LITERARY MIRRORS OF THE NIGERIAN WAR

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Abstract: One of the darkest periods in Nigeria's history is the militarized period of Sani-Abacha's government. Violence and undiscriminating punishment of any societal avenue diverging from the official ruling was punished by death, and the most daring crime against the policy of Sani-Abacha's regime was the individual judgment of the events. Beyond the official claims for a whole Nigeria, there was a deep desire for asserting a distorted perception of a political unity, through the annihilation of minorities, which until that moment, had been relatively peacefully cohabiting with the majority. This lack of mutual understanding, ill-disguised in concepts like "unity", "Nigerian identity", "wholeness of the country", and so on, claimed - as Robertson reports - two million lives (Robertson, 401, qtd. in Obi) in the actual war. 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, rich, poor, Igbos or Yoruba. The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) ended in January 1970, leaving the Nigerians embittered and distrustful in a Nigerian coherent national identity. A social conscience which was lacking direction and a structured system of values to cope with such horrifying consequences, coupled with a state of amorphous unknowing triggered more violent social reactions, and the literature dedicated to the horrors of war is as rich in Africa as elsewhere in the world. The trauma of war, against the assertions of scholars as Patrick Bracken and Celia Petty, do not derive from a specific cultural orientation, an essentially Western one, but it acquires universality through the human factor the West and the African world share.

Keywords: Nigerian Civil War, war novel, coping strategies, moral values, psychological trauma

The post-Independence period in Nigeria was marred by dissolution, moving between the collapse of the alien structure of British ruling and the anomy of an amorphous phase, in which the remains of the colonial past constituted the only link between the tribal conscience and a future social engagement, one that was supposed to determine the evolution of an original Nigerian perspective. The inheritance African world assumed from their former rulers was defined by the concept of power, the power upon the means of survival, the means of creating order, the means of creating ideologies. The regression to a pre-colonial stage became impossible, but on the other hand, so was the unmediated absorption of the former colonial view. On such a background,

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, two million lives (Robertson, 401, qtd. in Obi) 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:

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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 (Nnedum 97, qtd. in Obinna et al. 1480)

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" (Osoba, qtd. in Obi, 405). 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" (Perham, p. 231). 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 (Shillington, 1113). As Perham recounts:

"[…] I saw on a television screen the Ibo 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" (loc. cit., 232)

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" (Encyclopedia of African History, loc. cit.) 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.

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"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" (Perham, p. 231)

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 (Heerten, Lasse; Moses, Dirk 169).

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" (Melson 142). 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" (Heerten et al. 182).

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 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. (Nwadike 26) 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." (Okafor 24).

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 (1993), 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 post traumatic 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 post traumatic stress. More importantly, children are more at risk than adults during political violence and war. Researches findings indicate that 80% of children had

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symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder one to two years later (Chinwokwu, Eke Chijioke; Arop, Sylvia Kaka, 44).

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 end in war. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, different types of conflicts have most times ended in great casualties.

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" (Bracken et al., qtd. in Whitehead). 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.

Nigerian War has informed a substantial body of writings, and continues to influence the literary memory of much younger writers, belonging to the so-called Second Wave of African Writers. Its toll in human lives and the trauma provoked on a social, political and economic level continues to exhort interrogations into the reasons and the coping strategies against such a tragedy.

The novels written on this subject have two centers of interest: the war, with its horrors, violence and incomprehensible alterations induced in the Nigerian society, and the way in which the echoes of the tragedy can be traced in its aftermath, in society as a whole, but also at the individual psychological level.

Following Olalere Oladitan's classification of war writings, critics speak of pioneering forecasts, testimonial novels on the events and the immediate effects of the conflict – the so-called "Literature of Testimony" – personal accounts of the tragedies, under the form of memoirs, analyses of the ideology and violent ideologically-based transformation of the society (cf. Oladitan, 14)

The first group of writings, a collection of testimonials on the events during the war and their impact on all the factors involved, includes, in Oladitan's opinion, John Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* (1973) and Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976).

John Munonye's literary themes are "the intrusion of modernity and its harsh demands on individuals living in villages or small towns" (Gikandi, 486). Heavily influenced by Chinua Achebe, his colleague at Ibadan, he presents a pessimist perspective on the future of Nigeria as a culturally distinct society, "but… in these stories he still maintains faith in the ability of his characters to secure their identity and integrity through the process of education" (loc. cit.) It comes as no surprise that a civil war, considered by modern sociology and social psychology the most traumatic event in the history of a people, triggered John Munonye's response, with an accent on the mobilizing aspect of a large-scale conflict: social effort channeling in restoring a sense of normality. In *A Wrath for the Maidens*, Munonye addresses the political implications of the Nigerian war and its causes, the power imbalance between North Nigeria and South

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Nigeria and the corruption elevated to the stats of national politics, which culminated in the Biafra War (cf. Feuser). As his characters say,

Unless we seriously get down to the core of the disease, all the efforts that go into the present war, and all the losses in life and property will be wasted in the end. And assuming we will win the shooting war, the victory may prove to be a defeat after a short time. (Munonye, 212)

As Gikandi highlights, Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* goes beyond the ethnic roots of the Biafran war in order to expose the „its class and gender contradictions" (329). Charles Larson insists on the Biafran point of view expressed by the author, with its satirical edge, misplaced as the critique points out, nevertheless revealing the same lack of trust in a solution which is not based on altering the entire social system which triggered the conflict (Larson, 235). In Chukwuemeka's historical fiction, "[…] what begins as a comic or satiric story with war as a backdrop ends as a bitter and depressing account of modern warfare in Africa" (loc. cit.).

Willfried Feuser proposes Okechukwu Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* as "the most significant novel produced by war" (Feuser, 41) Irony and bitterness pervade his writing, and the author's burning critique is equally oriented to „the globetrotting Biafran envoys in Paris bent on lining their own pockets" and to the "righteous Nigerian" officials who bought weapons and plains from former convicts and corrupt military and "prayed for salvation at night" (Feuser, loc. cit.). Their soldiers are perverted individuals, each one of them with his dark shadows in his past. At an individual scale, the two pilots, "… one of them… facing a prison term because of fraud and the other had lost his licence because of an assault on an air hostess" (Mezu, 36) are iconic for the moral collapse within which the Biafran war was carried.

To this short and by no means comprehensible list of testimonials on war, we could add, together with Peters, Cyprian Ekwensi's *Divided We Stand*, written during the war (Zell et al.). The feminist perspective of the Biafra event is aptly described in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1981).

The second segment of war writings includes the individual accounts in the works of Soyinka's prison notes, *The Man Died* (1972), and Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973) (Peters, 35).

Elechi Amadi based his nonfictional volume on his personal engagement in the Biafra War as a Federal Army officer, and a Biafran prisoner. Human degradation, the return to the self as a means to preserve an identity - against the gruesome landscape of the war prisons - render a sense of helplessness and futility in any effort to comprehend the human dimensions of such an experience.

Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* is a written expression of hate and fury. Detained for eighteen months during the Biafra War, of which fifteen months in solitary confinement, Wole Soyinka has written his memoires between the lines of his *Idanre*, smuggled for him by supporters or, as other sources inform, on toilet paper and cigarette wrappers (Lindfors, 134). The themes on which the memoires are based are survival, not only physical, but also of the moral values as humanity, integrity, justice, and the need to preserve one's psychological wholeness. As Wole Soyinka highlights, his memoires are not a recipe for surviving degradation, but a private diary of his refuse to succumb to terror, injustice and loneliness.

As Peter Enahoro underlines:

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Soyinka lays down his political thoughts in the manner of an enraged man pounding the table with his fist, which is fair enough for a writer in a continent where too many are only too willing to compromise and keep their political thoughts well hidden, even sometimes, one suspects, from themselves. (239)

The title of the volume speaks about the death of a Nigerian journalist, beaten to death for an alleged attack on Gowon[1]. His death acquires a metaphorical quality in Soyinka's memoires, the silence of conscience's death, the silence of the human soul when confronted with pure evil and not daring to challenge it. When society maintains silence, when all of them "wound their voices around our [the silenced] innermost guts and made each man partake of the brotherhood sacrament of blood and guilt and pain" (Soyinka, 1988, 11) What saved Soyinka from insanity, as he himself declares, was his camaraderie with the other prisoners, and this shared experience kept their humanity alive. From his prison notes emerges an obsessive need to find a meaning to all this "attendant human suffering" of war, because, as Soyinka shares with his readers, "[the war] must… be made to fragment more than buildings: it must shatter the foundations of thought and re-create" (Soyinka, 1971, 182, qtd. in Owusu, 1). An organism caught in an anomic universe, in which the only certitude is death, must de-construct itself, in order to die or to be re-constructed, even if it will forever bear the scars of that tragedy. But *The Man Died* moves beyond being an artistic plea to humanism and compassion. It became the dais from which he took daring stands, making known his opinion about the futility of such a war, the great risks that his country was about to tak on unsubstantiated grounds. As the author mentions:

[…] my denunciation of the war in the Nigerian papers; my visit to the East; my attempt to recruit the country's intellectuals within and outside the country for a pressure group which would work for a total ban on the supply of arms to all parts of Nigeria; creating a third force which would utilize the ensuing military stalemate to repudiate and end both the secession of Biafra, and the genocide-consolidated dictatorship of the Army which made both secession and war inevitable. (1971, 19, qtd. in McLuckie, 24)

Sprung from the deep feelings of injustice, pain, empathy with the dead and the survivors alike, such themes pervade the third segment approaching the event of war in African literature.

The third segment of Literature of War, in its humanist approach, went beyond the healing process of the creative act, and, starting from themes like the role of ideology and violence, tried to trigger a reassessment of social values through "a revolutionary transformation of society" (Oladitan, 14). This artistic avenue is searched by Kole Omotoso's *The Combat* (1972) and Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973).

Both works share "the use of symbolism and allegory" in dealing with the theme of war. In Komotoso's novel, the two protagonists, close friends, fight over the paternity of a ten-year old boy, born in 1960, Nigeria's Independence year as a nation. It is not difficult to intuit that the two friends are the Federate Nigeria (Ojo) and Biafra (Debe). The struggle between the deep feelings of friendship and the need to control Isaac, who, as Owomoyela elucidates, "is an

[1] General Gowon, the head of state in Nigeria between 1966 and 1975.

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offering for slaughter" (36) determines a profound crisis in the conscience of the two protagonists, reflecting, beyond the allegory used, the crisis in which Nigeria's national consciousness struggled. A straightforward allegory of the Civil War, the battle between the two friends, like the war between Biafra and Federate Nigeria, is "organized, prepared, cynically advertised by the media, viciously consecrated and blessed in religious services, in a kind of hypostatized reality". (Gorlier, 45) Not by chance, at the end of the novel the reader finds out that the boy was dead from the beginning, killed by Debe's car. There is a marked sense of disillusionment in *The Combat*, distrust in Nigeria's future and its capacity to recover from this pointless war. Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* deploys the same allegorical mode, and the author's perspective is as bleak as Komoto's. The allegorical Nigeria in Soyinka's novel, Iriseyi, is almost dead, in a deep coma, and her coming to life is by no means clearly established. The images of death, near-death, fragmentation, blood, maiming, continuous interrogations of the war's meaning pervade not only in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* and Komoto's *The Combat*. By no means the only novels written on this tragic event, their works are accompanied by Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), written from the territory whose oil was considered one of the reasons for Biafra War. *Sozaboy* is also an allegory, "indicative of the social malaise in Nigerian society" (Eke, 87), which, though it is not the only factor triggering the war, was an important one. Also a victim of an unjust trial, like in Soyinka's case, Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed by the Nigerian military government on 10 November 1995 (87).

The theme of war and of its atrocities, in social dissolution, psychological trauma and the hardships of reconstruction, does not remain without echo in the twentieth century. As one analyst maintained, the experiences of war, with their psychological scars, will haunt many generations of African writers, (Okolocha, 2012) and what is more deeply felt at a social level is not the direct effects of a conflagration (number of deaths, loss of property, political instability), but a sense of insecurity, a deeply felt psychological trauma which destabilizes the entire structure on which the individuals caught in the conflict had constructed their identity. The impact of such a trauma is so powerful that it triggers nightmarish narratives years after the event, as the literature of the Third Wave of African Writers proves.

As one of its representative writers acknowledges:

> I was born seven years after the Nigeria-Biafra war ended, and yet the war is not mere history to me, it is also memory, for I grew up in the shadow of Biafra. I knew vaguely about the war as a child – that my grandfathers had died, that my parents had lost everything they owned. […] I was aware of how this war haunted my family, how it colored the paths our lives had taken. (Adichie, 45)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is included in the writings of Literature of War, even if the author was not an eyewitness to the horrors. Her measure, as for other writers of the third wave, is the transformation of personal war experiences in oral tradition, objectifying them, giving them value beyond the human experience, which helped in their development. An example of such a process, to return to Adichie's narrative, is the image of the beheaded child, and the calabash in which the bereaved mother is keeping it.

> Olanna […] tells him how the bloodstains on the woman's wrapper blended into the fabric to form a rusty mauve. She describes the carved designs on the woman's calabash, slanting lines crisscrossing each other, and she describes the child's head inside: scruffy braids

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falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O. (2006, 111)

One way of surpassing the psychological strain of trauma is to invest it with forgiveness. Such a strategy of coping is employed by Olanna, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Aiyero's community, in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, in their attempt to understand and to give meaning to the abhorrent background against which they perform and write. (Darie, 2014) Before death, we are equal, we all sound like "the bleating of a goat", as Adichie puts it (2006, 98).

Other novels proposed for inclusion in Literature of War are Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, "a representation of war seen through the eyes of journalist Osime Iyere", who attains, through the war and its tragedies, "a political awareness" (Killam and Kerfoot, 148). Eddie Iroh wrote almost a decade after the end of the war, and still the echoes of the dramatic event haunts his *Forty Eight Guns for the General* (1976), a novel on the war experiences of a group of mercenaries, and *Siren at Night* (1979), in which the author protrays „a society in turmoil" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 116) as a result of the destabilizing suffering and lack of meaning. Also, among the later accounts of the Biafra War, John Hawley mentions, besides Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Dulue Mbachu's *War Games* (2005), the journey through the calvarish war of a ten-year old boy who realizes that he is an Igbo (the secesionist ethny) and asks himself „… what I had done to deserve such hatred" (Mbachu, 17, qtd. in Hawley, 2008, 18) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005). In an interview with Todd Moss, researcher at The Center for Global Development, Uzidinma Oweala made known the theme of his gruesome novel about the eperience of war, as seen through the eyes of child soldiers.

… if somebody stands in front of you and tells you, "I will kill you if you don't kill this person," that's a very – or even worse like, "If you don't kill this person, I'll kill your family." Then what are you supposed to do as a little kid? I mean, you don't, it's incomprehensible. (Iweala, 2006)

The term "incomprehensible" could be applied to the entire war experience, and allegory is just a means for translating this trauma. Authors like Soyinka and Komoto use allegory in this sense, but for both of them, as in the other war novels, in which allegory was not employed, the tragedy pervades through the signs and symbols, and renders historicity to the events narrated, revealing their belonging to the tragedies of war.

It is not in our intention to analyze the entire corpus of Literature of War, with its generous representation in themes and authors. We made references only to those authors who employed allegory in transmitting the traumatic experience of this dramatic event, authors who directly witnessed the Biafra War or authors of the Third Generation for which the history and testimonials of Biafran War must be preserved in order to understand the drama such a conflict triggers in the soul and conscience of the individual, but also the social disintegration nations caught in a civil war are exposed to.

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