

The Binaries of War and Literature: The Nigerian Political Struggles and the Emergence of Novel

Gayathri Menon K
Assistant Professor
Department of English
VTM NSS College
Dhanuvachapuram

Abstract

Most of the Nigerian writers have invoked an aesthetics of pain in order to represent their hopes and dreams tragically atrophied by the Nigerian system. Nigerian Literature has its own glorious past full of variegated literary and oral art forms and literature that has been transferred from one generation to the other. While colonialism induced a kind of patriotic feeling and a different visage to the already blooming literature, especially the emergence of a new genre called novel, the political upheavals after the colonial rule helped its growth in many levels. This paper deals with the changes in Nigerian politics and the subsequent effect of it on the emergence and development of a new branch called novel. War and literature as binaries that can evolve in the midst of the other.

Keywords: Africaness- post-independent Nigeria- Biafran war- Military rule

Introduction

The initiation of western education, the formation of westernized urban settlements, the setting up of a cash economy and modern industries opened fresh prospects to the individual and drew together people from different ethnic groups into the shelter of urban aggregations. To fit himself into the economic scheme the individual has to acquire literacy, and through literacy some specialized skill or profession. The result was that he took out himself from a community where status and social hierarchy had decided the individual's place in society and where the individual counted in terms of the group to which he belonged, but entered a situation in which Obiechina says that, "he thus predisposed himself to play a range of roles which did not exist in traditional setting-roles depending on his level of education and professional training" (327). As the individuals broadened contacts and multifarious attachment to others in different walks of life made him capable of envisaging himself imaginatively in any of the roles attached to the other professions and vocations, lead to development of novel writing.

The contemporary Nigerian authors have moved away from discourses about national identity and authentic 'Africaness' in their work, choosing instead to develop hybrid literary styles and to highlight themes of migration, existential anguish, and cultural intermingling, since most of the authors have migrated from their countries of birth and settled in Europe or America, from where they shuttle between global locations. This is evident from Newell's

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claim that “their work is characterized by features such as narrative indeterminacy, non-linearity, nonrealism, linguistic experimentation with the ex-colonial language, and the fragmentation of subjectivity and cultural intermingling” (211) and Ben Okri’s comment “I got tired of the traditional artifices and realism of the novel” (Deandrea 2002: 47).

Discussion

The focal chore that engaged Nigeria since its independence from British colonial rule in 1960 was the venture to create a general sense of nationalism even though the European rulers had enforced a single government on the heterogeneous consortium of communities for political and administrative expediency. The interference of the colonial powers and their policy of drumming up inter- ethnic abrasion through open or disguised support for separatist tendencies is like fanning the flames of already existing ethnic troubles. Chandrani Biswas states: “the innumerable differences among various indigenous communities continued to trouble the tasks of uniting the newly independent nation” (12). The pre- colonial nightmares, abhorrence, and antagonisms hang about dormant in the memory of the Nigerians and continued in the colonial as well as the post- colonial period. Chief Awolowo’s comment “Nigeria is not a nation. It is a geographical expression” (Hallet 344) states that the country is agglomeration of tribal units. The three main ethnic communities- the Hausa, the Igbo, and the Yoruba- that dominate Nigeria are different from each other by language, lifestyle, culture, ecology, and history. The situation generated by World War II with its unemployed veterans, workers’ strike against low wages, and boycotts by small plantation owners to raise the prices of their products accelerated the process of Nigerian nationalism and the emergence of political parties like

the National Council of Nigerian citizens... inspired by the Ibo intellectual Nnamdi Azikiwe.... The Northern People’s Congress (NPC) led by Hausa intellectual Abubakar Tafawa Balewan was formed by the traditionally conservative Hausa and Fulani communities. Finally, the Action Group of the Yoruba chief and intellectual Obafemi Awolowo. (Biswas 19)

The economic condition of the country in the post- independent period was overseen by a number of factors external to the Nigerian economy which Robin Luckham observes as, “the colonial government handed over to the inheriting elite, the political class, the right to control the machinery of government in return for the protection of its economic interests” (207). Though perplexity, corruption and endemic battles for office marked Nigerian life since pre- independent days, the federation had encountered all the odds, always hitting upon some temporary stanchion to avoid total crumple. The factor that kindled the extreme battle was the infusion of the ethnic regional hostilities into the army by introducing quota system. But the quota system fostered suspicions within the army between different tribes as it favored the Northerners even though Ibo were still too prominent among army officers. Achebe observes that the

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modern Nigerian history has been marked by sporadic eruptions of anti- Igbo feeling of more or less serious import, but it was not until 1996- 7 when it swept through Northern Nigeria like “a flood of deadly hate” that the Igbo first questioned the concept of Nigeria which they had embraced with much greater fervor than the Yoruba or the Hausa/ Fulani. (*The Trouble* 45)

All the ethnic tensions reached its peak driving Nigeria to a civil war when a military government was formed under an Ibo Major General Aguiyi Ironsi through a coup and striking the political and military leaders in Lagos, Ibadan, and Kaduna. A highly charged symbolic environment takes its grip throughout Nigeria after the coup, when both sides of the conflict fracas came to deem that the others were plotting against them, conniving to put a ceiling on their promotions in order to destroy them, for Luckham, “both developed myths around their own ‘invulnerable’ heroes. And both reinterpreted the struggle for power in the light of generalized beliefs defining it in terms of sin and retribution” (194). The precipitous rise in food prices, following a bad harvest and the precarious condition of the economy are some of the other factors that inflamed the situation of agitation. Fear, confusion and resentment had been building up slowly in the north among the Hausa tribe from the grass root level as the region gradually emerged from its state of shock after the first coup. After Colonel Yakubu Gowon became the supreme commander of the Nigeria, there broke out a massacre of the Ibo people in the north. As there was no state security to protect the Igbos, the northerners gave vent to their jealousy of Igbo wealth through mass looting accompanied by killings. In 1967 an assembly of Easterners unanimously passed a resolution declaring the sovereign republic of Biafra with an avowal by Ojukwu stating that “the territory and region known as Eastern Nigeria, together with her continental shelves and territorial waters, shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title The Republic of Biafra” (Jorre 121).

The federal forces of Nigeria started to shove the boundaries of Biafra inward, from south, west, and north leading to the loss of Biafran oil centers in Bonny, Port Harcourt, and Calabar, as the war progressed. The Biafran war, which ended up in 1970, marked a turning point in the history of Nigeria because of the massive war- time havocs, heavy toll of human lives it claimed, and its long term impact on the lives of the Nigerian people. Biswas quotes,

the Nigerian civil war also became degraded by corruption, nepotism and arbitrary oppression, characteristics shared equally by both sides. For the average Nigerian or Biafran, the war was a menace. Once the initial enthusiasm of the war was over, the Nigerian and Biafran everyman wanted an end to the incessant bloodshed and endless killings. (32)

The war percolated deep enough to affect all the politically active strata of society as well as millions of ordinary people who came in direct contact with the war. War features as a

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formative as well as a traumatic aspect in Nigerian literature, often endowed with far greater significance to Nigerian history and private life than colonialism. The reality of the war situations and the post-war conditions was reflected in a rich crop of war novels which depicts various facets of human struggle for survival. Nigerian civil war was followed by a significant body of literature, since “war inevitably gives rise to war literature” (Biswas 10), which mirrored the social realities of war. War literature depicts this struggle during the war as well as the imbalance in the gender power relationship wrought by the war. The iconic representations of women in various anthropological, historical, and cultural male-centered studies project them as non-actors in history. The nature of womanhood is constantly defined in terms of male desire and male imagination as Kate Millet points out that “under patriarchy the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described.... The image of woman as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs” (46- 47).

Apart from male authors such as Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, who depicted war and its carnage, there are some female authors like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who extracted a slice from history and mixed it with fiction through various narrative tools. Nwapa’s stories revisit time after time to the experiences of women during the civil war years, referred to by Nwapa as a period when young Igbo women were cut off from their family ties and society, disconnected from the moral lessons that were passed down through generations of foremothers. Newell quotes the comments of the narrator in Nwapa’s *One is Enough* as “the war forced women to survive by their wits alone: Igbo women participated in the ‘attack trade’, crossing front-lines to haggle with the enemy, bringing goods home to float in the scarcity economy; or they followed Biafran officers, offering them sexual ‘gifts’ in return for money and food” (184). Nwapa’s *Never Again* is another work which concentrates on the Nigerian society during war days and also the worth of Biafran women in supporting their fighting men and society. Another Nigerian woman author Buchi Emecheta through her *Destination Biafra* makes an effort to probe into the historical and political reality of the Biafran war, in which Debbie fit into a new breed of educated Nigerian urban women who represents a theory of personhood where the individual exists as an independent entity rather than her kinship relations, where she has a responsibility to realize her potential for happiness rather than to accept her role and is ready to pronounce “I didn’t mind you being my male concubine, but Africa will never again stoop to being your wife, to meet you on an equal basis, like companions, yes, but never again to be your slave” (*Destination* 258-59).

Conclusion

Literature mirrors politics, when literature becomes a weapon for the common man to expose the realities of their life and the assorted political condition. The same has happened in Nigeria, where the facts shows the development of Nigerian novel following the trajectory of western novel writing, with the changes that had happened in the scenario of politics.

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