

War As A Theme In Fiction And Non-Fiction: The Example Of Nigerian-Biafra War

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Abstract

Wars exhibit man's inhumanity to man. This paper discusses war as a theme in a number of fictions and non-fictions. These sources show that wars create or cause social wounds which are difficult to heal. Particular attention is paid to the Nigerian-Biafra war.

Keywords: War as treated in fiction and non-fiction shows man's inhumanity to man.

For most people, there will be no end to this war. There will be no starting again or continuing from where they stopped. For those who are maimed this war will never have an end. For those who are dead, there will be no starting afresh. For those who are ruined, there will be no continuing from where they stopped...

Into the Heart of Biafra

By Catherine Acholonu

1. Introduction:

The above excerpt is the presentation of the situation during and at the end of the Nigerian civil war by a literary artist.

In her drama, Catherine Acholonu describes the Biafran experience. She traces the gruesome experiences of one family from the beginning to the end of the war. By the end of the war there was next to nothing left of a family of six at the beginning of the war. The former husband and wife who at the end of the war succeeded in recognizing each other could not however start life again as man and wife for the memories of their past were totally erased by the war. Coming together again would mean to hurt the wounds yet to be healed.

The woman has remarried in utter loss of hope of ever finding the members of her family. The human tendency to struggle to keep alive despite all odds helps her decision to remarry with the hope that "time with a magic wand will one day heal her wounds". But it is only time with a magic wand that can heal those wounds. Whether the wounds will ever get healed is a big question to answer.

The bitter experience was narrated by the woman to her former husband in a dialogue that ensued on their unexpected encounter at the end of the war:

Chume (former husband, a village chief conscripted into the army, now blind from the war): "Why couldn't you wait for me, for the war to end for us to start again like most people?"

Mona (The woman): "Chume. For most people there will be no end to this war..." (The excerpt).

Chume: "What of our children, Mona? ..."

Mona (weeping): "Ibe was conscripted into the army. I have never heard of him since. Oke joined the Boys Brigade to escape hunger. He was caught on their very first encounter with enemy soldiers... The baby,... hunger took him away from me. He died of kwashiorkor. And Kozuru. I lost her when they shelled Oguta..."

Chume: "Mona. You must come back to me. Together we shall start again".

Mona: "Start again". No, Chume. You shall, only be a permanent reminder. A life with you would be a second death. You must find your own way now, and leave me to my fate..."²

Though the characters in this drama are fictional the drama paints a true picture of war categories of individuals, whom we shall consider in this paper as "victims" of the war or in another literary artist's view, as "heroes" of the war, whose reintegration into the society requires reexamination.³

At the end of the drama, Chume, now a blind man from war accepts "marriage" with another maimed soldier, who hops onto his back and directs his way as they left Chume's former wife for an unknown destination. Mona, now left in her new home hopes that time with a magic wand would heal her wounds. She has lost everything.

Our aim in this paper is to look at the reintegration of the categories of the war "heroes" exemplified in the above excerpt, also the "children of war" at the different levels of social reality.

We would start with the contention that the social wounds of war have only been partially healed, and that the scars of the war will remain for as long as the war affected generation lives. For many people in the then Biafra, this war has not really ended.

In spite of the Federal Government's efforts at the four Rs (Reconciliation, reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reintegration) as soon as the war ended, war remains "hell" and what follows after the war is

worse than the war itself particularly for the vanquished. This was also the view of John Blashill reporting on the Nigerian civil war.⁴

The early days:

On the national level, the Federal Military Government tried to alleviate the sufferings of the people in the then Biafra as surrender was announced by the then Biafran 2nd in Command, Philip Effiong. General Gowon was quoted as saying:

Let us join hands to build a truly united and great nation...⁵

For him, there were no victors, no vanquished.

In spite of the good intentions of the Government to ensure peace and order at the immediate end of the terror, bad elements in the society went about their business. Countless incidents of rape and looting by victor Commandos were reported. The incidents of rape were so rampant and terrible that young girls made for the bush to escape conscription", their euphemism for rape.⁶

In the villages, parents waited impatiently for sons who went to war to return. Many mothers were deceived to believe that sons, who did not return after many days following the end of the war escaped with the "big master" into exile. In the village of this critic, which is nearest to the Onitsha sector of the war, some women who could not hold on emotionally died in utter loss of hope. Some men also gave up the ghost after some waiting. There were those who remained in the state of living which was worse than dying. Our people call it "òdi ndụ ọnwụ ka nma".

It took the community two years before they could summon up courage to organize a mass funeral ceremony for all those still missing at the end of the terror. The whole town mourned for four days. Without such funeral rites, there was the belief that those missing souls could never find repose.

At the community level, those departed souls were believed to have been sent to rest two years after the war. But the memories of the losses remain forever with the living. Lone sons, all or some sons, who went to fight were lost. The losses are a permanent hole in the heart that experienced them. This was also the view of Nwabikwu et al in their article in African Guardian of January 1989.⁷

These early days also witnessed some historic events in the villages near the Onitsha sector of the war than was ever known before. The victor soldiers were then occupying this critic's town and other neighboring villages. Hundreds of girls and young women went after the soldiers, befriended and married them under no native law and custom, for want of material comforts, which were lacking among the men of the vanquished side. Marriage between tribes was rare before this war and was never easily welcomed by people. A lot of such marriages took place at this time without the consent of most parents.

These early days also witnessed the handling of the case of those "Biafran" children who were hard hit by the war. Those were the children, who fell prey to the mal-nutritional killer of the war time, called kwashiorkor. Their case was handled at all levels of social reality. During the war, those children were evacuated for treatment and safe keeping to the Republics of Gabon and Ivory Coast, through the collaboration Organizations and Agencies. A few of these children were also sent to Europe. With the end of the war, the Government was faced with the task of arranging for the return of those children. The United Nations High Commission for refugees was invited to participate in negotiating their return. Gowon had earlier insisted upon making a reality of the then twelve States - structure by establishing some sort of administration even for the State which was primarily in rebellion. He appointed Mr. Ukpabi Asika, an Igbo as Administrator of the East Central State. As the negotiation for the return of the children who were sent out during the war was started, the International Union for Child Welfare (I.U.C.W.) was nominated by the Federal Government to arrange for the repatriation of the children to their parents after they had arrived at Nigerian Ports. Through the three State Governments, then (East Central, South Eastern and Rivers State), the I.U.C.W. negotiated and prepared five transit centres for the return of these children. The children began to arrive by air from November 1970 onwards. All of them arrived through Port-Harcourt before they were transferred to their States of origin. The last flight of the children arrived in March 1971. The relatives of the children were traced and the children handed over to them. But the whole process did not just go smoothly. A number of children could not be traced to their parents or relatives and were either placed in foster homes or in Government Welfare Institutions.⁸ The failure to get those children reunited with their families is already a big social problem to be faced by the society at large and any claim to their successful reintegration would be very unfair. A study was done on the above repatriation and rehabilitation programme fifteen years after the end of the war.⁹

In general, the immediate end of the war witnessed efforts by the Nigerian Government to ensure the termination of all forms of hostilities. All former Federal and Regional civil servants and staff of public corporations were told to report to the nearest district office, where they received one month's salary advance and were sent on six weeks' leave.

Although the above successes were recorded, the scars of the wounds still remain to remind the affected individuals about the tragic experiences. Many reports one and two decades after the war testify to this.¹⁰

The later days:

Two decades and more after the end of the war, our disabled war veterans stay displaced on wheel chairs on highways. They spend the days from morning till evening on highways and this appears very much to be the best distraction they have chosen. In his article in *African Concord* of July, 21, 1987, O. Balogun narrated the plight of these war victims, also as seen by some of them. He wrote,

For thousands of people who came out of the civil war the same way as Anselem and Sylvester (maimed soldiers interviewed), Biafra, even though its sun set years ago, has remained a living horror. Since the end of the war, they have been sitting and wishing, watching their hopes tick away with the hands of the clock... some are settled at Oji River Centre others at the Marist Rehabilitation Centre, Hopeville Catholic Mission, Uturu... it has not been possible for these people to clear their memories of the war out of their minds...

The chairman of "Biafran" disabled soldiers at Oji River has this to say, "It is we in this condition that keep remembering the war..."¹¹ In the same article was also narrated the continuing effect of the war on the Effiong family because of Philip Effiong's involvement in the war decades ago. The Effiong family faced continuous discriminatory actions even from fellow tribesmen. Even the Hopeville Rehabilitation Centre established for the rehabilitation of war victims is reported to be a monument of neglect decades after the war. It lacked the basic facilities to operate and the supposed inmates of the Centre said to be a routine sight on the Okigwe-Afikpo road where they solicit alms.¹²

Twenty years after the war, the plight of mothers and their children who are rightly called "kids of battle" was also narrated.¹³ Those were the children who were born from "marriages" of convenience between Federal soldiers and "Biafran" women. One of the victims narrated how, when her village fell to the Federal troops, she was forcibly taken away from her home and kept in a camp. There she agreed to marry one of the federal soldiers in order to save her life. Before the war ended, she had two babies for the man whose only first name she simply gave. The husband survived the war and a third child came in September 1974 while the couple was still in Port-Harcourt. But six months later, he left the family and nothing had been heard of or from him ever since. The woman had to struggle to bring up the children alone. There was also the case of two children named Rotimi and Olatokunbo, who were being raised by their mother alone somewhere in Imo State. She had no answer for her children as to the whereabouts of their father. Studies have indicated many such cases. The major problem observed is that those children carry a heavy burden in many parts of Igboland where they are regarded as outcasts and treated as such. There can be no better illustration of the scars that remain unhealed. The process of reintegration is therefore far from being complete.

Seen also as a scar that cannot heal is the issue of "Abandoned Property". Decades saw three government panels and a special "Abandoned Property" committee and passion still run high over the issue of houses, plantations, farmlands and other immovable property left by the Igbo in some parts of the country at the onset of the civil war.¹⁴ Sam Ikoku was quoted as sometime saying that the problem of rehabilitation in many spheres of the society is another classic disease of government's good ideas and sound policies ruined in the process of implementation.¹⁵ Therefore, the fact that, while efforts were made at the Federal level to rehabilitate the Igbo and to reintegrate them with the mainstream of the society and an issue like "Abandoned Property" still remained a perennial problem showed again the incompleteness of the reintegration process. For many victims of the "Abandoned property", who are still living (some have since died without enjoying the fruits of their labour as a result of war) "there is no end to the war and there is no starting from where they stopped", they are ruined for life like many others.

2. Theatre as a war cry

The Greek dramatist Euripides and the German playwright Brecht used their theatres as war cries. Euripides' *Trojan Women* (Mack et al, 1973:443); and Brecht's *Mother Courage* (Esslin: 1980) among others are cries against wars and their evil effects just like Acholonu's *Into the Heart of Biafra* and some other works on the Nigerian/Biafra war. In Euripides' and Brecht's, death scenes are displayed in different forms. Affected characters dialogue, express normal war-time emotions and end up more devastated than assuaged. Messages of war in Brecht's and Euripides' plays are universal and call for reaction from every society. In Euripides' women

are battered and broken-hearted, tortured into slavery. The widowed Hecuba, Andromache with her little son brutally murdered, Cassandra driven to madness, all paint realistic pictures about war. Even the victorious soldiers were dealt with by those they fought for. In Murray's words, *The Trojan Women by Euripides* "...is only the crying of one of the great wrongs of the world wrought into music" (Murray, 1915:1). The picture painted in the action of this play is as ancient as it is modern. Today, in many parts of the world, cities are burnt like the city of Troy because of war. People are massacred, rendered homeless and taken prisoners of war. Euripides took his pen as a sword to fight the evil that happened before his age and, was still happening during his time. Brecht foresaw the final holocaust of the *Second World War* and wrote his *Mother Courage* between 1938 and 1939. Brecht's plays are food for thought for his audience. Brecht's *Mother Courage*, whom he tries to paint bold is battered and driven to madness at the loss of her last child. She lost three children to the war. She simply becomes a living dead. *Mother Courage*, seen as a scavenger, is an example of those who think they can make gain from war, but they end up as losers. War is the result of conflict of interests, where materialism is equated with violence. Fought for either political or religious reasons, wars and war-mongers rope different people in and consume lives and material resources. Though Brecht's and Euripides' are fictions they are based on historical events of their societies just like Acholonu's.

Summarily put, the social wounds of war are hard to heal. History really shows that man has learned nothing from the past as far as war experiences are concerned.

3. Concluding remarks:

The then "Biafran" Second-in-Command, Philip Effiong once said, that "war does not pay either the victor or the vanquished". Both sides sustain losses that can never be regained.

If reintegration simply means the proclamation of one Nigeria, a nation undivided, then we have achieved much success. At the community level, people have worked and continue to work hard to reconstruct and to develop their communities with or without government aids. Individuals have worked hard to get life going for them with little or no help from the government. In all parts of the country, there is full awareness of the reality of Nigeria as one indivisible nation. The success of the reintegration efforts for many Igbo is however not simply measured by "a welcome-back-to-the-mainstream" wishes to them the vanquished. There are problems among those people that the literary artist Festus Iyayi refers to as 'heroes'¹⁶. Decades after the war, echoes of war cries did not die down. The "heroes" of the war continue to languish from neglect. Those who lost dear ones continue their lament; the soldiers who were maimed continue to suffer their fate and the rehabilitation efforts for them is as good as failed, when staying on wheel chairs on Expressways became their only distraction. Both on the winner's and on the loser's sides, thousands of soldiers, the "heroes" of the war were demobilized, dismissed, retired, or just plain forgotten and their tears remain unheard.¹⁷ The children of war, whose efforts to know their fathers failed, would for ever live to blame the society that gave them life. To live in a society as an outcast is the worst social evil that man can experience. For the mothers of those children, the war will never have an end. For those living Igbo, whose life sweat was tagged "Abandoned Property", the whole issue of reintegration remained a farce. We can go on and on adding legions of suffering individuals and groups for whom Gowon's initiative at the four Rs was not realized, and finally, the basic principle for fighting the war, the vices against which the war was fought remain deep seated in our national life. We are yet to learn lessons from the war.

In many Northern States of Nigeria individuals particularly teachers secured teaching appointments decades after the war on contract grounds. They worked as expatriates in their own country. Some Igbo families in the North, where members were on Federal appointments went back to their States of origin because of the above situations. This writer has relatives, who were thus affected. In one of the cases, the man was lecturing in a Federal University in the North while the woman was a school teacher in the same place. They had to come back, because they did not see how one of them should put in a life's service to her nation without a reward of pension when she retires. The home State has since offered the said victim and others of similar fate teaching appointments on humanitarian grounds at the time when the chances for such appointments were as good as nil.

There is the distaste of the relatively new jargon in the country known as the "Nigerian factor". This jargon is an old wine in a new wine skin. In his summary of the lessons from the Nigerian civil war Amechi Umeorah has this to say,

... The lesson of the civil war is that if Nigeria is to survive as a nation, Nigerians must transfer their loyalty from the tribe to the nation...¹⁸

In his own analysis of the war, Joseph Okpaku has this to add on the present challenges that Nigeria faces in her development into a strong nation:

The continuation of ethnic favours without regard to competence and qualification is another threat to the well-being and stability of the country. This situation exists in practically all echelons of the society... Nigeria shall have fought a war of unity in vain if qualified scholars are passed over in favour of less qualified or even untrained individuals because such scholars are not whatever ethnic qualification is required...¹⁹

The above excerpts contain in a nutshell the problems that Nigeria faces in her ambition to develop as a strong nation. The struggle for the ideals that make up "unity" continues. The struggle for integration and reintegration continues. Our suggestion is, that for those victims, those heroes for whom the war continues, the reintegration should include distractions that would as much as possible make them not to dwell on the thoughts about their scars. As was pointed out in the article by Nwabikwu et al in the African Guardian of January 1989, "memories of war can never be absolutely erased but they could be made irrelevant".²⁰

The literary artist's analysis of the war and its end is therefore the view that is recurrent in stories and articles on the Nigerian civil war several years after the end of the war. Only "time with a magic wand" can bring the reintegration to a 100% success. This is because Nigeria as a nation still fails to realize the herculean task of healing the social wounds of war before her. The 2nd decade of the new millennium still records utterances and actions of the then Biafrans on pages of national dailies indicating incomplete integration of the Igbo into the Nigerian affairs. One example is the continued movement of the MASSOB. When Nigeria does away with terms like Federal character in an area like job selection and emphasize competence and merit, we would realize that she has been born as a united nation. All tribes do not have to be represented in every Federal Government Programme for there to be success. Nigeria could only develop and progress if posts are given to people who are competent in the jobs irrespective of their ethnic background.

Acholonu, Euripides, and Brecht, among others have clearly shown the futility of war. This futility of war is brought out by Euripides when Poseidon and Athena engage in a dialogue at the beginning of the play. Athena says, "on my part: I wish to make my Trojan foes rejoice and give the Greeks a bitter Homecoming" (Mack et al: 445). Reacting to Brecht's *Mother Courage*, McBride says that Brecht wants us to see that war makes criminal out of everyone...even mothers (Murray, 1915:2). At the end of the Nigerian/Biafra war, Gowon declared "no victor no vanquished". People were mothered in vain in these wars both real and fictional.

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