

Nigerian Novelists: Chronicles of the Nigerian Civil War

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Abstract

*In many instances, historical and political events during the Nigerian civil war have generated several literary works of repute. The civil war ended in 1970 and within the next decade or two the Nigerian literary scene witnessed the publication of numerous works of poetry, drama, and especially fiction such as Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War* (1972) Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1965), Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973), J.P. Clark's *Casualties* (1968), and Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* (1970) based on the events of war and its aftermath. This article on the topic is galvanized by the studying of these different authors and reflecting on their portrayal of the civil war. The paper examines Nigeria Civil War and Nigerian Novelist by exploring the narratives of some of these novelists on the Civil War as well as the role of the Nigerian Novelists during and after the civil war through post-colonial and new historicism theoretical preoccupations. Even though different scholars have written on the Nigerian civil war, there is still a paucity of studies on the significant roles of Nigerian novelists during and after the*

war. This study, therefore, hopes to explore the different narratives of some of the Nigerian novelists on the Nigerian Civil War, bringing out the evils and the dire consequences of the civil war while providing readers with the knowledge needed to make sense of the country's current events and political climate to prevent another ugly situation from occurring.

Key words: Nigerian Civil War, Novelists, New Historicism, and Post-colonial

Introduction

The civil war, a fratricidal conflict that claimed thousands of lives, produced the largest body of literary works of any historical or political event in Nigeria's turbulent history. Ezeigbo (1991). Udeze, E. (2015) estimates that “since the war ended over 200 materials in different genres of literature by Nigerians and foreigners have been produced” (92). After the civil war was over in 1970, several works of poetry, drama, and especially fiction that were based on the events of the war and its aftermath were published in Nigeria. Some artists recreated the war experienced by using extra-realistic forms such as the parabolic and mythic modes. For instance, Kole Omotoso published his ideological novel *The Combat* (1973), and Wole Soyinka also wrote *Season of Anomy* (1973) which adopts a mythological perspective. It was also about this time that the first Nigerian detective novels and thrillers like Adaora Lily Ulasi's *Many Thing You No Understand* (1970) and *Many Thing Begin For Change*, Eddie Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* were published, representing the writer's subjective interpretation of the war experience. This extraordinary and pervasive experimentation with form may have been the direct result of the unprecedented increase in the number of people who started to write and publish creative work at the end of the war. Quite a number of them had fought actively (on the Biafran side) as young army officers or intelligence officers during the war.

These writers have come to be referred to by critics as the second/third generation of Nigerian writers and they include successful authors like Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*, Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, Eddie Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General*, Kalu Okpi's *The Warriors*, Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, Adaora Lily Ulasi's *Many Thing Begin For Change*, Cyprian Ekwensi's *Divided we Stand*, Flora Nwapa's *Never Again*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree*, Anthonia Kalu's *Broken Lives*, Alfred Obiora Uzokwe's *Surviving in Biafra: The*

Story of the Nigerian Civil War, and a host of others. This work, therefore, is an attempt to explore the tragic experiences and discourses on the war by these Nigerian Novelists.

Theoretical Framework

As a theory, post-colonial and new historicism is skeletal upon which the interpretive analysis of this study is based. The main aim of post-colonial theory is the continuing impact of histories of colonialism by documenting the varied effects of relations of power structure in the formation of identities while new historicism preoccupies with understanding intellectual history through literature, and literature through its cultural context. According to Julie Mullaney (2010):

The “postcolonial” in postcolonial writing thus amplifies the nature of its wider cultural work, how it interrogates the past and present operation of historical forces and dominant ways of reading them that underscore local, national and international identities. (7)

Therefore, post-colonial writers use history as a tool to reflect on their past experiences. Similarly, Nigerian novelists have reflected on this past - the Nigerian Civil War- in their literary works. They fictionalize the history of the civil war to accommodate the question of conflict and internal strife in Nigeria. The issues of identity woven around the war history are central to Nigerian – Biafran historical living experiences in the selected texts.

Mullaney's (2010) *Post-Colonial Literature in Context* submits that the notion of post-colonial literature aligns with the continued implications of histories of colonialism. It also preoccupies with documenting the varied effects of relations of power structure in the formation of identities. In her words:

Just as the spread of European colonialism across the continent was often violent and uneven, the project come out of decolonization and the after-colonial nation-building has been erratic and traumatic. After the independence from colonial authority, the trials of African nations since independence are often marked by bloody civil wars, military rule, dictatorship, ethnic conflict and genocide, prolonged by continuing social inequalities are critical to an understanding of the social issues facing Africans now. (13)

It reflects how the problems faced by Africans directly impact the people as seen in their violent disrespect and misbehaviour.

The theory contends that the reader's and the writer's interpretations determine whether a historical account is accurate. This assumption is based on how little is said about the history of the losers. Presumably, only the super powers have the means to record stories. This occurred

both in Libya and in Iraq during the US-led invasion. The US, which controls the most influential media outlets and publishing companies, is the source of all information that has been shared with the public. However, the Nigeria-Biafra history has shown that more than the history of the dominating or the victor, the history of the loser may also be heard. Because it clarifies the struggle and perhaps explains why there is an ongoing movement for Biafra, readers are more interested in the stories of the vanquished than the winners. They might have propagated their stories in the guise of various discourses even though they may not have published their stories as official records or texts.

In the case of the Nigerian-Biafran War, the novelists on the side of Biafra (the supposed loser) have chronicled the events of the war as well as the novelists from the Federal Government of Nigeria (the perceived winner). More novelists have emerged from the Biafran side thereby making the voice of the losers more audible than the voice of the winners. Although the Federal Government declared a situation of “no victor, no vanquished” at the end of the war, it is apparent that the war was won and lost. The new historicists would want to hear all the stories and recognise all the voices of both the winners and the losers.

Moreover, the new historicists, on the other hand, contend that there has never been and will never be a singular history or viewpoint. Instead, a variety of narratives combine to form a full cultural relationship. According to some new historicists, powerful groups and classes pushed the idea of a homogenized culture as a means of preserving their interests. New historicists look for sources that were neglected in the past due to concentration on obtaining an overarching explanation of a period's practices and products since they are aware that New Historicists contend that there has never been and will never be a singular history or viewpoint. Instead, a variety of narratives combine to form no single discourse can describe the intricacies of any event or artefact.

Their submission has sparked interest in the stories of marginalized individuals and drawn some criticism for how much credence they give to non-mainstream sources. The mission of the new historicists is crucial because people learn who they are through the tales they tell about themselves. Limited comprehension of what and how ideologies operated and interacted to construct individual and group identities would result from hearing only the narratives of the dominant groups and disregarding others who have helped mould humanity. It is on this note that

this study seeks to appraise the Nigerian civil war through the chronicles of different novelists to establish the through narratives of the Nigerian-Biafran Civil war.

Nigerian Civil War In Literature

Younger generations of writers are continuing to write about the history of the war decades after it has finished, experimenting with new methods, themes, and approaches. For this reason, according to Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, writing about the history of the war will never stop. According to her, historical events will always serve as a source of inspiration for writers, even those who will not be alive today. In their paper "The Nigerian-Biafran War: Post-Colonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide," Heerten Lase and Moses A. Dirke claim that the conflict is commonly considered a turning point in the post-colonial world order. They point out that academics have published widely on the several concerns raised by the Nigerian-Biafran War.

They argue that because an artificial famine was used as a weapon against the Biafrans during the Nigerian-Biafran War, it qualifies as genocide. However, they are aware that two of the top researchers on genocide in Africa, Leo Kuper and Robert Melson, observed the war and came to important conclusions regarding the nature of genocide, thereby excluding the event from the canon of twentieth-century genocide. They also pointed out that in his memoir *There Was a Country*, Chinua Achebe, a well-known author who served as the Biafran ambassador during the war, highlighted the issue of possible genocide in the Biafran struggle. Adding that "another famous Nigerian author, Wole Soyinka, whose imprisonment during the war by the Federal Military Government is chronicled in his novel, *The Man Died*, concurred that Biafrans had indeed been victims of genocide even though he did not support the Biafran Secession (170).

Iniobong I. Uko is another writer on the Nigerian civil war. In her chapter "Of War and Madness: A Symbolic Transmutation of the Nigeria-Biafra War in Selected Stories from the Insider" (Uko, 2008), she writes that "the defective healing process of the wounds on the Nigerian Psyche from the war has resulted in an extensive gulf between the people of the defunct Biafra and Nigeria" (49). She claims that the fiction about the conflict, which is mostly written by academics and intellectuals from Eastern Nigeria, particularly the Igbo who suffer the hardest, vividly portrays how the Biafrans were treated before and during the war. She believes that the Nigerian Civil War and Madness share a deep symbolic connection. The author compares "The Madman," a short fiction by Chinua Achebe, to the Nigerian Civil War.

Nwibe loses the right to use the title "ozo" after being identified as insane and receiving treatment for it, she says. If he had been given his proper place in society, he could have become a little bit calmer. Decades after the Biafran War, Uko notes that "the Igbo are hardly fully accepted and integrated into the national fabric" (52). However, they are driven to work hard and succeed to overcome all challenges and find acceptance in society because they possess a strong will, are persistent, and are ambitious. Numerous fictional accounts of the Nigerian Civil War, according to the author, "stress that the proper healing and development of the brutalized Nigerian mind and spirit, as well as the land, will continue to be an illusion" as long as the war "remains a potent source of outrage, inter-ethnic hatred, discrimination, and intense nepotism" (58).

According to Ogaga Okuyade, not even the historical occurrences from the dark days of colonial authority can compare to the historical happenings of the Nigerian Civil War. He agrees that numerous writers, including Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emencheta, Festus Iyayi, Isidore Okpewho, Chimamanda Adichie, and so many others were influenced by the war, putting them in the spotlight of the African literary landscape. Okuyade adds that it is not surprising that the Nigerian Civil War has drawn the attention of critics, researchers, and authors. Okuyade adds that it is not surprising that the Nigerian Civil War has drawn the attention of critics, researchers, and authors. This, in his opinion, is because wars have historically served as a fertile ground for artistic expression. Because of the numerous problems, the continent is experiencing, literature is destined to flourish there. In addition to the sun and moon, he adds that "crisis is one thing Africa and Nigeria, in particular, have in abundance" (324). Given the constant violence the nation is known for—the Nigerian Civil War, the Niger Delta Crisis, multiple kidnapping cases and ethnic confrontations, religious violence, and the deadly Boko Haram insurgency—this is the case.

However, the total trauma of fatalities, sufferings, and losses the nation faced during those tough times preoccupies both creative authors and academics in their contributions to the constantly expanding body of Nigerian War Literature. Discourses on Nigerian war literature rarely address aesthetics due to their sombre undertone. Most discussions of Nigerian war literature focus on important thematic concerns to enlighten the next generation about how to avoid the three years of the civil war, which would have been unpleasant but preventable. This study, therefore, in addition to exploring the effort of Nigerian novelists in chronicling the trauma that underlies the

Nigerian Civil War, also, looks at how some of the writers synergise their arts and experiences of the civil war as a significant step towards the politicization of the Nigerian literary imagination.

The Nigerian Civil War: A Background Study

After independence, there was tension among the ethnic groups in Nigeria, which was compounded by political disagreement. One of the issues arose during the 1965 law and order that had broken down in the western part of Nigeria. Despite the presence of troops, it was no longer safe to walk the streets by day or night. And so, on 15 January 1966, a group of young army officers, led by Major Chukwuna Kaduna Nzeogwu, staged a coup d'état, killing leading politicians. Among them are the Sarduana of Sokoto, Tafawa Balewa, leader of the North; Chief Samuel Akintola, leader of the West; Chief Okotie- Eboh, and a Minister (Ezeigbo, 1991). Nzeogwu and his group, not having any real control of the country, soon surrendered to General Aguiyi-Ironsi who became Head of State. In the East, no politicians were killed. This gave rise to the suspicion that the coup was an Igbo bid for power (Ezeigbo, 1991).

On the 24th of May, 1966, Gen Aguiyi-Ironsi broadcast Decree No 34, abolishing the Regions and placing the country under a unitary government. This was seen by the North as giving the Igbo, who at that time had more educated and highly placed officers in the federal service, an undue advantage. The North reacted violently and thousands of Igbo were killed in the region. In July 1966, another coup led by Northern army officers overthrew Gen. Ironsi and Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon became Military Head of State.

Lt. Col. Gowon's rise to the post of Nigerian Head of State on 1st August 1966 in place of Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi, was strongly disputed by Lt. Col. Emeka Ojukwu because Gowon was not the most senior Nigerian in the Armed Forces. Consequent to the widespread riots in the North in May and the large-scale killing of Ibo-speaking people outside the Eastern Region after the July 29 country coup, there was a mass exodus of Ibos back to their homeland to put a stop to the killings and restore stability in the country. An ad-hoc conference of the representatives from the four Regions was summoned to take place in Lagos on 9th August 1966. The conference met and made some useful recommendations.

Decree No. 24 was formally nullified at this conference. A second bigger ad-hoc conference for framing a new Nigerian constitution was summoned for September 1966. But while it was still in session, more killings of Igbos were reported in the Northern Region and the conference broke up without achieving any tangible results. It was at this juncture that a friendly neighbour,

General Ankarah, the Ghanaian Head of State, invited the disputants to a roundtable conference at Aburi in Ghana. Lt. Col. Gowon, Lt. Col. Ojukwu, and other military governors, accompanied by some aides, attended the conference on January 4 and 5, 1967. Some important decisions were taken at this conference but different interpretations adopted by Lagos and Enugu on the return of the participants worsened, rather than, improved the situation. Lt. Col. Gowon enacted Decree No. 8 on 17th March 1967 which many people thought was a generous attempt to meet Lt. Col. Ojukwu's wishes, but the latter rejected the Decree flatly.

When Lt. Col. Ojukwu eventually seized Federal Government property in the Eastern Region, the Federal authorities were convinced that Lt. Col. Ojukwu was irrevocably committed to secession. So, on 29th May 1967, the 12 states' structure of the country was announced by Lt. Col. Gowon. Ojukwu's reaction was swift. Three days later, Lt. Col. Ojukwu announced the secession of his Region from the Federation to form a new nation called "Biafra". The Nigerian Civil War became inevitable and it started at 5 am on 6th July, 1967 when federal troops crossed the then North-Eastern state border near Gakem and swept on to Obudu and Ogoja. Another troop began to work its way through Ogugu and Ogurugu with Nsukka town as its objective.

Were the Biafrans caught by surprise? Certainly not. As disclosed by General Obasanjo in his memoirs, *My Command*, preparation for the war on the rebel side was put into high gear as soon as troops of non-Eastern Region origin withdrew from Enugu in August 1966. The training was embarked upon both for officer cadets who were mainly lecturers and students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and for other recruits, mostly civilians. The training plan even at this stage envisaged an all-out war. Lt. Col. Ojukwu, in an address to the National Conciliation and Peace Committee in Enugu in May 1967, as quoted in Onabanjo Sanya's *Glimpses into Nigerian History* (1983), had boasted that: "I am proud and my officers are proud that here in the East, we possess the biggest Army in Africa" (37).

Nevertheless, the Federal troops captured their first phase target within a short time, even though Nsukka, the intellectual bastion of the rebellion, fell as early as 14 July 1967. One of the important casualties of the Nsukka war front was Chukwuma Nzeogwu who had been detained in Enugu prison by Ojukwu after July 1966 coup and deployed as a field commander against the federal troops when the civil war broke out. His body was removed and buried in Kaduna by Lt. Co. Gowon's order. There was a little lull after the fall of Nsukka, but on 9th August 1967, a

new development took place. The 'rebel' forces suddenly invaded the Mid-West region. Fredrick Forsyth (1977) in his book, *The Biafra Story*, asserts:

Starting at dawn, a mobile brigade of 1,000 men they had carefully prepared in secret, swept across Onitsha Bridge into the Mid-West. In ten hours of daylight Warri, Sapele, the oil centre at Ugheli, Agbor, Uromi, Ubiaja, and Benin City were occupied. (45)

Who conceived and executed this wonder victory? The scheme was conceived by Lt. Col. Ojukwu in conjunction with a very enigmatic man; Lt. Col. Victor Banjo. Lt. Col. Banjo had been detained in Enugu prison along with Nzeogwu and Ifeajuna for his alleged complicity in the January 1966 coup. When Lt. Col. Ojukwu released the coup leaders, he released Lt. Col. Banjo also. But while the others stayed in official quarters in Enugu, Lt. Col. Banjo stayed with Lt. Col. Ojukwu in the state House and a close relationship developed between the two. Lt. Col. Banjo was made the commander of the Mid-West operation, the planning of which was not even disclosed to Lt. Col. Hilary Njoku, the then-Biafran Army Commander.

No sooner had Lt. Col. Banjo captured Benin in the morning of the invasion day than he began to behave queerly. Instead of exploiting his initial advantage of surprise and speed mobility, he stayed on in Benin for three whole days for no known reason. However, the reason became known afterwards. According to Madiebo (2000:15) in his book *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, Banjo was holding 'daily meetings with the British Deputy High Commissioner in Benin'. When summoned to return to Enugu for consultations, Lt. Col. Banjo refused to go. He had plans to march on to Ibadan and Lagos. General Obasanjo relates in his book, *My Command* how Banjo sent a clandestine message to him at Ibadan, pleading with him to yield the Western region to him.

Perhaps Lt. Col. Banjo was no longer mentally sound. Madiebo (2000). Perhaps it was a case of obsessive political ambition. However, time was running out for him. When the 'rebel' forces got to Ore on the Benin-Lagos Road, the Federal Army Headquarters woke up to the danger and sent a brilliant commander, the late Gen. Murtala Muhammed, then a colonel, with a newly formed army group to the Mid-West to deal with the situation. Col. Murtala Muhammed quickly turned the tide of the war, cleared the rebels from Ore, recaptured Benin, and swept on triumphantly to Asaba.

Lt. Col. Victor Banjo did return to Enugu eventually, the night before Benin fell to the Federal troops. A few days after his return he was arrested by Lt. Col. Ojukwu's order and charged along with Majors Ifeajuna, Alele, and Samuel Agbau for plotting to subvert the Biafran Government. They were executed in Enugu on 24th September 1967. After this spectacular Mid-West episode, the war continued on a see-saw course for another two years and three months. After making three abortive attempts to cross the River Niger at Asaba to capture Onitsha, the Federal forces 'abandoned the idea of an opposed river crossing, crossed the Niger at Idoh instead in January 1968 and, approaching Onitsha by this longer route, captured it on 23 March 1968.

In the southern sector, the 3 marine commandos under the brilliant command of Col. Benjamin Adekunle, nicknamed the 'Black Scorpion', were slogging away capturing rebel strongholds in the Delta area one by one. Bonny had already fallen on 27 July 1967, Calabar fell on 18 October 1967 and Port Harcourt fell on 19 May 1968. But it was not a walk-over by the Federal forces. Owerri which had been captured by them on 16 September 1968, the 16 Federal Brigade trapped there had to be supplied by air drops for six weeks until 25 April 1969 when, in the night, the Brigade successfully conducted a withdrawal, carrying with them the body of their dead commander.

But with the Biafran enclave reduced to only a tiny fraction of its former mass, the outcome of the war was never in doubt. After nine or more months of hopeless struggle, Lt. Col. Ojukwu eventually called it quits, handed the government over to Lt. Col Philip Effiong took a plane, and flew out to live in exile in the Ivory Coast. On Monday, 12 January 1970, Lt. Col. Philip Effiong broadcast a message to the Biafran troops to lay down their arms. Two days later, the formal surrender of the Biafran army and government was officially conducted at Dodan Barracks in Lagos. The 12 states' structure was fully operational throughout the Federation and Biafran ceased to exist. With this, an important chapter in Nigerian history came to a close.

The Role of Nigerian Novelists

Novelists are literary scholars that specify prose as a genre of literature. Unlike writers in other genres of literature, novelists fraternize with both fiction and non-fiction as raw material for their artistic creativity. Literature itself is like a phenomenon applicable to the generality of the human race. Nigeria as a country is not left out in this scenario. However, as long as there is the existence of Nigerian Literature, of which Nigerian novel is a major integral part, there is bound to be practitioners who are known as Nigerian Novelists. Literature influences and it is

influenced by the happenings in the society. That explains why many scholars see literature as the mirror of society artistically rendered in words and in a manner that is artistically pleasing and entertaining, to elucidate the human condition. Madubuike, I. (2015). Hence, the function of Nigerian novelists is to mirror society vis-à-vis the happening (whether past-history-present or future). Taking this into cognizance, we can therefore describe the novelists as the stethoscope and barometer to test, view and mirror society and improvise on these facts via their artistic principles to suit and achieve what (messages) they intend to pass across to the larger society (especially the readers). Meanwhile, those facts may be political issues, economic or socio-cultural issues.

Moreover, the artistic principles the novelists often deploy deal with the way facts are transformed through the use of images, diction, creation of characters, etc. to capture the ideology or occurrences in a given society. Logically, the aims of the novelists for performing those super flow responsibilities are to inform, teach, correct, and entertain their readers in all human endeavours, which cut across politics, economy, and socio-cultural settings. More so, a novelist is usually concerned with the recording of the happenings in society in its confrontation with either good or bad.

Therefore, to be familiar with Nigerian literature in the period between 1970 and the present is to be conversant with one dominant and recurrent area of social concern: the Nigerian civil war (1967- 70). This dominance is so pronounced that it can be argued that in the growing body of Nigerian national literature, works directly based on or indirectly deriving from the war experience constitute the largest number of literary productions on any single aspect of Nigerian history to date Udeze, E. (2015). A rough count reveals over six titles spanning the three conventional forms of literature. And given the statistical dominance of the Nigerian civil war could well be said to be the single most imaginatively recreated historical experience in Africa so far. Okuyade, O. (2016).

Nigerian Civil War fiction brings to mind such relatively familiar titles as Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1965), Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973), Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War* (1972), J.P. Clark's *Casualties* (1968), Kole Omotosho's *The Combat* (1970), I.N.C. Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice* (1974), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Divided We Stand* (1980), Eddie Iroh's *Toads of War* (1979), Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976), Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975), Anthonia Kalu's *Broken Lives and Other*

Stories (2003), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country* (2012), Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), and Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* (1986).

This literary output can be attributed to the fact that social experience is the primary source of literature. More specifically, we can attribute the rich literary harvest to the age-long relationship between literature and war. War, as the most logical means of setting inter-communal and international disputes, offers the opportunity for the display of heroism as well as the infliction of great pain and death. Because war puts the greatest pressure on human nature, relationships, and institutions, it becomes also a fertile ground for the literary imagination. Thus, the Trojans war, the Thirty years war, the Spanish civil war, the American civil war, the Mau-Mau war, etc. each has generated a distinctive body of literature appropriate to its time, place, and socio-historical circumstances. Therefore, Nigerian civil war literature (fiction) belongs to a global tradition of war literature. But it displays peculiar thematic and stylistic features which reveal not only the specificity of the Nigerian experience but also the human aspect of that dark chapter in Nigerian history which ordinarily historical accounts are not equipped to reveal.

Following the series of political travails of the immediate post-colonial era (the early 1960s), Nigerian literature (fiction) became so critical of the political life of the country that a certain "War consciousness" had become manifest in the literary imagination of Nigerian authors by the mid-1960s. With the outbreak of hostilities in 1967, the reality of war and its attendant social dislocations became an integral part of the Nigerian experience. Accordingly, most of the established writers like Achebe, Okpara, Ekwensi, Soyinka, and Okigbo were drawn into one form of active involvement or the other. These involvements and the overall experience of war were to yield the literary harvest that we have since witnessed.

As a body of historically conditioned literature, Nigerian civil war literature (fiction) acquires distinctiveness both at the level of theme and technique. In terms of theme(s), the literature in question raises fundamental questions about the society that preceded the war and those values which made the war inevitable in the first place. These questions centre on the problem of elite leadership, inter-class and intra-class relationships ethnic heterogeneity, external involvement in the war as well as the state of private and public morality in a war situation (Uko, I. I, 2008).

Consequently, most writings on the war share a critical, even condemnatory stance towards the quality of leadership provided by the national elite in the pre-war periods. In Eddie Iroh's *Forty-*

Eight Gun for the General (1976), the military leadership of Biafra is portrayed as so ideologically confused that it cannot distinguish between the real interest of the young republic and those of imperialist agents. The General is so intent on holding power that he plays his dedicated officers against a cabal of mercenaries and vice-versa until the military situation deteriorates to a point where he has no republic to preside over. In Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1965), the elites (intellectuals, businessmen and bureaucrats, etc.) are so thoroughly blinded by their loss in the war that they spend most of their time in rumour-mongering and chamber gossip, while poor villagers and underfed soldiers defend Biafra.

The elites are equally naïve, Dr Kanu, the hero is so simple-minded that he puts to plunge himself into battle even though he knows that the soldiers he would be a leader are armed with an ordinary machete against the enemy's sophisticated military hardware. This vote of no confidence by the elite writer on the members of his class comes to a climax in Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maiden* (1980). This continued to the extent that the wartime society embodied the contradictions of the pre-war era, its most conspicuous attribute was social, inequality and injustice. Accordingly, the effects of the war on the material life of different strata of Nigerian society reflected this notion of inequality. War literature also takes up this problem and raises it to the level of a major theme. In Iroh's *Toad of War* (1979), we can clearly distinguish between those who die daily of hunger and of the enemy's bullet on one hand and a handful of opportunists who make money and feed fat (The toads of war) on the proceeds of war on the other.

The war situation, especially in Biafra, also put to test certain time-honoured social values. The economic blockade of Biafra meant the death of those items which today refer to as "essential commodities", beverages, toiletries, and even staple food. The war situation puts to test fundamental social bonds and institutions such as marriage and friendship, thereby exposing individuals to difficult moral choices. Achebe, in his *Girls at War* (1972) takes on the moral predicament of the Nigerian womenfolk in the war situation as one of his major themes.

Gladys, the initially un-spoiled and serious-minded teenage girl is forced by material hardship to barter her sexual fidelity for essential commodities. And both she and her lover, Mr Nwankwo, realize that Gladys is only a victim of the prevailing circumstances. Gladys is just a mirror reflecting a society that had gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre. A similar problem is raised in a different context, in Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976) where the long absence of

the tragic hero, Oshevire, from the home forces his wife to betray him with dire consequences for both of them. Okpewho takes as his main preoccupation the psychology of people who are subjected to the dehumanizing effect of upheavals. The civil war functions as a metaphor for human nature and as a backdrop against which people under stress act out their innate prejudices. As a novelist, Okpewho is of course not interested in the external drama of violence that war always entails. Rather, he is interested in the human and emotional dimensions of war-broken homes, the fate of widows and widowers, marital infidelity, the suffering of orphans, even insanity, and general moral decadence. In this novel, he re-echoes Achebe's *Girls at War* (1972) and Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* (1970). The novel therefore straddles two areas of the Nigerian literary tradition, its war theme makes it a political novel but its focus is on the human implications of war. But within this broad plan, Okpewho is interested in exploring each character's problem individually and thereby seeks to establish his separate identity. This is why structurally; the novel is a series of personal confessional statements indicating the individual reaction of the protagonists to the composite circumstances that confront all of them. The violence of war is minimal and peripheral to the plot though rebel guerrilla attacks and air raids take place, but the war situation forms a pervasive and inescapable background to the events and these would never have occurred had there been no war. This is quite appropriate as the story is set, not in Biafra, but in liberated federal territory not too far from the front line.

While exploring several themes, the writer describes certain events and state of affairs which existed during the civil war: how the rhythm of life in the community was disrupted; the stress imposed on individuals on an emotional and psychological level; the vindictive manipulating of the military authorities for selfish and wicked motives, the distasteful settling of old scores by exploiting the opportunities presented by the changed situation; the military tribunals investigating the detained; the vigorous efforts by the military authorities to protect all, even members of the rebel tribe; the assertion of personal integrity and self-respect in the face of overwhelming odds.

Heroes (1988) is Iyayi's third novel, he focuses his critical searchlight on the baseless pogrom that was the Nigerian Civil War. The journalist, Osime Iyere, was sure he understood all the issues at stake: the Nigerians are good, the Biafrans are bad. Simple. But through a most tortuous process of coming to consciousness, he begins to perceive the real truth. The federal troops are as venal and brutal as the secessionists.

At first, I did not understand. So I stood on the side of the federal troops against the Biafran troops and when the Biafran army was driven away and the federal troops came, I changed sides. But this time I was on the side of neither the Biafrans nor the federal troops. I neutralized myself that the Nigerian had an innate natural tendency to inflict pain (P. 142).

The effects of the war are not uniform for all but felt mostly by the common soldiers, the workers and peasants and their families whether Nigerian or Biafran. The acquisitive shanks-the colonels and generals and contractors and politicians on both sides benefit from this game of death and in fact, it is caused by their greed and corner-cutting.

The common people whether they are Hausas, Igbos or Yorubas, Efiks etc, have never hated one another until they were deceived into this dead end by the greed of the generals and the politicians. The war is therefore baseless.

Thus, the conclusion in Iyere's word

I have nothing against wars ... that are fought over principles. Principles that deal with our questions. Where are we going? How are we getting there? But no principles are involved here because even if the country remains one or is divided, nothing down, where come from, the farmer and the worker will continue to live in mud houses and starve and be ignorant and sick (p.64).

Osime Iyere the main character in the novel supports the vociferous calls for a united Nigerian and those denouncing the Biafran Soldiers and exalting the Federal troops as the saving force for Nigeria. But when the Federal troops shot and kill his girlfriend's father without cause in cold blood, he begins to realize that there is more to the war than he originally thought. Osime quickly sees that even though the Biafra and Federal troops commit wretched crimes, the generals and the officers are the real enemies of the people of Nigeria.

Iyayi's *Heroes* is concerned primarily with social themes and he adopts a very radical response to the decaying socio-political structures that dominate the Nigerian environment. *Heroes* (1986) assesses the Nigerian Civil War, especially as it was experienced in the Mid-West, formerly Bendel State, and now Edo and Delta States. The overall impression that emerges from these works is the familiar fact that war enthrones an anarchic ethos in which social morality suffers a major dislocation in the cause of events.

Flora Nwapa recounts the civil war from a civilian standpoint in her chronicle of the war titled *Never Again*. She depicts the tension and agony, the betrayal, and the moral degradation of the war in a civilian enclave in this traumatic but fascinating story. Similar to this, Belolisa's *Torn*

Asunder: A Nigerian Civil War Odyssey tells the story of the civil war from the perspective of someone who was too young to take part in the fighting but wasn't too innocent to recognize the psychological effects of attrition and hatred. These publications make it clear that the Nigerian civil war was a needless experience that could have been avoided. It was a conflict of pillage, robbery, betrayal, falsehood, perjury, and dishonesty.

A Harvest from Tragedy, edited by Chinyere Nwahunanya, is an in-depth analysis of Nigeria's civil war literature. The author provides insight into the significance of Nigerian war writing in the political and literary experience of Africa in her editorial notes. Nwahunanya (1997) opines that:

in its re-creation and interpretation of history, Nigerian war literature has enriched the existing body of historical writing from Africa, especially historical fiction. In this way, the writers have made literature continue to function as the mirror of society. In the process of mirroring and criticizing its pitfalls, the war literature also serves as a compass for social redirection. (14)

The overall trauma of deaths, sufferings, and losses the nation endured during the trying times of the civil war, however, preoccupies both creative writers and academics as they contribute to the constantly expanding body of Nigerian War Literature. Discourses on Nigerian war novels rarely address aesthetics due to their sombre undertone. Most discussions of Nigerian war literature focus on important thematic issues to inform the next generation about how to avoid the three years of the civil war, which would have been painful but preventable.

Furthermore, the war experience, by sensitizing more people to translate their experience into words, also helped to democratize literary creativity. It helped to expand the club of Nigerian Novelists beyond the small cult of established writers. It culminates into what is known today as Nigerian War Literature.

The Nigerian Novelist As An Historian

Literature is at the same time history's major bequest to mankind. This is because all literature begins as an experience and ends as fiction. Without human experience in history, there would be no literature. This is because literature uses human experiences as raw material for reflecting and refracting society. Literature usually begins as an experience and ends as an imitation. Fiction/Literature, therefore, has an edge over history by the simplest of definitions, history is events and records of the past. As events, history only changes the direction of the lines. Literature/fiction, on the other hand, presents not only an imaginative reconstruction of reality

but also overtly or covertly offers a corrective to history by suggesting what should have been. In essence, literature does not only reflect realities but also refracts them.

Contemporary African writers have shown a remarkable sensitivity to this dual role of literature as a chronicle of history and as a reflection of life realities. Beginning with their earliest works, they have attempted to recapture and present the realities of the African experience as defined by time and space and to suggest correctives to the unsavoury aspects of that experience as against being defined by the personality, experience, and view of a particular writer.

At the level of artistry and literary craftsmanship, the Nigerian novelist dwelling on the war has had to grapple with an ancient dilemma. It has to do with the relationship between literature as art on one hand and history as empirical social experience on the other. The historian is concerned with empirical data, operating as much as possible at the level of facts in pursuit of specific truths. On the other hand, the literary artist is concerned with historical data to constitute the content of his art. But the language of the literary artist does not subsist on hard facts. He mediates facts in pursuit of both specific and universal truths while trying to please or disturb the process. Because of his proximity to the history of the war, the Nigerian novelist on the war is faced with the problem of disciplining history to obey his artistic purpose.

Several years after the end of the war, upcoming generations of writers are still intrigued and narrating the history behind the war through the exploration of novel styles, thematic preoccupations, and perspectives. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (1991) affirms this notion by submitting that, writing on the history of the war will not cease. Her stand is that historical experiences will always continue to inspire writers, even future writers who have not been born today.

Aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War

Unlike the other civil war across international boundaries, the Nigerian Civil War was a war of unification, a war of reintegration (Ezeigbo, 1991). It was, therefore, a much more difficult war for the Federal field commanders to prosecute with the objectives of unification in mind than wars fought against aggressors on foreign land. The human aspect was paramount.

It was a contradiction and complication not easy to resolve. How to fight causing only limited destruction, how to inflict wounds and heal at the same time. How to subdue without fatal and permanent injuries. How to feed and house the civilian population without exposing our troops to

dangers and risk of saboteurs and infiltrators. How to achieve surrender without inflicting permanent or long-lasting psychological humiliation.

In an article submitted to the Nigeria Military School by Major Abubakar Atofarati: *The Nigerian Civil War; Causes, Strategies and Lesson learnt* (1992), it was stated that the war cost Nigeria a great deal in terms of lives, money, and image in the world. It has been estimated that up to three million people may have died due to the conflict, most from hunger and disease. Reconstruction, helped by the oil money, was swift; however, the old ethnic and religious tensions remained a constant feature of Nigerian politics. Military government continued in power in Nigeria for many years, and people in the oil-producing areas claimed they were being denied a fair share of oil revenues. Laws were passed mandating that political parties could not be ethnically or tribally based, however, it has been hard to make this work in practice.

The Igbo felt they had been deliberately displaced from government positions because their pre-war posts were now occupied by other Nigerians (mostly Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani). When Igbo civil servants left to join similar posts in Biafra, their positions had been replaced; and when the war was over, the Government did not feel that it should sack their replacements, preferring to regard the previous incumbents as having resigned. This, however, has led to a feeling of injustice.

Further feelings of injustice were caused by Nigeria, during the war, changing its currency so that Biafra supplies of pre-war Nigerian currency were no longer honoured and then, at the end of the war, offering only ₦20 to easterners in exchange for their Biafra currency. This was seen as a deliberate policy to hold back the Igbo middle class, heaving them little wealth to expand their business interests.

Since its end in January 1970, the Nigerian Civil War has inspired a large body of non-fictional and fictional writing. As is probably expected, the latter category far exceeds the former. The Nigerian literary scene witnessed the publication of numerous works of poetry, drama, and especially fiction based on the event of the war and its aftermath.

Conclusion

Although, literature has been variously defined by different authors. The commonest definition of literature is that it is the mirror: that is a means through which life's experiences are expressed. This, therefore, means that the Nigerian novelists in their works have continually mirrored the terrible experiences which Nigeria had as a result of the Nigerian Civil War which

lasted for three years between 1967 and 1970. They have portrayed the terrible events that happened during the civil war.

Nigerian Civil War literature (fiction) stands out in the history of Nigerian literature, not only as a constant reminder of that sad chapter of our national history but also as a significant step towards the politicization of the Nigerian literary imagination. With the war and its aftermath, literary creativity and criticism assume their rightful place as part and parcel of our socio-political discourse.

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