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SONGS OF STEEL OR SONGS OF GUNS: A NARRATIVE ILLUSTRATION OF VIOLENCE BY ANDREW EKWURU

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ABSTRACT: Civil Wars is considered one of the major obstacles linked to the development issues in postcolonial Africa. They erode human dignity and destroy infrastructural facilities. The Nigeria-Biafra war serves as a perfect illustration of this problem which has been a focus of some Nigerian writers namely Andrew Ekwuru. Thus, this study investigates how Andrew Ekwuru depicts the Nigeria-Biafra War and the violence inflicted on Biafran civilians in *Songs of Steel*. In the light of the theories of narratology and psychoanalysis, the study first describes acts of brutality perpetrated by Soldiers. It further explored the traumatic events experienced by characters. The study concludes that the Nigerian-Biafra War had a devastating effect on the individual and communal psyche of people, and therefore presents it as a futility.

Keywords: death – destruction – soldiers – trauma – violence – war.

RESUME: Les guerres civiles demeurent l'un des obstacles liés aux problèmes de développement dans l'Afrique postcoloniale. Elles érodent la dignité humaine et détruisent les infrastructures. La guerre du Nigeria-Biafra en est une parfaite illustration. Cette guerre a été un sujet central pour certains écrivains nigérians notamment Andrew Ekwuru. Aussi, cette étude examine la manière dont Andrew Ekwuru représente la guerre du Nigeria-Biafra et les violences infligées aux civils biafrais dans *Songs of Steel*. En s'appuyant sur les théories de la narratologie et de la psychanalyse, l'étude d'abord décrit les actes de brutalité perpétrés par les soldats. Elle explore ensuite les événements traumatiques vécus par les personnages. L'étude conclut que la guerre du Nigeria-Biafra a eu un effet dévastateur sur la psyché individuelle et collective, et la présente ainsi comme une futilité.

Mots clés : Destruction - Guerre - Mort - Soldats - Trauma – Violence

INTRODUCTION

After independences, Nigeria faced a series of conflicts among which the brutal Biafran War that took place between 1967 and 1970 in Nigeria. This war was primarily between the government of Nigeria and the secessionist state of Biafra, which declared independence in

May 1967. The conflict was driven by deep ethnic, political, and economic tensions between the country's major ethnic groups – the Igbo, Hausa-Fulani, and Yoruba – along with a backdrop of regional inequality, colonial legacy, and the struggle for self-determination.

During that war, a lot of Biafrans and Nigerians as a whole were displaced, badly traumatized, raped and killed. This war has caused so much harm that it has influenced the literary production of the country. Therefore, Nigerian writers and critics tried to recreate historically and artistically this war through their writings. Like his fellow Nigerian writers, Andrew Ekwuru tried to show the impact of Nigerian Civil war on the country. Through his novel *Songs of Steel* (1980) he gives an insight of the violence perpetrated by the soldiers on civilians.

A lot of literary critics have also expressed various opinions on the Nigeria-Biafra War. In his article, "Women And Violent Conflicts In Destination Biafra, Half Of A Yellow Sun and Roses and Bullets" (2016), Ihueze Adaobi Olivia discusses the works of Chimamanda Adichie, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Buchi Emecheta who captured the events of the Nigerian civil war from different perspectives, sometimes giving in-depth exposure to women's experiences in their narratives. While Ihueze's work empathized with women who have encountered pains of different forms during and after the war, Yecho Elizabeth Ihugh in her article "The Nigerian Civil War and its Effects on Women and Children" (2019) focused on effects of the civil war on women and children.

Unlike the critics mentioned above, Andrew Ekwuru did not fail to stress the violence and pains of war experienced by men too. He shows how men, women and children suffered during this war. This paper therefore explores the civil war and its violence inflicted on the Biafran civilians. Its purpose is to show how the civil war and violence have led to the traumatization of civilians throughout narratological and psychoanalytical approaches.

Through his novel, Andrew Ekwuru presents "the narration of a succession of fictional events" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 2) linked to the situation of war. The narrative discourse is based on how authors "use stories as sense-making instruments" (David Herman 2003: 12). The discourse of war in *Songs of Steel* will help to stress the level of violence and the atrocities undergone by people in situation of war. The psychoanalytic approach will show the mental and emotional impact of these war events on the characters and the readers. This work is divided into three sections. The first part consists in describing the different acts of brutality perpetrated by Soldiers. The second point explores the traumatic events experienced

by characters. The third section deals with the futility of the civil war regarding its devastating effects on the individual and communal psyche of people it therefore presents war as an unsuitable alternative for settling disputes in the society.

1. Mercenaries as Perpetrators of Violence on the Civilians in *Songs of Steel*

Beating, killing, raping were different forms of violence inflicted on the civilians during the Nigeria-Biafra war. Those responsible for this violence are mercenaries. The mercenaries as referred to in *Songs of Steel* are different from "real soldiers" (Ekwuru 1980: 95). For the narrator, they are «the unemployed, the highway robbers, truck-pushers and servants who have been recruited to bolster the number» (Ekwuru 1980: 95) of real soldiers. These mercenaries represent a threat to the civilians. Through their voices, one can realize that they are characterized by violence. Their conversations show to what extent they are violent. In fact, their discourse in the narrative is about killing, shooting. The aggressiveness of these soldiers can be read through the voice of Captain Redpath in the passage that follows: "Tunde! Captain Redpath whispered. Here come your targets. He then addressed the other gunner. Derida, everyone is an enemy here. Shoot anything that moves" (Ekwuru 1980: 98).

The passage above is a representation of indiscriminate violence. Indeed, Captain Redpath is giving instructions. These instructions are orders leading to civilians casualties. By identifying "everyone" as an enemy that should be shot, Captain Redpath makes no distinction between the soldiers and the civilians. They only kill with no exceptions. As their task consists in shooting «anything that moves», needless to say that they shoot whoever they meet. The following excerpt confirms what is already said:

> Foolish Nyammari! Swore Mustafa, cleaning his boot with grass and coming out to rejoin those in the armoured car. What happened there? Inquired Captain Redpath. Mustapha grinned stupidly as he explained: 'One foolish Ibo woman open her yarsh for me. One – two I kill her baby and shoot her. (Ekwuru 1980: 99)

The conversation shows that mercenaries kill harmless and innocent people. They completely destroy families by killing husbands and wives. The following sentence better illustrates that idea "Obasi! Sobbed Simon silently. They have now killed my sister and her husband" (Ekwuru 1980: 106). This extract justifies that soldiers killed indiscriminately. They kill not only men but also women. In doing so, their objective is to kill people "in great numbers" (Ekwuru 1980: 15). Denouncing this ongoing genocide, Achebe says in his famous war memoir titled *There Was a Country* that the Nigerians wanted to "exterminate the Igbo people from the face of the earth" (Chinua 2012: 229). Chinua Achebe's statement is full of meaning when we closely analyse the

aggressive attitude of soldiers in *Songs of Steel*. In fact, "The soldiers came and went like strangers. They were, leaving towns and villages razed to the ground and a trail of burning, raping, murdering and looting in their wake." (Ekwuru 1980: 87). What is at stake in the passage above is soldiers' cruelty.

As far as women are concerned, they were raped before being killed. The passage below accounts for this situation: «she lays as God made her, but soiled; spread-eagled and facing the blue sky. Her mouth was wide open, her face twisted horribly as if still in pain. Flies, carrion flies, swarmed over her. She had been raped before being shot. » (Ekwuru 1980: 106). The nakedness of Martha's body means that she has been undressed, raped before being killed by the soldiers. The soldiers used the war period as an opportunity to violate women. In their article, Alidou Ousseina and Turshen Merredeth stress that violence inflicted on women is different from the type that affect men. They write:

> The violence against women is both explicitly and implicitly sexual. Explicit sexual violence includes systematic rape (men use rape as a way to dishonour and humiliate not just women, but the enemy group); forced pregnancy (to leave the enemy's marker); shooting women through the vagina (rendering women infertile and ensuring the end of the group's ability to reproduce)" (Alidou and Turshen 2000: 83)

As it can be noticed, soldiers were also responsible for sexual violence. Soldiers threaten and torture men in order to rape or flirt with their wives as evidenced in the narrative: "The soldier then beat the innocent and lawful husband of his lover. He would have killed the man had he not promised never to challenge his wife in future. He was still lying there when the soldier left his compound, arm in arm with his wife en route to the barracks." (Ekwuru 1980: 84). Here, we note that Soldiers ill-treat men and take their wives forcefully from their homes thereby separating them from their husbands.

By attacking the civilians, both men and women the soldiers violate the supreme headquarters code of conduct that "clearly states that there must be no killing of civilians" (Ekwuru 1980: 101). So, the use of dangerous arms like "Smith and Wesson, Oerlikon guns, rifles and machine guns" (Ekwuru 1980: 121) by soldiers to kill the civilians can be qualified as war crime. Ibezim Emmanuel gives ground to such a thought in his article, "Redressing Atrocities of War in Biafra: A Matter of Amnesia or Prosecutions?", stating that "The Nigerian forces have been accused of having directed attacks against civilians and civilian objects contrary to the law of armed conflicts, thereby committing war crimes." (Ibezim 2021: 81). Soldiers' acts are considered as war crime because they attack those they are supposed to protect because "these soldiers were ordered to spare the civilian lives" (Ekwuru 1980:105).

2. Space Markers of Violence and Trauma on the Civilians

During the Nigerian civil war, people experienced different events. These events as depicted in *Songs of Steel*, were traumatizing to humanity. In fact, villages, towns or cities were turned into spaces of violence. As illustration, the bombardment of the twin villages, which "no one has ever experienced" (Ekwuru 1980:96) has caused traumatic events that the narrator reveals as follows:

> Mortar-shells began to rain down on the villages. Abigail, who had left to spread melon in a basket to be dried, flung the basket away and run towards her children and mother. There was panic everywhere. She dragged her sons away from their home. Behind her ran Simon and his family and madam Dibia fleeing towards the forest. By then hell was let loose in the village. Great explosions thundered and shook the compounds. People were falling, hideously injured. Others, trying to help, were picking their way through the debris and corpses. (Ekwuru 1980: 96)

The passage above highlights the shelling of the twin villages. Too many people met their death by shelling. Ekwuru states that people's properties like "Huts, solid houses" and "animals" (Ekwuru 1980: 96) were destroyed. It is of course the violence and pains that these people saw during the shelling of their villages that made them flee to the forest. Characters like Madam Dibia, Abigail and Simon fled to forest because they did not want to be killed in such a bombardment. For the reasons of survival, they forcefully left the village to live in the forest. The author illustrates this forced displacement in the narrative: "They had not left their homes and villages of their own choosing, they left because their villages were attacked." (Ekwuru 1980: 155). They were really frightened by military attacks, after experiencing a heavy bombardment of their village. The narrator confirms this in the following lines:

> Those still distrustful of the invading army lurking near the villages preferred to die in the forest rather than be killed by enemy guns. Abigail, her mother, Rachel, and their children. Driven by the fear of seeing her entire family destroyed by the war, Madam Dibia prevailed on Abigail to stay with her in the forest. (Ekwuru 1980: 120).

Fearing for their lives after the shelling of their village, they abandoned their houses and left their village to settle in the forest. Despite the fact that they were taken out from their home into the forest yet they still meet the pains and violence they were avoiding. The narrator says clearly: "they did all they could to make the forest habitable and found some comfort until a group of Canberras and hasting bombers returning from Raids inside and unloading several bombs in the forest." (Ekwuru 1980: 120).

Obviously, these ongoing military operations that people experienced affected them psychologically. Worthy of note is that the bombardment of the forest that served as a hiding

place for the refugees was more traumatizing and caused mortality, disability, and psychological damage. This situation obliged the survivors to leave the forest to unknown destinations as it is clearly written in the novel: "they fled at the scent of danger, taking only what they could carry, jamming roads leading away from the advancing of army but often not knowing their destination." (Ekwuru 1980: 86). The fact that people run without knowing where they are going means they are in confusion. Indeed, people are traumatized by death and disability caused by the war. The characteristic features of war trauma are expressed in the passage below:

> In the long carriages, behind the steam engine lay or sat hundred of the maimed and mangled. The once restive crowd was now still and apprehensive, the expectation with which they greeted the first appearance of the train giving way to gloom, fear and anxiety. As the train pulled up, a man with his head and chest covered in plaster leaned out from the window. Shocked, the waiting crowd stood in silence. (Ekwuru 1980: 6)

The extract above is about war atrocities. War has disabled many people. People were mutilated or wounded. Having witnessed these atrocities, people get distressed and petrified. People are silent because they are psychologically affected by what they are confronted with and it can be argued that extreme pain destroys language itself. Their silence expresses the feeling of sadness, hopelessness and fear, which represent the symptoms of trauma.

What is perceived as trauma consists of overwhelming life events that pose intense threats to both biological and symbolical survival and generate terror (Leys 2000). In other words, events are experienced in such a way as to induce an intense psychological crisis. These events, it has been variously shown, inflict fear and suffering, induce pain, anguish, fear, loss and grief and bring about the destruction of a 'coherent and meaningful reality' thus pushing the traumatized to the limit, as phrased by psychoanalysts. This notion of Trauma is applicable to the characters in the narrative as they are frightened by tragic events that occurred in it.

The unspeakable condition of trauma as advocated by the traditional trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth is reflected in the muted voices of the headmistress, Mrs Rebekah Onwuike when she reveals: "terrible, terrible; I'll never forget what I have seen" (Ekwuru 1980: 4). Mrs Onwuike is affected by the horrors of war. The repetition of "terrible" shows her inability to fully express the pain. As a refugee, she is unable to forget the sights of "the orphaned and dazed, people with machete cuts or hunting-spear wounds" and "The mangled! The maimed" (Ekwuru 1980: 3). These images remind of the war trauma. In fact, these scenes keep coming back as flashbacks and nightmares that torment her over and over. According to Caruth Cathy, flashbacks, are intrusive and recurrent re-enactments of the traumatic event. These flashbacks consist of images or sensations that the victim associates with the traumatic

event or they can give him or her impression that he or she is experiencing the traumatic event all over again, since flashbacks can take the form of literal visual representations of the event. (Caruth 1995: 63).

The danger of flashbacks and nightmares is the destructive potentials inbuilt in the repetition of trauma. Incessant repetition of the traumatic event, even years after the experience, can, as Caruth points out, be "(…) retraumatizing one's self." (Caruth 1995: 63). This exact visual quality can be related, according to Leys, to "(…) the cinematic possibility of flashbacks which are experienced by the traumatized individual as exact returns or replays of the traumatic incident." (Leys 2000: 241). Many trauma victims also suffer from traumatic nightmares. Just like flashbacks, these nightmares can repeat themselves and can be experienced as if the traumatic incident is occurring again, and they, in most cases, consist of precise remains of the distressful past. In other words, nightmares and flashbacks can be induced by minute acts which take place in normal day-to-day life experiences.

Other traumatic events occasioned by the civil war include starvation and diseases. Because of war, a lot of people were "desperately hungry not only for food but for medicines." (Ekwuru 1980: 83). War made it difficult to have access to food and medical care. Since "there were no medicines", a lot of children were dying from diseases. This was the case of Ekeoma who "lost three children, her daughter and her two boys. The girl died of Malaria. The boys died of dysentery" (Ekwuru 1980: 156). While some children were dying from diseases, others were "dying of famine" (Ekwuru 1980: 122). Consequently, Ezibgo lost his brother from starvation: "we were on our way to scavenge for food in the market when he died on my back" (Ekwuru 1980: 126).

As it can be noticed, starvation was a threat not only to children but also women who "were flocking into Army barracks begging alms and bartering their bodies for food" (Ekwuru 1980: 83). Not to starve to death, some women had to sell their bodies for whatever can be spared by the soldiers so as to be able to cater for their families. Commenting on the effects of starvation, Ihueze Olivia quotes Buchi Emecheta who portrays starvation in *Destination Biafra* as an "ingredient of destruction and immorality" (Ihueze 2016:10). Rape was also part of women's experiences of war trauma during war time. What makes rape a trauma is that it exposes women to sexually transmitted diseases, stigmatization and sometimes unwanted pregnancies. That is why, after the war, "women who had been raped not long before stood in tears" (Ekwuru 1980: 116). These women were crying because their sexuality were disparaged and their physical integrity destroyed.

3. Writing on Violence: A Cry of Horror or an Account of Destruction

Ekwuru in writing *Songs of steel* recreates the bitter experience of the Nigeria-Biafran war. His narrative paints a clear-cut picture of people suffering occasioned by the war. By using both male and female characters who witnessed the atrocities of the war, the author wants to inform the readers that "Everyone has suffered in this war" (Ekwuru 1980: 157). The narrator means here that men, women, children, and the elderly have all suffered from hunger, mass killings and predicaments occasioned by the war. In the narrative, readers are taken through these struggles, displacement, family breakup, village destruction, insecurity, and human rights abuses and other losses.

Again, the choice of women as protagonists means they underwent the greatest misfortunes. In addition to the torture and rape, they were left widowed. These horrible situations during wartime are beyond imagination. To the narrator, "the damage caused by this war can't be put into word" (Ekwuru 1980: 142). It is impossible to describe the emotional, physically and psychological effects of the civil war on people. The damage is so much dreadful that language cannot express it. Actually, the destruction and suffering caused by the war are so immense that people miss words to express or describe the events. In the narrative, the author wrote: "They had suffered inestimable losses; their loved ones were dead, people they loved so dearly were gone. Their homes were in ruins" (Ekwuru 1980: 159).

Recounting the big loss of innocent Eastern Nigerians in war, Stephen David wrote in his article entitled "Biafra and the Question of Genocide: Examining the Dimensions of Violence in Heroes and Toads of War" that "the war claimed many lives, with accounts ranging from 150,000 to 3 million. Although scholars cannot agree on the body count, one thing that is indisputable is the devastating effect of the war on Biafrans." (David 2018: 29).

Many Briafrans have been killed so that one cannot guess the exact number of people killed. David gives ground to Aremu Johnson who states this:

> At the end of the war in 1970, the exact number of lives lost remains a subject of speculation and debate, with estimates ranging from one to two million on both sides. These included countless number of innocent children, nursing mothers and pregnant women who were not killed by the bullets of a gun but by starvation and disease (Aremu 2017:68).

What the critics agree on is the higher death toll. Such death toll led Achebe to write that "the cost in human lives made it one of the bloodiest civil wars in human history" (Chinua 2012: 227). While recalling the devastating effects of the civil war, the author insists on the

futility of war. What is evident in *Songs of Steel* is that the Nigerian civil war was "not necessary" (Ekwuru, 1980: 73) because "it does nobody any good" (Ekwuru 1980: 34). Mary Okolo shares Andrew Ekwuru's point of view for two main reasons. The first reason is that "they disturb societal development on a large scale." (Okolo 2023: 365). In fact, no development or progress whether in terms of human development or infrastructural advancement in a wartime is possible. Okolo's thought is true when we all realize that villages, towns, markets, schools and even churches were destroyed and activities were suspended in Eastern Nigeria during the Nigeria-Biafra war as Biafrans struggled to stay alive. Indeed, Kassim Sikiru Taiwo insists that it "is obvious that conflicts and its attendant refugee problems retard the process of nation building, as societies are dislocated and people generally disorganized." (Kassim 2005:188).

The second reason why conflicts and war are not good according to Okolo is that they create insecurity. Egbekpalu Emelda submits that insecurity "points to the general sense of vulnerability that threatens human life; socially, psychologically, emotionally, physically, educationally, religiously, etc." (Egbekpalu 2021: 5-6). In such a situation daily existence is governed and dominated by fear. It is impossible for fear-controlled individuals to accomplish any great feat. A nation of terrified individuals can never make any meaningful progress. The best they can hope for will be stunted, haphazard and believing in stumbling growth.

Instead of strengthening national unity, the civil war had brought division, suffering, death and destruction. The indelible impact of the civil war on the predominantly Igbo Biafran landscape and on the psyche of the people, is visible and obvious for a long time. The narrator reveals this in *Songs of Steel*, stating that "although the fighting is over, the conflict still remained" (Ekwuru 1980: 160) despite the end of the war, its effects remain relevant. It is this violence and the manner it was unleashed on the injured and oppressed groups, especially the side of the rebels, the pains and trauma it left behind that prompted Chukwuemeka Ike to conclude in *Sunset at Dawn* that "War is evil (…) it is terrible" (Chukwuemeka 2014: 147). Yes, war is evil, due to the violence and pains it goes with. It affects people socially, economically, physically and psychologically.

The painful experiences of starvation, sickness, hunger, death, killing, displacement and hiding during the civil war can never be forgotten. The enormity of violence and pains people suffered during the war still vibrates in their memories as Ogene Mbanefo and Nwakaego Obi, in the words of Chukwuemeka Ojukwu (1989), confirm: "The memories of the war are still in

the minds of people. A lot of Nigerians harbor sad memories of that period, so do I, yet, it is a period we just can't abolish or erase because it has become part of our history, something we have to live with"(Ogene and Nwakaego 2021: 10).

Andrew, recalling these sad events which are now part of people's history wants to inform the survivors that war is "too dreadful" (Ekwuru 1980: 34) and need to be avoided. That is why he has chosen characters who spent too much time praying for peace and making suggestion to avoid fighting. The lesson, he teaches is that fighting is not the solution.

CONCLUSION

The Nigeria-Biafra war as narrated in *Songs of Steel* was violent. In the narrative, Andrew Ekwuru paints the pictures of the suffering and monumental destruction of lives and properties during the civil war. The study first described acts of brutality perpetrated by Soldiers. We examined how soldiers perpetrate violence against civilian men and women in Biafra. People were indiscriminately beaten, shot and women were raped to death. The second point of the analysis explored the traumatic events experienced by characters in the narrative. The civil war has caused events like bombardment, killing, famine, diseases, death, rape, displacement; which have traumatized people. Violence of war has overwhelmed people and leave indelible imprints in their minds.

The study concluded that events like civil wars' events are futile and do nothing but drag human civilization into a dark abyss of loss. Wars do not benefit anyone, any government and any state. The case of the Nigerian civil war, studied in *Songs of Steel*, has had a devastating effect on the individual and communal psyche with significant traumatization on people. Therefore, Andrew Ekwuru presents wars as unsuitable alternatives for settling disputes in the society. The effects of this war have become a significant, though painful part of Nigeria's history that can never be wished away.

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