

War in AFRICAN LITERATURE TODAY

Edited by Ernest N. Emenyonu

26

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Zimbabwe's War of Liberation
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War & Madness in Biafra • Civil War Poetry
History, Memoir & a Soldier's Conscience
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War in African Literature Today

26

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A Review

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Editorial Article

War in African Literature: Literary Harvests, Human Tragedies

Ernest N. Emenyonu

In an excellent introduction to his anthology, *A Harvest From Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature* (an important text which deserves more exposure and circulation than it has so far received), Chinyere Nwahunanya (1997), using the Nigerian civil war as premise, highlights the cumulative value of the corpus of literature inspired by war and its concomitant catastrophes on geo-political African realities. He states:

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 society and criticizing its pitfalls, the war literature also serves as a compass for social re-direction. A didactic function emerges in the process, especially in the portrayal of death, devastation, avoidable mistakes and sufferings engendered by the war. The ultimate intention of course is to see whether these records of a sour historical moment will enable the modern African to see the futility of wars as a solution to national problems which could be solved without a recourse to war, carnage and bloodshed. The suggested mistakes of the war initiators and administrators portrayed in these writings thus become invaluable guides to meaningful national growth and a stable and progressive society. If this lesson comes through, then African nations (and indeed the world) would have gained immensely from this harvest of tragedy. (14)

All through history, creative writers and historians have been known to bring their imaginative visions and critical skills to bear on the important events in the history of their people. Historians and literary artists of each era base their discourse and postulations on particular wars but their implicit philosophical inquiries point to a range of universal dilemmas – *Why are wars fought? Do wars achieve their declared initial objectives? Is war the ultimate solution to a human crisis at a point in time? Who benefits from war? Who are the toads of war? Who are the innocent victims of war? Is war inevitable in a human society?* Each writer approaches each of these questions from a chosen perspective and proffers answers intrinsically embedded in character types, narrative structures and patterns of

conflict resolution. Seen from this angle, the discourse, whether historical or imaginary, invariably translates into a didactic inquiry.

The creative writer – novelist, poet, playwright, or short story writer – who draws inspiration and themes from war situations, has other challenges to confront. The imaginative work (a by-product of war), must still meet certain known aesthetic and critical standards by which it should be judged as a work of art. Its relevance, authenticity, integrity and acceptance would ultimately depend not only on how convincingly the author has portrayed the unique human conditions brought about by war, but also on how the author handled the act of balancing emotional impulses and loyalty to art as a sacred entity. It is easy for a creative writer to stray away or be derailed from objective artistic visions because of partisan or passionate involvement in a *cause*. When this happens, the work could degenerate to running commentaries and propaganda. Artists do not create in a vacuum. They can, and do take positions on the serious political and social issues of their times, but this should be done in a manner that does not compromise the integrity of either the artist or the created piece. This is a challenge which some of the African writers must fully overcome in their sensitive war-inspired imaginative writings.

Chinua Achebe has defended in a compelling way, the desirability of contemporary African writers to be outspoken on the big political and social issues facing the continent, and share in the hopes and aspirations of their communities. In his classic article, ‘The African Writer and the Biafran Cause’ (1975), Achebe recaptures this theory of commitment with an enchanting imagery:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. (78)

And on his active role on the secessionist Biafran side during the Nigerian civil war, he maintains:

The involvement of the Biafran writer ... in the cause for which his people are fighting and dying is not different from the involvement of many African writers – past and present – in the big issues of Africa. The fact of the war merely puts the matter in sharper focus. (78)

This issue of *African Literature Today* on ‘War in African Literature’ embodies the findings of various studies on environments of war, the consequences of war, the role of the writer as a historical witness, the lessons that can be learned from the devastations of war (intended and unintended). It also includes discourses on how African writers have handled the recreation of war as a cataclysmic phenomenon in specific locations. *Have fictionalized representations demonstrated equitable balances between socio-political messages and the medium of conveyance?*

The authors of the ten articles in the volume have explored the subject

of war in African literature from a variety of perspectives – panoramic, regional, individual case studies, and comparative analysis of identified artistic visions and literary techniques.

In the lead article, ‘The Muted Index of War in African Literature and Society’, Chimalum Nwankwo analyzes the handling of the theme of war across genres and geographical boundaries to show the monumental impact on both the human condition in Africa, and imaginative literature as an intellectual and cultural activity. He contends that the war literature deserves more serious attention than it has received so far. He argues that

War is Africa’s muted index ... The index could guide the insightful reader toward the foundations of Africa’s numerous perennial or still unfolding tragedies. Clearly, the most quotidian of Africa’s problems, ranging from human rights to various cultural, political, and socio-economic issues appear either related or traceable to a long and turbulent history of wars and their unsavory aftermath. (13)

Christine Matzke in her ‘Life in the Camp of the Enemy: Alemseged Tesfai’s Theatre of War’, examines the use of drama and its performance (as propaganda) to boost the morale of people during the Eritrean liberation struggle against Ethiopia from 1961 to 1991. The focus is on the artistry, theatrical devices, and innovations of the premier playwright of the era Alemseged Tesfai, and analysis of relevant plays.

In her ‘Of War and Madness: A Symbolic Transmutation of the Nigeria-Biafra War in Select Stories...’, Ini Uko studies the depictions of the war debacle in the short story genre using the first published work of fiction on the civil war, *The Insider: Stories of War and Peace from Nigeria* (1971). The focus is on the ‘unraveling of the symbols in the relevant stories as a way of, first, explaining the relationship between the civil war in Nigeria and madness, and second, evolving a vision for the future of Nigeria.’ She concludes,

Technically, the kinetic imagery in this collection of stories ... translates symbolically into Nigeria’s journey towards a true and authentic nationhood in spite of its diverse constituting ethnic groups and interests. The stories stress that as long as the Nigerian civil war remains a potent source of outrage, inter-ethnic hatred, discrimination, and intense nepotism, the bogey of insanity will remain among Nigerians, and the proper healing and development of the brutalized Nigerian mind and spirit, as well as the land, will continue to be an illusion.’

Oike Machiko in ‘Becoming a Feminist Writer: Representation of the Subaltern in Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*’, takes the position that ‘studies of Biafran war literature have been male-focused works by women writers have not been paid serious critical attention ...’ (60) She uses the novel, *Destination Biafra*, to demonstrate the dramatization of the complex problems of representing subaltern women in a war situation. Machiko perceives the novel as a serious feminist work (different from earlier works by women writers which were mere ‘fictional autobiographical sketches’). She argues that fictionality distinguishes the text,

Destination Biafra, from others, and is doubly focused by its 'meta-fictional characteristics'.

Maurice Taonezvi Vambe, in his 'Problems of Representing the Zimbabwe War of Liberation in *The Contact*, *Pawns*, and *The Stone Virgins*, uses evidence from critical texts as well as imaginative fiction to discuss the complexities of fictionalizing the Zimbabwean war episodes and experiences.

Clement Okafor ('Sacrifice and the Contestation of Identity in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*'), Sophie Ogwude ('Politics and Human Rights in Non-Fiction Prison Literature'), Zoe Norridge ('The Need to Go Further?: Dedication and Distance in the War Narratives of Alexandra Fuller and Alexander Kanengoni'), Isidore Diala ('History, Memoir and a Soldier's Conscience: Philip Efiog's *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story*'), and Ogaga Okuyade ('Of the Versification of Pain: Nigerian Civil War Poetry'), individually and collectively enrich the volume by the diversity and versatility of their explorations as well as the scope and vitality of their representative discourses and findings.

The literature of war has enriched contemporary African Literature both in the quantity and quality of output. Elsewhere (1995), I had discussed the findings of my studies on the vibrant and prolific representations (in fiction and memoir), of the Nigerian Civil War and its aftermath, in the first two decades after the war. It was evident from those studies that

where the commitment in political terms overwhelms the artistic vision, as has been the case with many of the novels so far produced on the Nigerian Civil War, the writer comes out with less than his/her artistic best. In the present circumstances, the Nigerian writers on the war must allow a reasonable period of time to lapse before they can objectively write about the war, no longer as active combatants in the conflicts, but as writers who bring their imaginative vision to bear on the important events in the history of their people. Such works are likely to be more aesthetically pleasing and artistically rewarding than the skills demonstrated in the books examined in the study. *The great Nigerian war novel is yet to be written.*'(458)

This might prove to be as true about the war novel in Africa in general, as it is about the war novel in Nigeria in particular.

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The Muted Index of War in African Literature & Society

Chimalum Nwankwo

The impact of war on the human condition in African literature and society has not been taken as seriously as it deserves. It is now becoming, like the study of the colonial experience, a terribly repugnant exercise in which sometimes America is also studied and classified along with post-colonial Africa as a post-colonial subject. Thus, in contemplating Africa's wars, the cost of war in both impalpable and palpable human terms is wrapped in the wool of fanciful and fashionable paradigms, literary exercises better suited for the full-belly faddish reflections of blasé coteries of the metropolis. This attitude or inclination is responsible for the shoddy and haphazard diagnosis of the ills of the African continent. It blights the efforts of governments and distorts the projects of governance. No matter how well-meaning a rescue might be, certainly, it is clear in all circumstances that a problem must first be recognized and understood before one begins to proffer solutions. Many African poets and novelists are engaged in that enterprise.

The quiet agony of imperial humiliation left the new generation of African leaders and many new-breed post-colonial intellectuals who stepped into the master's shoes in a giddy Manichean desire to be like the master. It is there in the diffident preferences for all things foreign, from the character of infrastructural development to even the basic food the so-called educated Africans eat, from the most shameless malfeasance to the disgraceful gaps yawning between the African rich and poor, from the hunt for alien paradigms and hermeneutics by African scholars to the choice of sometimes unnecessary exile. This is colonialism still at work, expressed in what some Africans scornfully call 'colonial mentality', a confusion of abuse for a bullish ex-master and the disparaging of the befuddled indigenous replacement who disdains his own cultural base. To understand the gravity of this problem, it is necessary to classify the experience as part of the phenomenon called 'identity crisis'.

Most so-called educated Africans are still sorely afflicted with identity crises. One needs this kind of preparatory reflection and awareness to understand the impact of wars on the human condition in Africa. If

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colonialism was quiet, the wars which came at the heels of colonialism or in some cases with colonialism were not quiet and did more deleterious damage. African writers have followed the pulse of the continent and chronicled the historical event and upheaval simply and persistently, quite often with great candor, directness, simplicity, and in many cases an inventiveness which does not lose sight of the prize, to remain, as in much of traditional Africa, the last moral bastion of the people.

Contemplate this roll call. South Africa. Congo. Angola. Algeria. Rwanda. Mozambique. Uganda. Tanzania. Namibia. Kenya. Nigeria. Liberia. Sierra Leone. Chad. Zimbabwe. Liberia. Sudan. Eritrea. Ethiopia. Ivory Coast... The list of recent turbulent histories goes on with wars still raging in certain places as we read. Ostensibly, African history, if one may borrow the titles of works by two well-known writers, either trundles with *The Rhythms of Violence* (Lewis Nkosi) or appears perpetually *Bound to Violence* (Yambo Oulougum). The kind of ethos needed to capture this undesirable index is what we find in the epic sweep of Syl Cheney-Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, though the magical and marvellous ambience of those works muffle and transform that ethos into fatalistic and nihilistic messages. *The Famished Road* salvages its own marred epic ethos though by anchoring the societal despair from an insidious and enervating politics in an ontological crisis where the nebulous and the concrete jostle for relevance in a world that has virtually become surreal because of the imponderable gulf between the rulers and the ruled.

There is still much work to be done by African writers for a needed harvest, however grim, which could serve as an index for a more comprehensive study and understanding of the nature of the crises bedeviling the African continent. Even though more specific references will be made to the situations in Zimbabwe and Nigeria for the examples in fiction in this paper, references to poets and poetry in this paper will cover a wider range. The African continent is a continent with a peculiar history and experience, and that peculiarity becomes more intriguing and sometimes almost perplexing as one moves from one region to the other. For instance, I believe that a more careful attention to South African history and politics draws attention to the fact that the country as we know it has been embroiled in one kind of war or the other, in high or low registers, from the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck at the cape in 1652 to the final dismantling of apartheid in the early nineties. An understanding of the role of the Zulu nation in the South African space from as far back as Chaka enhances an understanding of South Africa and the volatile formations of its polity. And even after we have done understanding the South African picture, it remains imperative to extend attention to the impact of the dynamics of relationships between the British, the Dutch, the Asians and the various troubled black ethnicities of Southern Africa who constitute the majority population of that entire area. Can we also tell the story of

Southern Africa without extending our knowledge and understanding of the area to the relationship between that history and that of Zambia and Zimbabwe? If land hunger was the *casus belli* in the protracted rivalry between the Dutch and the British in South Africa, the imperial dreams of Cecil Rhodes complicates the history of the area and the consequent suffering of the black nations which continue to pay the price of aboriginality and of land ownership with a chequered history of instability and constant turmoil. Zimbabwe remains a product of the imperial adventurism and warped dream of Cecil Rhodes which began with his Cape to Cairo Pax Britannia project and only peaked with the treacherous deal between Rhodes' British South Africa Company and the Ndebele Chief Lobengula.

The wars which began with Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 when he wrested power from an equivocating British colonial administration to the present dark clouds of national doubt and questioning and even confusion are still the same war. We might even say that the ghosts of Cecil Rhodes and his diamond explorers and investors are still running crazily all over Zimbabwe in the light of the pretence of Western powers that the high-handed and untidy process of land redistribution by Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe has no history behind it. Zimbabwe's contemporary writers, who are amongst some of the world's best fiction writers, in freshness and innovative energy have in the last decade told and re-told these stories of concatenated wars with grace and eloquence and quite significantly in a poetry that frequently touches the sublime. Among these writers and their works, the following stand out: Chenjerai Hove in *Bones and Shadows*, and Alexander Kanengoni in *Echoing Silences* and *Effortless Tears*. For the peripatetic consequences of this bloody history, there is of course the moving testimony of Robert Zeleeza's *Exile*. Let me quibble awhile through the titles of the works of these writers and say that the silences of the history of Southern Africa and Zimbabwe are broken most thunderously by the old bones and shadows of a violent African history through the effortless tears of Yvonne Vera, particularly in *Stone Virgins*.

There are echoes of war and references to war in Vera's writings such as *Under the Tongue* and *Butterfly Burning*, but in *Stone Virgins*, she cracks the kernel of history, and the oblique rises to the harrowing in aftermaths that are as potent as the real experience. But this disgorged ugly blood of that history is not supposed to discourage but presumably to inspire. It is the kind of thesis one finds in Toni Morrison's vision. It is a vision which derogates and rejects fixation to past pain and the past itself in favour of the comprehensive and holistic. It is a vision which seeks for a teleological accounting of human action. Life and war become interchangeable analogues in *The Stone Virgins*. The poetry of the recapitulation skips nothing from memory. The villain is culpable but demands our sympathy in guilt, thereby increasing manifold our sympathy for the victim.

4 *The Muted Index of War in African Literature & Society*

In that novel, the African dream is measured by war and conquest. New dreams from a present simultaneously benighted and full of promise search old agonies for light into the future. Human drama is set in times and places where a certain contemporaneity underscores the paradoxical nature of human destiny. A number of examples from the novel will affirm this point.

Opening the *The Stone Virgins* with the modern city of Bulawayo makes many points at once. The historical significance is unmistakable. It is an African city but the legacy and heritage of conquest and imperialism with stamps of a complex identity remain very clear. The streets are named after the master and obviously by the master. In case the issue of cultural supplantation is unclear, the names of poets from the imperial culture concretize that point. And of all the names and naming, Cecil Rhodes is of course included, along with his British South Africa Company. With such strokes we are reminded of the long arm of history. The descriptions also quickly tell the story of class oppression and discrimination. There are places where only the high and mighty enter. The poor can only peep in. And then, the beauty of the city is an exquisite tantalus with its blooming and radiant flowers speaking of all manners of hopes and dreams. The city of Bulawayo is the present, forbidden to some but accessible also to others, but certainly this access is limited. This is the African colony with the power of the colonial master evident in its eerie absence. The master is absent and gone but that absence is potent even without the master's physical presence. That is what makes it a defining paradox. Even though the cleverly historicized text conflates events in the opening portions of the story between 1950 and 1980, the long root of experience goes much further backward in time with echoes of the South African genesis.

When action shifts to Kezi, there is Kezi before the war for vengeance and cleansing. There is also Kezi after the war. Kezi before the war is the rural town of the Africans. These Africans had laboured together in battle to reclaim a heritage and a glory that was to be national independence. The drinking and gathering places are open to all, man and woman. Every spirit glows with the euphoria of victory. Kezi's nerve centre, Thanda-bantu store, and its proprietor, hold promises of a great future for man and woman.

Like the bridge between past and present, there is a bridge on the road between the city of Bulawayo and Kezi. Like the past and present, there is steady traffic between the city of Bulawayo and Kezi. And like the past and present, both feed from each other, with the present of course being less accessible than the past. Kezi is the point of transition, the crossroads. This is where the Africans have to redefine themselves. This is where they have to answer the questions of readiness for the present and the future. The polysemous symbolism of this section is simplified in the drama of love and by the drama of love between man and woman. The

sweetness of love, between Thenjiwe and Cephas Dube will not endure, not yet. The sweetness of the relationship will endure when it is clearly understood by both parties; defined and named and nursed together. And so the seed given to Thenjiwe by Cephas Dube is spat away. Why not? It is as yet a seed named by man and known by man. Knowledge and experience are yet to be had and shared equally by man and woman in this telling reversal of the biblical sharing of the problematic apple in the garden of Eden. This unmediated gap becomes more obvious in the sights from the war when female veterans are in town to take the streets with the jaunty leisure of the men. There is clear evidence that the men of Kezi are uncomfortable with the liberated ease of the women. The men do not yet take into account that these women had also gone through the crucible of war, baptised into a new dispensation through bravery and sacrifice beside their men-folk. It seems that come cleansing time, women will be forced back into the hieroglyph of unfulfilled dreams depicted in the cave of Gulati, into a mythical African past of irrelevance and fruitless sacrifice, back into a virgin stone of silence! A new inter-ethnic war destroys Thandabantu store. It is that war which destroys the promise which placed Kezi and Thandabantu store at the crossroads. That is what is foreshadowed by the murder of Thenjiwe by a war-scarred insurgent. The same war-scarred man cuts off the lips of her sister, Nonceba, after raping her. It does not seem as if men are ready to share the same stage with women. Men still want women without their voices and speech. Kezi is not yet ready for the oblivious modernity which Bulawayo promises.

To understand the entire thesis upon which *The Stone Virgins* rests is understanding the third major setting of the novel: Gulati. Gulati, as the cave which houses the mythical hieroglyph defining the African women of Zimbabwe also carries in its echo the stones with which Zimbabwe as a reborn African republic is universally associated or identified. This is the setting which explains the relationship between myth and history and memory:

Tall women bend like tightened bows beneath a stampede of buffalo, while the rest spread their legs outward toward the sun ... Disembodied beings ... They are the virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king. They die untouched. Their ecstasy is in the afterlife. Is this a suicide or a sacrifice or both? ... everything in Gulati rots except the rocks, history is steady; it cannot be tilted forward or backward ... In Gulati, I travel four hundred years, twenty more ... (103-4)

The warped consciousness of a warped and insensitive body reflects on the past, on the role of women in Zimbabwe history. It is a muddled history of pain and futility and empty strife. A man who finds solace in a ritualistic visitation of that cave cannot be normal. He is in need of salvation. It is Sibaso, who killed Thengwiwe and raped her sister. He is a symbol of the blighted male spirit needing salvation from ancient ways