

[4] Ian Robertson. *Society: A Brief Introduction*. New York: Worth, 1989, p. 410.
[5] O.A.U Nnedum. „Etiology and Consequences of Internal Population Desiplacement in Nigeria: A Psychological Analysis." *Understanding Social Sciences*. Ed. O.N. Oranye și N.A. Nnonyelu. Enugu: Oktek, Ltd., 2004, p. 97, quoted in Obinna, Ezeokana; Chukwukelue, Chine; Ugochukwu, Nnedum; Ojo, Omonijo. „Influence of Traumatization and Category of "Biafran-Nigerian" Civil War Veterans on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among War Survivors." *Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research* 1.10 (2011): 1480-1483. <www.textroad.com, p. 1480.
[6] Segun Osoba. „Ideological Trends in the Nigerian National Liberation Movements and the Problems of Nationaal Identity, Solidarity, and Motivation 1934-1965: A Preliminary Assessment." *Ibadan* 27 (1969): 26-38, quoted in Obi, Joseph. „Art, ideology, and the Militarized African Postcolony: A Sociological Reading of Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy." *Neohelicon* XXV.2 (1998), p. 405.
[7] Margery Perham. „Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 46.2 (1970): 231-246. 14 June 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2613824, p. 231.
[8] Kevin Shillington (ed.). *Encyclopedia of African History*. Vol. 2. New York-London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005, p. 1113.
[9] *Idem*, p. 232.

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The same feeling of foreboding plagues *Season of Anomy*, and the horrifying details of death circumvent a country bleeding innocent blood in pointless crimes and hunting scenes. The tensions in the country became deeper and bloodier. The assassinations, the structure of the group of conspirators, and the politics of the military government brought to power nourished an anxious belief in conspiracies ethnically orchestrated, "an Igbo bid to dominate Nigeria"[10] and the Hausa-Fulani factions (Northern Nigeria) of the army and the Northern population exploded in a countercoup, on 29th July of the same year, drawing another scarlet scar in the face of Nigerian history. Numerous Igbo officers and civilians were killed in Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta. The parallels between the bloodshed of this action and the ruthless army troops and the hordes of savage civilian lynching for pure pleasure in *Season of Anomy* are striking. The massacres of Igbo in northern cities, followed by a desperate retreat of the civilians, ruled out the concept of "one Nigeria" (Encyclopedia, loc. cit.), at least from Igbo's point of view. Hatred and lack of trust replaced the openness of the past relations between Igbo and the northern Nigerians.

> "The Biafran appeal to our emotions came from the repeated pictures, not only of dead or dying men and women, but, even more penetrating, of small children with swollen stomachs and stick-like limbs who sometimes appeared to look straight at the viewer with a last cry for help"[11]

On May 30, 1967 the Eastern region, dominated by Igbo segment, led by its governor, lt. colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, announced its secession from the Nigerian federation. The state of Biafra is born. By July 6, the Nigerian state declared war to the rebels, triggering a historical event which was to haunt the international social space for decades.

> It was a genuinely global event. Whether in its estimated one to three million deaths (Falola, Toyin; Heaton, Matthew 158), its implications for secessionist movements and political stability in Africa, its role as a crucible of contemporary humanitarianism or subject matter for famous African novelists, the war was widely regarded as a watershed in the postcolonial global order. [12]

As witnessed by scholars present in those years in Nigeria, Biafrans were being killed only based on their identity. One of the survivors of Polish genocide as a child, who was spending two years in Nigeria for his doctoral thesis, commented: "[It was] as if the twenty-some years after the Second World War had been compressed into a few minutes. The Holocaust monster was on the prowl again, and it was no use trying to escape its implications in Africa or elsewhere".[13] As an expert on problems of Biafran event, Melson underlined that the conflict was not the product of a racial ideology, but a context for a pervading need of self-determination triggered and sustained by the tensions of a post-colonial nation and the search for a "modern nationalist ideology".[14]

The view on the Nigerian events is far from being unanimous. The reports were contradictory and some observers on the field even testified that there is no solid evidence

[10] *Ibidem*.
[11] Perham, Margery. „Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 46.2 (1970): 231-246. 14 June 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2613824, p. 231.
[12] Lasse Heerten, Dirk Moses. *Journal of Genocide Research* 16.2-3 (2014): 169-203. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.936700, p. 169.
[13] Robert Melson. „My journey in the study of genocide." *Pioneers of genocide studies*. Ed. Samuel Totten și Steven Jacobs. New Brunswick, NJ: Greenwood Press, 2002, p. 142.
[14] Lasse Heerten; Dirk Moses, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

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leading to the label of genocide or systematic destruction of the property of an ethnic or religious group. Nevertheless, there was enough evidence of famine and death by illnesses and malnutrition as a direct result of the war.[15] On the other hand, as Nwanne Okafor underlines, "other independent observers such as Stephen Lewis who was a visiting Canadian Member of Parliament were of the opinion that there was genocide during the war."[16]

At a psychological and social level, the experience of war or political, ethnical, and social violence are viewed as deeply traumatic for all categories, women, children and men. Citing Stavrou, the sociologists Eke Chijioke Chinwokwu and Sylvia Kaka Arop underlined:

> Research shows that 60-80% people exposed to war and political violence directly or indirectly suffer symptoms of posttraumatic stress. Research findings also indicate that mere living in a violent prone area where the media is filled with images and reports of horrible violence destruction as we are witnessing in Nigeria presently can result in people experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress. More importantly, children are more at risk than adults during political violence and war. Researches findings indicate that 80% of children had symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder one to two years later[17]

The war ended in January 1970. The Gowon regime (brought down on July 29, 1975) profited of the oil boom of the mid-seventies to entertain a huge aggregate of opportunists, power-misusers, heinous politicians, functioning on the aggregate growth indices Nigeria has been recording. The vast network of bureaucrats, political coteries, and gigantic projects without realist coverage was meant to protect the mighty ones, leaving the humble citizen at the mercy of the government. Nigeria was overwhelmed by violence determined by the nature of political structure, leaving in its wake bitterness and mistrust in a Nigerian national identity. Although conflict is inherent in human societies, not all conflicts, be they of ideological, political, or religious nature, have ended in war. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, different types of conflicts have most times ended in great casualties.

Soyinka predicted the development of post-war Nigeria. A war fought solely on the grounds of "national boundaries", without an ideological, social, cultural foundation, ruled out any improvement of the social or political scene. Soyinka warned that "the ramifications of an alliance of a corrupt militarism and rapacious Mafia in society are endless and nearly incurable".[18] And elsewhere:

> "[…] they (the postcolonial rulers) were more concerned with the mechanisms for stepping into the shoes of the departing colonial masters, enjoying the same privileges, inserting themselves in that axial position toward the rest of the community. I saw the most naked and brutal signs of alienation of the ruler from the ruled… And I realized the enemy within was going to be far more problematic than the external, easily recognized enemy."[19]

[15] J.A. Nwadike,. *A Biafran Soldier's Survival from the Jaws of Death*. Xlibris Corporation, 2010, p. 26.
[16] Okafor, Nwanne. *Victimization During the Nigerian War*. Master Thesis. Tilnurg, 2014, p. 24.
[17] Eke Chijioke Chinwokwu, Sylvia Kaka Arop. „Socio-Psychological Effects of Political Violence and War on Gender in Nigeria." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5.26 (2014): 44-50. <10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n26p44>, p. 44.
[18] Soyinka, Wole. *The Man Died*. London: Rex Collings, 1971, p. 182.
[19] Jaggi, Maya. „Wole Soyinka: Lamenting Nigeria's peculiar mess." *World Policy Journal* 11.4 (1994). http://search.proquest.com/docview/232591881?accountid=15533, p. 1.

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As Obi underlines, "the Nigeria of *Season* was characterized by neopatrimonialism involving sectional elites. The state – distributive and privatized, and run by a military/bureaucratic oligarchy - existed for private gain, hence those competing factions invoked all forms of alliances and primordial appeals to control it."[20]

For Soyinka, and other writers on the Biafran war, its horrors, and its aftermath, like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Half of a Yellow Sun*), relevant is the voice of the dead, and the answer to the question how could such meaningless deaths justify the emergence of a better state of the nation.

Season of Anomy is part of Soyinka's tetralogy on the Nigerian war, together with *The Man Died*, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* and *Madmen and Specialists*, not only because they share the same themes, but also because of the horrifying world they describe, in which sanity and normality are only the markers of the historical disease.

Some analysts proposed that war trauma, indeed the concept of trauma more generally viewed, would derive from a specific cultural orientation, defined in western terms, and its relevance to nonwestern communities may be limited. This is to say that trauma is culturally informed, "in its concepts and interventions".[21] Nevertheless, such a view does not take into account the pain, the loss, the alienation, and the dehumanizing variable of the individual, accounting for the universality of the concept of trauma. What presents interest for the present analysis is the way in which the concept of trauma of war regains its power, its universality, in Soyinka's war novel, *Season of Anomy*.

Like all Soyinka's works, informed by a deeply mythological perception of the social, the novel has its roots in Orpheus' myth, Ofeyi's journey being equated with Orpheus' quest for his wife, his descending into hell and the perils with which the challenger of gods must confront. Nevertheless, if Orpheus's quest is the quest of a unique individuality, Ofeyi's quest goes beyond "the need to seize for himself the enormity of what is happening, of the time in which is happening".[22] His quest is a shared journey through a shared history, and "the meaning of the event… lead me to a new understanding of history."[23]

Soyinka wrote *Season of Anomy* during his incarceration, between the lines of the books brought to him by his friends in prison. This could be considered the moment of his re-definition as a writer, as a "myth-maker", as one author called him,[24] and as an individual anchored at the immediacies of his country. As Biodun Jeyifo argues:

> *The Man Died* and *Season of Anomy* are the first harvests of [the] development of Soyinka's writing and between them they show the extremes of the artistic and ideological effects and consequences of this pattern.[25]

The anger and desire of revenge transpire in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, and the mediation of the artistic form, or, better said the lack of it, is the expression of an overwhelming strive to punish through language. This is one of the reasons why some authors considered that, without a basic knowledge about the historical events presented by Soyinka in *Season of*

[20] Joseph Obi, *op. cit.*, pp. 405-406.
[21] Patrick Bracken, Petty Celia. *Rethinking the Trauma of War*. London: Free Associaation Books, 1998, quoted in Whitehead, Anne. „Journeying through Hell: Wole Soyinka, Trauma, and Postcolonial Nigeria." *Studies in the Novel* 40.1&2 (2008): 23-30.
[22] Wole Soyinka, *Season of Anomy*:Rex Collings, 1973, p. 218.
[23] *Ibidem*.
[24] Lindfors, Bernth & Kothandaraman, Bala, ed. *The Writer as Myth Maker. South Assian Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. Trenton-Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004.
[25] Jeyifo, Biodun. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 179.

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Anomy, namely the Nigerian war and its aftermath, the reader feels at a loss of understanding the crucial points of the novel. The deep roots of Soyinka's psychological pain leave no room for well-wrought narrative discourse, better said, for "logical" course of his prose. Deeply marked by the atrocities he witnessed and by his unjust imprisonment, with all the degrading and the dehumanizing conditions of a Nigerian prison, Soyinka will transform writing in a "personal vengeance… [but also] a commitment to justice… for humanity at large, and assumes some ideological dimension in the novel which issued from the same context and inspiration" (Oladitan 14, qtd. in Rajeshwar 184).[26]

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[26] Oladitan, Olalere. „The Nigerian Crisis in the Nigerian Novel." *New West African Literature*. Ed. Kolawole Ogungbesan. London: Heinemann, 1979. 10-20,. P. 14, quoted in Rajeshwar, M. „Never Too Late to Regain Paradise: Season of Anomy." *The Writer as Myth Maker. South Asian Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. Ed. Bernth and Kothjandaraman, Bala Lindfors. Trenton-Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004. 184.

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