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The Literary Artist as a Mediator: the Case of Nigerian Civil War Poetry

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Abstract
This paper contends that there exists a paradoxical relationship between violence and conflictual situations on one hand, and the literary art on the other. While conflictual violence exerts tremendous strains on human relations, literary artists have often had their creative sensibilities fired by such conflicts. The above accounts for the emergence of the war-sired creative enterprise collectively referred to as war literature. These writers have used their art either as mere chronicles of the unfolding drama of blood and death or as interventionist art to preach peace and restoration of human values.
Using the Nigerian experience, this paper does an examination of select corpus of poetry, which emanated from the Nigerian civil war experience. It isolates the messages of peace, which went a long way in not only pointing out the evils occasioned by war and conflict but also in suturing the broken ties of humanity while the war lasted. As our societies are becoming increasingly conflictual, our literary endeavours should also assume more social responsibilities in terms of conflict mitigation, prevention and promotion of global peace.
This paper therefore envisions a new literary movement i.e. peace literature which creatively interrogates social contradictions that create tension, conflicts and violent clashes. A literature that will serve as a veritable instrument in the promotion of the message of peace, understanding and restoration of human dignity in our contemporary world riddled with moral, religious, racial and idealogical conflicts
Keywords: Violence, Conflict, War-literature, Peace-literature, Interventionist-art

Introduction

The role of committed literature is succintly captured by Bruce king(1975) when he ascerts that

It is a crystalization of the emotion
expectations, experiences, joys
sufferings, hope and aspirations
of a people

This goes to confirm the contention that literature mirrors life. This view has been the central argument in the sociological school of literary criticism over the years. Since literature does not operate in a vaccum, it must always have a reference point from where it draws its "*raw materials*". In essence, literary art is a creative expression of the diverse moods, experiences and tempers of the society which they mirror. This in a way suggest that, there is usually the presence, in the literary enterprise, a marked fidelity to socio-cultural millieus which produced the literature. History also does this but while history hardly brooks authorial embellishment, literature spices the raw data of history and social events with creative imagination of the writer. This point is poignantly expressed by Oko Ajah (2010) when he observes that

Authorial intention defines the difference
between an historian and a writer. In
addition, aesthetic and stylistic qualities
are major factors in this difference (75)

The point being stressed here relates to the architectonics of bare-facts of history within the compass of the creative work. History merely provides the literary artist with the raw materials which are manipulatued to spin the literary yarn. What the writer does is what Ajah (2010) refers to as "*fictionalisation of history" (74).*
Just as any socio-historical events, war, which has unfortunately become part of human history has always provided a fertile ground for the thriving of literary creature enterprise. This view is further stressed by Chidi Amuta(1988). Who asserts;

Because war puts the greatest pressure
on human nature, relationship and
Institution, it becomes also a fertile
ground for literary imagination. (p. 86)

Confirming this paradoxical nexus between literary creativity and the destructive rage of warfare, R.N. Egudu (1978) sums up the nigerian Literary scene after the Nigerian civil war as follows:

The war period- a period of death- has
thus become a period of poetic harvest (104)

However, it must be quickly pointed out here that the mood, temper and tone of war literature is always dictated by the authors attitude and the prevailing cultural millieum in which the theatre of war plays out. For example, in the traditional African setting, war was seen as normal part of existence and we see many communities delibrately going into wars to prove their superiority over their neighbours or to acquire land, and property, not minding the carnage that such enterprise always occasion.

As Okpewho (1985) put it;

> *The experience of war has always been a fierce one in any age or community. In many traditional African peoms, this fierceness always takes an interesting turn. In the traditional custom, war was regarded as one solid way for man to prove his manhood and earn respect among his people; poetry composed in this spirit would naturally reflect a certain eagerness for war. (p. 136)*

This quotation poignantly demonstrates that in most traditional African society, war was seen and accepted as a way of life. To them, it was not only a necessary way of life, it was a akey to their existence. A means by which individuals and communities demonstrated their valour. If a community was to survivie in the midst of their beligerent neighbours, it must be ready to pick up arms at any moment to deffnd her territory and itegrity. It must be stress here that though such war were not devoid of human and material losses, such calamities were less emphasized by the traditional griots who serve as entertainers, chroniclers and historians of their communities. To them, the sheer heroism of their war mattered more than bemoaning the human and material losses which they occasion. Indeed, for an individul or a community to shy away from prosecuting a war was an un acceptable show of cowardice. Thus, in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, for example, Nwaka and his supporters jeer at Ezeulu for advising the people of his village (Umuaro) against *fighting a war of blame*. In essence, in our traditional society, oral war poems were composed to valourise war enterprises rather than discouraging it. It was such heroic spirit that informed the composition of such poetic piece as "In praise of Olukoyi" (Yoruba, Nig.) "Cowards crawl Back" (Acholi, Uganda), "Sunjata" (Madinka; Gambia), etc.

With the emergence of increasing cosmopolitan setlement, the human community have continued to acquire more complexities in terms of human relation and the problem that man has to grapple with. Insuch contexts, wars have continued to assume more complex and more violent dimensions. This has to engage the attention and creative imagination of the literary artists. Hence, the themes of corruption, disease, deprivation and war have continued to dominate the attention of our writers. Their efforts have remained a vigorous disection , interrogation and reflection on the human situation with the ultimate goal of pointing a way out. No wonder, the literary writers are described as *the self appointed guardian of the public good* (Ajah 2010; 73). The body of literary works produced by the Nigerian civil war reflects the attitude of the contemporary times to war generally and their effects on the human condition. No wonder most of them are threnodic lamentative.

The Nigerian Civil War: A synopsis

To place the present assignment in proper perspectives, a brief historical account of the event that produced the Nigerian Civil War is germaine here. At the dawn of independence, achieved on a platter of gold in 1960, Nigeria embarked on her first experiment in democratic governance in what was the country's first republic. Within the first six years of this experiment, mishandling of our culturo-ethnic diversities by the Nigerians political leaders had created a lot of political and social tension. The crises in the western region of he country between Chiefs Awolowo and S.L. Akintola was a glaring example of the tormoilt that was later to grip the entire nation. The inability to manage the pocket of such political conflicts created general atmosphere of insecurity and tension which culminated in the first military intervention on January 15, 1966. This coup which was characterised by a lop-sided assasination of key political fugures of the northern and western Nigerian extraction only succeded in hightening the political tension which pervaded the Nigerian political climate before the coup. This led to a counter-coup in July, 1966 in which many eastern political and military leaders were killed. It was this retaliatory coup that brought Yakubu Gowon (a northerner) into power. The seed of tribal and ethnic suspicion in Nigeria had by now blossomed into full antagonistic fronts ready to charge at one another with little or no provocation. This situation confirmed Soyinka's view in *A Dance of the Forest* that Nigeria was only "*a gathering of tribes*",. In frustation, the Ibos of the eastern Nigeria demanded to seccede from Nigeria and therefore declared that section of the country " The Republic of Biafra" under the leadership of Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu. But, Nigeria under Gen. Yakubu Gowon would take none of that. The ensuing imbroglio led to the formal declaration of war between Nigeria and the 'Biafra Republic' in 1967. That war which lasted for 3 years came to be referred to as Biafra war in the political anals of Nigeria. The entire Country (especially the Eastern part) became a tortured landscape, bespattered with the blood of her own people. That war experience was what created the body of literature collectively referred to as the Nigerian war literature.

The Nigerian War Literature

The development narrated above, ushered in a new creative sensibility on the Nigerian literary scene. The

literary collective which drew their raw materials from the war is what is popularly referred to as the Nigerian civil war poety. For example, such prose works as Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*', Eddie Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General*, Achebe's *Girl at War*, Isidore Okpewho's *The last Duty*, Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* among others owe their thematic root to the Nigerian Civil War.

In this literary corpus the theme of dertruction became an engaging artistic concern. Our poets particularly found themselves in desperate search for the appropriate imagiries for elucidating the 'new' business of death going on in the land. The tone and contents of those poems were decidedly both sad and elegiac. Consequently, the pictures emerging from these poetic expressions are those of horror, death, destruction and agony. Commenting on the prevalent mood and style of these war poems, Funso Ayejina (1988) opines that

More than anything else, the Nigerian
Civil War has given rise to some
of the finest threnodists in
Nigerian poetry in English. (118)

For the purpose of this discourse, we shall closely consider war poems of three Nigerian poets, i.e Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe and J.P. Clark. Who did not only witness the war but were also active participants in it. In this connection, representative poems are taken from their war poetry collections.

Theme Tones and temper in Nigerian Civil War Poetry

It goes without saying that war, anywhere provides occassion for the perversion of human values, harvest of death, blind rage and incontinent destruction. The Nigerian Civil war was not an exception. Friends beccame foes, hatered replaced love and the once peaceful landscape is now deafened by strident wailing of killing bullets. It therefore is not surprising that most of the poems under consideration here are thematically focused on death, destruction, hatered and distrust. In terms of tone, these poems are largely threnodic lamentative and gripingly sorrowful. The Temper oscillates between outright anger and revulsion. We shall presently pick some of the sample poems of the three Poets under examination here and see how they have distilled the Nigerian experience through their poetic art.

Christopher Okigbo, although died during the war while fighting on the Biafra side, his poetry can be said to set the pace for the other civil war poetry in Nigeria. Before the war broke out, and taking his cue from the Socio-political crises in the country, he came out with his "Path of Thunder" in 1965. These Poems unambiguously prophesied the violent war that was later to engulf Nigeria.

In that colletion, Okigbo wrote with the clarity of a Priest poet who saw it all coming. In "Thunder can Break" for example, he saw Nigeria entering "*an iron chapter*" in its unfolding history and pronounces the damning prophesy of doom and gloom;

This day belongs to a miracle of thunder;
Iron has carried the forum
with token gestures. Thunder has spoken,
left no signature...
The arrows of God trembles at the gate of light
the drums of curfew pander to a dance of death
and the secrete thing in its heaving
threatens with iron mask
the last lighted torch of the century...

(Okigbo, 1971: 63;66)

The predominant images in the above excerpt are those of iron and thunder, both signifying violence. In the Yoruba cosmology, Iron is associated with 'Ogun', the patron god of war. It is an ambivalent deity capable of both destruction and construction. But, in this case, the negative connotation is foregrounded. To enter into an 'iron chapter' signifies war and violence. Thunder creates an atmosphere of violent clashes just like the rumbling of the thunder which comes at times with storm foretelling serious cataclysmic consequences. The impending war which can be likened to a gathering storm comes with myriads of possibilities. No wonder, Okigbo likens it to

A nebula immense and immeasurable
a night of deep waters-
An iron dream unnamed and
unprintable, a path of stone.

It must be noted that thunder, in Yoruba mythology is a cosmic representation of Sango- an eratic mythical hero-capable of wreaking immence carnage when enraged.

Okigbo in this apocalyptic collection is so engrossed with the waiting disaster, and as a seer poet, he carefully selects his figures, and imageries to call attention to the impending doom. Thus, in "Come Thunder", "Hurrah for Thunder" and "Elegy for Slit-drum", he persistently tells the people to "remember... the thunder/among the clouds" and cautions that:

The hunters (who) are talking about the pumpkins
if they share the meat,
let them remember thunder.
For, the thunder that struck the elephant
the same thunder can make a bruise. (67)

The import of this piece is that those who are instigating war and are luxuriating in the possibility of emerging victorious should exercise caution, for the outcome of war just like the thunder is not predictable. All are liable to being vanquished by it. He justifies this caution with a folkloric anecdote in "Elegy for Slit-Drum" where he tells the reader the tale of a jungle which was:

...peopled with snakes,
The snake says to the squirrel
I will swallow you
The Mongoose says to the snake,
I will mangle you
The Elephant says to the mangoose
I will strangle you...
Thunder fell, the tree cut a path
Thunder smashes them all. (70)

The jungle here was the Nigerian nation. The snakes, mangoose, squirrel and elephant are the Nigerian people at war with each other(the gladiators), and the thunder that struck was the war whose destruction was total. The choice of animal imageries is delibrate. This is a way of calling attention to the fact that human beings in a state of war have degenerated to the level of animals. It is worthy of note that Okigbo himself made the ultimate sacrifice during the war which he laboured so much, through his poetic medium, to avert.

The cautionary tone in Okigbo becomes overly lamentative in Clark's war poetry. Here, the dirge as an oral traditional poetic form is largely employed. The use of this poetry medium by Clark in this instatnce is quite justifiable within the context of the Aristotelian notion of Catharsis which Olu Obafemi (1992:7) has appropriated as the "purifying and regenerative potential of literature". The dirge tradition is common to most African communities. People engage in it at the death of dear ones to purge themselvrs of pent-up emotions and in the process assist them in tiding over their grief over such losses.

In the case of the Nigerian Civil War, the country on one hand, became a theatre of death, the landscape one tortured scene of drama of blind rage and carnage, a drama which prevented the Nigerian people from seeing or hearing each other as brothers. Mutual trust was replaced by mutual hatred and reciprocal vendetta. At anotheer level, Clark laments the death of his personal friends and associates who perished during the war. This duality of Clarks sorrow is summed up by Tayo Olafioye:

In many of his war poems, J.P. Clark bemoans
the condition of a Nigeria at war with itself.
He expresses personal sorrow for his close
friends as much as for his country as a whole.
(Olafioye Tayo, 1974: 210)

This duality of object of lament is expressed in the poem, "*Casualities*" where he cautions the readers against seeing only the dead as the victims of war; "the casualities are not only those who are dead." This in line provides the refrain for the first segment of the three parts poem with the listing of an array of victims of the war, i.e, "*the dead*", "*the wounded*", "*the dispossesed*", "*the imprisoned*", etc. To him, the dead are not even the casualties because "*they are well out of it*", it is the living who survive only to count the loss.

In the poem "*Song*" Clark mourns those friends he used to share "*everything*", "*bed*", "*wine*", "*tea*", etc with. Since they have all been wiped off by the war, he know he can not look at any one of them again.

I can look at the sun in the face
but the friends that I have lost
I dare not look at any.
(casualties 1970: 3)

In "Dirge", the anguish and lament assume more force. Here, the poet appears to have completely lost grip of his emotion and bursts out in tears-laden voice;

Show me a house where nobody has died,
Death is not what you connot undo
yet a son is killed and a
Daughter is given...
Let us charcoal the mad
cutter of the teak,
but let us not cut down
the Clan.

(casualties; 25)

The first line emphasizes the totality of the destructive nature of war and therefore cause for grief, but that is incomparable to the iminence of the extinction of the people if a dead son is only replaced by a daughter. This view is in tune with the phalocentric nature of the African society which prizes a male child well above a female. Clark war poems largely exploit traditional African lament mode, parables, and Folkloric tradition to bemoan a nation gone mad with itself. It also sublty emphasises the need for harmonious existence. Commenting on the success of Clark's art as tool for conflict resolution, Robert Wren (1984) offers:

Clark is entirely in accord with
tradition in thus adopting the folk tale
technique to political conflict. Satirical
application of proverbial tales to current
village affairs is ancient custom throughout
Southern Nigeria... (p. 132)

The lament dirge, wailings and furious indictments that marked the war poems of okigbo and Clark already discoursed assume a new dimension in Achebe's (1971) *Beware, Soul Brother*. In this collection, Achebe pays particular attention to the destitude condition of the people during the period. His efforts here are more of psycho-analysis of war and its aftermath on the human condition. He examines the question of moral justice which according to him, has been subverted by the absurd ethics of war.

The most poignant and lasting impression of human suffering presented in this collection is contained in the picture painted of the "*Refuge Mother and Child*" where the woman is seen showering much care on " a son she soon would have to forget," as a result of war-induced hunger and malnutrition. In this poem, Achebe laments the devotion of the mother to the child which she would soon lose to death. This care he sums up in the tarse but deeply agonising line; "putting flowers on a tiny grave."

In the opening poem, to the section of the collection devoted to the civil war, entitle "*the first shot*", reference is made to the "break of our season of thunders". What then follows is then left to the reader's imagination.

Also in '*Air Raid*' the poem opens on a sad and pensive note:

It comes so quickly
the bird of death
from evil forest of soviet technology

Technology, ordinarily ensure improved living standard of the modern man, but it becomes another thing when it emerges from the 'evil forest'. The poem closes on a sad note, when the '*bird of evil*" (i.e the bullet) from the forest emerges with breath-taking speed and claims a man's life in an innocent act of greeting a friend. The message here is quite unambiguous; war, a drama of death, brooks no social calls or warm human relation,it is a blind drama of death.

In "*Remembrance day*", Achebe warns the war survivors who engage in empty ceremonies of remenbrance of the dead (war victims), to remember and fear the upsurge of the anger of the dead who have been led to their early graves, for they are capable of returning to avenge their death on the living members of the society. According to Achebe, what is needed on the part of the living is not empty remembrance celebrations, but true repentance for all the acts that created the occasion for people's untimely death. He declares in a tone of alarm:

Therefore fear them! Fear their malice
your fallen kindred wronged in death.
Fear their blood-feud,
tremble for the day of their visit!
Flee! Flee! Flee! Your guilt palaces
and cities!
Flee! Lest they come and ransack
your place and find you still at home,
at the cross-road hour...
That day to nurse their red-hot
Hatred for another long year...

(Beware; p. 19)

In the African cosmic view, the cross-road is associated with Esu – the ambivalent diety – which is capable of doing good and evil. When mischevious, it creates, partakes and thrives on human confusion. The "cross-road hour" in this poem indicates the high moon when the sun is at its hottest or middle of the night- two periods when Esu is at its most active. If the dead are to visit, they will chose this period and connive with the malevolent Esu to wreak harvock on the living and instigate another blood-guzzling war or some other terrible disaster.

From the foregoing discussion, the poets under consideration have used their arts to explore the diverse themes of death, destruction, violence, human suffering, etc which are created by war. They are united in their verdict that in any human society, it is better to live in peace rather than resulting to war. We must quickly note that all

these poetic expressions are mere reactions to war and and its aftermath. The question now is; must our writers always wait for war to happen only to serve as mourners and undertakers of a destroyed humanity? This is taken up in the next segment of this discourse.

The Peace Literature

We take our que from Gikandi's (2001) view that writers are "the self-appointed guairdian of public good". If writers are thus regarded, will it be right for them to continue to act as mere Chroniclers of wars and its effects or as pro-active agents of war prevention via the promotion of peace literature? If they are to use their act to promote peace, how do they proceed?

The myriad of social, political, economic and even ideological tension besetting our contemporary world have often times led to violent clashes with unquantifiable human and material losses. The Rwanda pogrom, the genocidal conflicts in Liberia, politically motivated crisis in cote de voire, the politico-religious insurgency of Boko-Haram in the northern part of Nigeria etc define the face of ethno-political relations in most part of contemporary Africa. This new reality posses a new challenge for the writers in the present time. Now is the time for our literary artists to begin the campaign for the use of literature to promote peace. For instance, the social responsibility of the literary artist in promoting peace could be carried out through the chromiting of the historical facts of life of examplary personages like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jnr, Alafin Abiodun of old Oyo Kingdom, Bishop Desmond Tutu etc whose lives were lessons in peacefully effecting changes that would have otherwise created conflicts and violent clashes in their respective societies.

As part of the new literary challenge, writers of children literature should dwell more on the themes that emphasize peace and harmony. This can be done through deliberate choices of imageries, figures of speech, lexical items, etc which uphold peace as a core value of a civilized world. This will ensure a new generation that is psychologically aversed to crisis and violence. In this connection, folklores, lullabies, myths and such other cultural literary items which promote peace must be built into such literary tradition.

Our submission here is; if every epoch, if every human experience, if every human condition and situation produces its literature, must we continue to be treated to a literary orchestra loud with themes of violence, blood and death in our present world riddled with ideological, moral and ethical contradictions? Our response to this poser is a firm NO! Now it is time to produce a literature whose theme , tropes and tenor will stir up anti-war emotions in the reader. A literary tradition that is resolutely commited to the promotion of peace and harmony in a world gone mad with itself. Now is the time to use literature as a needle to sew the society's torn parts together, rather than as a knife to cut our humanity into seperate antagonistic parts,or as mere tearful laments and after-comments of post war tales of woe.

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