



## Forms of War in Nigerian Literature

Joy M. Etiowo<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Ph.D., Faculty of Communication Technology, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 30 October 2013; accepted 3 February 2014

### Abstract

In the Nigerian context, every mention of war (as a word in the Nigerian past or present) automatically takes one back to the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War (1967-1970). While reference to this war is an integral part of this study, this paper examines the different faces of war in Nigeria and literary responses to them. Beyond armed conflict, gender positionings and configurations, political manipulations and intrigues, corruption issues, economic, ethnic and religious-inspired uprisings are wars Nigeria has been, and is still, contending with. From the novels of Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Chukwuemeka Ike, Isidore Okpewho, Festus Iyayi, Femi Osofisan, Okey Ndibe, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Abubakar Gimba, Tanure Ojaide, Afam Belolisa, Kaine Agary; to the poetry of Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Mabel Segun, Pol Ndu, Peter Onwudingo, Joe Ushie, Catherine Acholonu, Cecilia Kato, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Sophia Obi; to the drama of J. P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Arnold Udoka, among others, it is evident that these wars have provided impetus to the Nigerian literary artists. These writers have examined the different facets, phases, implications and prospects of these wars. The underlying lesson, in all, is that the liberative undertone of every/any war must never be abused and/or compromised for selfish purposes or unattainable goals.

**Key words:** War; Literature; Nigerian

Joy M. Etiowo (2014). Forms of War in Nigerian Literature. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 8(1), 130-139. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320140801.4163>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320140801.4163>

### INTRODUCTION

War is an action that emanates from a perceived wrong. It is evidence of an inability of parties to agree on terms that could be of mutual benefit to all parties involved. Wars could be fought with arms, especially when the conflict or disagreement or argument degenerates, and this could lead to destruction of both lives and property. For example, the Nigerian-Biafran war or the crisis in the Nigerian Niger Delta. War could also be ideological (fought through writing or verbally) as in gender or political positioning. The use of the term war in this paper, is in both cases – as involving armed conflict and as in ideological differences, among others.

In literary history all over the world, crisis or wars (of different magnitudes) have been veritable tools in the creative enterprise. For instance, the writings of Leo Tolstoy of Russia; the hypocrisy of the European ruling oligarchy that produced George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen-Ninety Four*; the Harlem Renaissance that fuelled back consciousness and black outpouring of Black American writings; the apartheid system in South Africa and the literary harvest that has been as a result of that obnoxious system; among others. Darah (2011), may, therefore, not be wrong when he notes that "classical traditions of world literature are fostered by environments where there are intensive struggles against great evils for the restoration of human dignity" (p.2).

In Nigeria, colonialism (in all its manifestations), the civil war, failure of independence and inept leadership, gender positioning and configurations, and ethnic/economic/ecological crisis in the Niger Delta are wars that have been at the centre of literary creativity.

### 1. NIGERIAN-BIAFRAN CIVIL WAR

It is a well-known fact that the Nigerian—Biafran civil war has produced literary inspiration more than any other event in Nigeria (Amuta, 1988). Nwahunanya (2011) did

a somewhat comprehensive study of the literature that emanated from this war. To go through these works one by one here will be to overburden an already, seemingly, overburdened issue. Some of the prose works include Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973), Nwapa's *Never Again* (1976), Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* (1976), Ekwensi's *Divided We Stand* (1980), Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1981) and, one of the most recent, Belolisa's *Torn Asunder: A Nigerian Civil War Odyssey* (2012).

One of the works which have not had critical attention is Belolisa's novel. *Torn Asunder...* reminiscences the events of the civil war from one who was too young to participate in the war but who was not too naive to understand the psychological implications of a war of hate and attrition. Belolisa, unlike Ike and Iroh, did not narrate the activities of/at the war front but shows the dispossession—physically, economically and psychologically—of all (soldiers, civilian, adults, children, men and women). For example, when the innocent boy, Cheta, picked a grenade thinking it was a toy and he was torn into pieces by it. Just like Belolisa, Nwapa had earlier in *Never Again* examined the civil war from a civilian's eye. Using Agwuta as a war front, Nwapa depicts the tension, the betrayal, the moral decadence of the war in a civilian enclave.

What is evident in these works is that the Nigerian civil war was an avoidable war that did no one any good. It was a war of looting, plundering, betrayal, deceit, lies and lies. In most cases, these ills were not propagated against the 'enemy' but by brothers against brothers; by 'patriots' against the same people for whom they claim to be fighting. Personal protection, protection of one's ego (not integrity) becomes a major driving force for senseless manipulation of people's psyche unto death on both sides of the war divide.

Apart from prose works, Soyinka in "Massacre", Clark in *Casualties: Poems* (1972), Achebe in *Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1972), Ndu in *Songs for Seers* (1974), Enekwe in *Broken Pots* (1977), Saro-Wiwa in *Songs in Time of War* (1985), Udechukwu in *What the Madman Said* (1990), Onwudinjo in *Women of Biafra and Other Poems* (2000), Acholonu in "Not Yet", "Biafran days", "Refugee", and "In these concentration camps", among others, have demonstrated in diverse ways poetic imaginations that have been conditioned by the civil war. Some of these poetry on the war were actually written by active participants in the war. For instance, Achebe and Onwudinjo. While Achebe was a Biafran emissary, Onwudinjo was a Biafran Captain who was at the trenches. His *Women of Biafra and other poems*, though came many years after the war, chronicles the suffering of women, the men and those who went to fight and were caught at the prime of their youth. These are people like Bob, Greg, Yeloskin, Stifnek, Oloju and Lucky in the poem "After Fears". In the poem "The Green Horn" we see:

Callow youths  
Who know not soldiering more  
Than sporting pips and epaulettes,  
And itched to roast and burn  
In the devil's frying pan (*Women of Biafra... 2*)

Even the dedication of *Women of Biafra ...* is indicative:

To  
Akan Imoh  
Ed Braiye  
Yeloskin and  
Ginigeme  
And the faceless throngs  
Sons of the Rising Sun  
Who bought our peace  
With their blood.

Onwudinjo's *Women of Biafra...* could be saying like Clark did in "Casualties" many years earlier (1972) that all active participants and non-participants are victims.

---

## 2. CULTURAL WAR: NIGERIAN (AFRICAN) CULTURE VERSUS COLONIALISM

---

Before the Nigerian–Biafran civil war, there was the cultural war between colonialism and her legacies, especially the ones that tend to erode the culture of the natives, on one hand, and the African culture on the other. The central focus in the Nigerian Nationalist songs of Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anthony Enaharo, Obafemi Awolowo, among others, was "see we to have something to show". Part of this was the deliberate unpopular use of their colonial names by some of the Nationalists, for example, Benjamin by Azikiwe and Jeremiah by Awolowo. At the peak of this cultural/nationalist fever in the late 1950s, the literary icon, Chinua Achebe, came out with his epic *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 and followed it four years later in 1962 with *Arrow of God*. These are novels of cultural affirmation. In these novels Achebe captures the rhythms of the way of life of his Igbo people (their politics, economy, socio-cultural and religious stands). In the words of Emelia Oko (2005), these novels (*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*) concretise "the essence of a way that was still vital, even if discredited by the foreigner" (p.13). She adds that, the heroes in these novels, Okonkwo and Ezeulu, "immortalise that old Igbo traditional independence and pride that could assert unequivocally that men were not born for servitude" (p.57). Achebe's assertion in his famous article "The Novelist as Teacher" (1975), is a summation of the literary artistic response to this cultural war. Achebe had said:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my people that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them (p.45).

Other Nigerian novelists, especially who wrote before the war and published by Heinemann under African Writers Series, were inspired to tread the cultural path, to use literature to explore, examine and conceptualise their Nigerian (African) culture. Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966), John Munonye's *The Only Son* (1966), Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) are illustrative. Amadi's *The Concubine* tells the story of Ihuoma, a beautiful and virtuous woman but whose husbands must die because of her entanglement with a spirit spouse. What is of note here is that the mythical, the mystical is part of the spiritual essence of the African people. The same spiritual dynamics are also employed in *Efuru*. Though feminist scholars have almost monopolised the novel now critically (Conde, 1972; Ezeigbo, 1996), *Efuru* demonstrates the interplay of the physical and the spiritual in the life of an African woman.

Before these novels, Amos Tutuola's novels especially *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) has been a story of an African way of life. Spirits, demons, ghosts, trees, forests, play their roles in human existence. Each element must be respected and its 'territorial integrity' recognised. *My Life ...* shows "the people's belief about the spiritual world and what happens to a mortal who wanders into the 'bad bush' and the world of ghosts" (Zell, Bundy & Coulon, p.174).

In the drama medium, Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark became household names. Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest* (1963), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and *The Strong Breed* (1971) are notable. These plays, especially the last two, are based on the Yoruba cosmological view of life after death; of the continuity of existence beyond the physical; of a life circle of the living, the dead and the unborn; of the dependency of one on the other(s). In *Death and the King's Horseman* there is a re-enactment of the cultural war that took place in ancient Oyo in 1946, between Western culture represented by the District Officer on one hand, and traditional elements on the other. At the death of a king, his horseman, Elesin Oba, is to commit ritual suicide in order to continue his service to the king in the other world. In this particular instance, the District Officer intervenes and arrests Elesin Oba in order to stop the suicide. However, Elesin Oba's son, Olunde, himself a product of Western education, takes his life in his father's stead.

Ola Rotimi's uses Sophocle's *Oedipus Rex* to create a Yoruba myth in *The Gods are Not to Blame* (1971). Here, again, the fate of man is attached to the decree of the gods and that is why every attempt by man to thwart the decree of the gods fails. Clark's *Ozidi* (1966) and *The Masquerade* (1964) articulate the Ijaw system of existence and communality. Gabriel Okara's poem "Piano and Drum" represents the poetic masterpiece in the cultural war between the indigenous and the foreign: piano for western cultures and drum for African traditional lifestyles.

### 3. LEADERHIP/CORRUPTION ISSUES

The expectations of Independence were/are obvious to all—good self governance, provision of social amenities, democratic ideals that guarantee security and confidence for every citizen, etc. However, it has been evident that subsequent Civil and Military regimes in Nigeria have not met the yearnings of the people. Independence has not meant "uhuru" for the common man especially. In the first Republic, and the interlude called second and third Republics, the opposition parties were the watchdogs. In military dictatorships, some civilian/civil rights opposition coalitions like NADECO (National Democratic Coalition) provided some thorny paths to the rampaging Army. The coups and counter/palace coups were indicators that all was not well even in the ruling oligarchy.

The massive corruption, self-enrichment and election violence of the first Republic and the impending coup found voice and prophecy in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966). Chief Nanga, a 'bush politician' and former school teacher, joins the political class and is made the Honourable Minister for Culture. He becomes, in the novel, the mirror or the arrowhead through whom the reader sees the greed, aggrandisement and self-centredness of the ruling class. The masses are so neglected that they become apathetic to what is happening around them. To the masses, the politicians can go on with their rape of the country, just as the colonialist have done before now (*A Man...* pp.161-162). One is not therefore surprised that Odili decides to also "follow them chop small for this world...". (*A Man...* p.65). The coup at the end of the novel could be the author's way of dismantling this stifling corruption empire.

Okey Ndibe in *Arrows of Rain* (2000) presents a failed Nigerian State where even the Judiciary, which ordinarily is the last hope of the people, cannot help the people. Justice is perverted and is only directed to serve the whims of those in power. A rapist, a murderer, an Army Officer of low moral esteem by any standard becomes the Head of State. Expectantly, the ship he captains must have no valuables. Those with talents, with ideals for a better tomorrow are frustrated, muffled, imprisoned, destroyed (as the case of Bukuru). Charlatans and mediocres operate at the helm of affairs.

The physical dirt in Festus Iyayi's *The Contract* (1982) is a symbol of the spiritual, moral and intellectual decadence in the society. Chief Eweh Obala is the Chairman of the Ogbe City Council. As the leader (a State President) he collects bribes and encourages corrupt contractors to operate. He will rather do business with these economic rapists than genuine businessmen, just because that arrangement satisfies his greed. Mr. Obala's stolen wealth is stored (invested) outside the country.

In *Kolera Kolej* (1975), Femi Osofisan uses his immediate 'Jerusalem', the University Campus, to reflect the corruption, intrigues, betrayal and general inept



leadership in Nigeria. The election that brought in the Vice Chancellor himself is questionable. Competitors to the Office were either destroyed professionally or physically eliminated. Ministers (Heads) were appointed not according to merit. Corruption, like cholera, becomes an epidemic that takes in its swipe everybody and everything. The consequence, like in real cholera epidemic situation, is death. Death of values, death of ideals, death of justice and equality, death of humanity.

Abubakar Gimba's novels especially *Innocent Victims* (1988) and *Sunset for a Mandarin* (1991) are tabloids for x-raying the intrigues that go on in Government establishments. Both novels are set against the background of military government. The military has intervened in power to "change things for the better, for the rapid progress of this country" (*Innocent Victims*, p.59). What one sees is a Military that is high-handed, brutal, arrogant, corrupt, insensitive, exalts sycophancy, and is so incensed with power and its use and misuse for self-glory and self-fulfilment.

*Innocent Victims* is a story of fraud, abuse of power and political machinery for selfish ends. A panel is set up to probe the activities of the Department of Food and Animal Production. The testimonies at the panel are revelations about a degenerate Civil Service that has refused either to serve or to be civil. There is illegal land mass acquisition and those involved "are mostly politicians, Military Officers and a couple of Civil Servants" (p.122).

In *Sunset...* the Sole Military Administrator (SMA) and Chief Executive Officer of Kindendo State insists that financial probity and due process must not be applied in matters that affect him. He becomes particularly irked that the payments he has not approved are made and "the ones I approved they didn't pay..." (*Sunset...*, p.135). This sets the stage for the victimization of Hamzah (The Director-General in charge of the Treasury), who is transferred to Department of Health and within twenty-four hours again transferred to History and Research Bureau, the archives unit of the Cabinet Office. Hamzah is eventually asked to resign. He refuses to and dares the Sole Military Administrator to dismiss him or terminate his appointment. Like Farouk in *Innocent Victims*, Hamzah becomes the moral voice here against the forces of inept leadership and moral decadence. In all these, the security agencies are accomplices to the ills perpetuated by the political leaders in and out of uniform. As Etiowo (2005) notes:

A recurring factor in these two novels is the uncomplimentary disposition of security and law enforcement agents. These agents are supposed to ensure the security of lives and property, maintain law and order, and, if need be, protect the integrity of the nation. But what is seen in *Sunset...* as in *Innocent Victims*, is a security outfit that is not concerned with the security of any life except that of those in positions of power, and law enforcement agents whose only role is the breaking of law and orderliness. (p.150).

The civil servants and the security forces are all entangled in a corruption web that robs the System of sanity and progressive ideals.

Ola Rotimi's play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (2006), is a satire on the politics and politicians in the country. Lejoka-Brown, a Major who had fought in the Congo, abandons his father's cocoa business to join politics. Lejoka-Brown's decision is not to serve his people or to contribute to national development but to rip off the country and enrich himself. He tells his friend and former colleague, Okonkwo: "Politics is the thing in Nigeria, mate. You want to be famous? Politics. You want chop life?—No, no—you want to chop a big slice of the national cake?—Na politics" (p.4). He goes on: "Cakes are too soft, Gentleman. Just you wait! Once we get elected to the top... we shall stuff ourselves with huge mouthfuls of the National chin chin... something you'll eat and eat, brothers and you know you've eaten something" (p.4). Lejoka-Brown employs all dirty tactics—physical and spiritual—to achieve his goal. He marries Sikira, the daughter of the President of Market Women, so that he could get the market women vote for him. He had planned to terminate his relationship or marriage to Sikira as soon as he wins the election. He also acquires a magic snake named 'Freedom' meant to give him good luck. He keeps the snake under his bed and "whenever he goes to campaign, master takes Freedom with him and wraps him round his arm like a gold bangle" (p.22). However, Lejoka-Brown could not win the mandate of his party and therefore his political ambition is squashed. One can say that this is a deliberate authorial arrangement, a way of saying that those with such diabolic and corrupt mindsets should not be given leadership mandates. It is a literary war against unprogressive and self-centred elements occupying the seats of power in Nigeria.

One of the major features of Nigerian poets who wrote from the 1980s is the poetic war against political failure and betrayal in the country. These poets take sides with the masses; they cry out against exploitation of any kind; and they are generally impatient with failed rulership. Political issues, especially as they affect the people, dominate their poetry. Tanure Ojaide's *The Endless Song* (1989) and *The Fate of Vultures* (1990), Catherine Acholonu's *Nigeria in the Year 1999* (1985), Adewale-Nduka's *Naked Testimonies* (2000), Ukam's *Little Cobra* (1997) and *The Bleeding Heart* (ed., 1997), Chin Ce's *African Eclipse* (2000), Joe Ushie's *Lambs at the Shrine* (1995) and *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998), Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place* (1983), Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* (2002), Adermokun's *Dance of the Vulture* (1990) and *Dark Days Are Here* (1995), Etiowo's *Mma and Other Poems* (2006), among others, are illustrative.

Acholonu, for instance, lashes at the political class which ravages "our farms and sets our homes all in flames", fail the electorate and is excessively corrupt.

The poems “Tell them Okigbo”, “To stone face”, “Going Home”, “Song of Beauty”, “The Rain Maker” and “The man died tomorrow” evoke the failure of the rulership. The rulers did not keep to their promises to the ruled, and this is because the promises were pretended not meant. The consequence of this misgovernance is in all planes- on the physical, the psychological, the economy, on individuals, on the family and on the whole State. For Adewale-Nduka, the testimonies of Nigerian politics, of our nationhood, are nakedly negative. These poets wage war against oppressive regimes and the exposure of “the failure of the ruling class confirms the fact that the average Nigerian is not pleased with the manner in which the affairs of the nation are being managed” (Okunade, 1997, p.76). Their language is aggressive and revolutionary (Ushie, 2001; Etta, 2006).

#### 4. GENDER POSITIONINGS AND CONFIGURATIONS

One war that has become a global war and that has equally generated great attention globally is gender war. This is the only war that has known no colour or race. Even the two world wars were not fought by the whole world like the gender war. In Nigeria, literary artists have joined the fray, especially in exposing these “outdated constraints on women’s lives” (Lovenduski, 1986, p.6), in order to make the woman reject inferiority and strive for recognition. The artists sought to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effective and contributing human being (Chukwuma, 1994). Nwapa’s *One is Enough* (1976), Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen* (1974), Alkali’s *The Stillborn* (1994), Gracy Osifo’s *Dizzy Angel* (2004) and Onuoha’s *Idara* (2012), to mention a few, are indicative.

Emecheta’s novels (*The Bride Price*, *Second Class Citizen*, *The Slave* and *The Joys of motherhood*) portray a social setting where the female is nothing but a slave, a second class citizen. The female can only be fulfilled not as, or from, an individual standpoint but according to what the society—patriarchal—lays out for her. One sees in Emecheta’s writing a social structure in which, in most cases, the woman is exploited through a system of assigned and devalued roles. In the words of Oko (2005), Emecheta “points out artistically as other feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Green the very structure of patriarchal social origination that by its very nature creates a brutalized female individual through subjugation” (p. 215).

In *Second Class Citizen*, Francis and his wife, Ada, represent the two sides of the coin: Francis the oppressive patriarchy, and Ada the dehumanized and brutalized female. However, Ada refuses to be confined to nothingness; she becomes a dominant, vibrant and automatic individual. As Oko puts it: “Ada rejects

castration as the proper mode of female existence” (p.230). Ada shows that “a woman needs a degree of autonomy and cannot be a man’s prey even in the interest of social cohesion” (Oko, 2005, p.231).

In Gracy Osifo’s *Dizzy Angel*, Dolise, Ogbanje’s father is the agent of female liberation. Ogbanje, by tradition, and superstition, is a child doomed to ‘come and go’. her mother has lost three children to the circle of birth, death and rebirth of one child. For Ogbanje to live to old age, therefore, and for her mother to have another child, the oracle decrees that she must be married out to an Olokun priest at the age of 15. The Olokun priest himself (Uloji in the novel) is the personal messenger of the oracle and through whom every spiritual assignment relating to Ogbanje’s life is carried out. At Ogbanje’s 12 years of age, Uloji performs the first marriage rites on Ogbanje’s head. Thirty pounds, accompanied with kola and palmwine, are presented to Ogbanje’s father, Dolise, as betrothal price. By tradition this act has made Ogbanje the wife of the Olokun Priest, only waiting for the final rites and consummation at age 15. It is important to note that the Olokun Priest is about the age of Ogbanje’s father and already has four wives, with some children older than Ogbanje.

Meanwhile, as this superstitious and patriarchy-induced drama is unfolding, Dolise has other plans for his daughter. It is Dolise’s ambition that Ogbanje should be the first girl in Beribiri, his community, to go to college. So even though Ogbanje is immediately betrothed to the Olokun Priest after her primary school, Dolise carefully persuaded Uloji to allow Ogbanje to go to college for the remaining three years before she is fifteen. That came to be. However, on the day of the marriage and taking-home proper, Ogbanje absconds from home. By divine intervention, and despite many afflictions, Ogbanje completes her schooling at Ghenero Girls’ College. She not only finishes college but went to Teachers’ College to pivot and become a teacher. Instead of the Olokun Priest, Ogbanje gets married to a Higher School Certificate holder who is already training to become a Medical Doctor. Her wedding in a church is also a testimony to the liberative changes in her life and community, especially as far as the womenfolk is concerned. By the church wedding, she will not be one of one man’s ‘collection’, but the only wife of the man. Even the men in the community marvelled at this idea of one man and one wife.

The portrayal of Ogbanje is important for the change and liberation which she symbolizes. Ogbanje is beautiful, decent, chaste, hardworking and intelligent. In school—primary and college—she is always winning awards. Though her life was at stake, Ogbanje refuses to be easily persuaded or swayed by the threats of superstition. She is a contrast to her mother, Obigheli, who, like Obiagheli’s mother, Odede, must adhere completely to the dictates of the oracle (tradition).

The old, unprofitable, inhibiting elements must give way if there must be a new dawn. As an African saying goes, "if the old plantain stem is not cut down, the new one will not spring out". It is, therefore, important that Uloji, the old Olokun Priest, the symbol of every impediment to change and liberation must die for Ogbanje to be actually free from cultural and superstitious chains that have hitherto held the women captive. Meanwhile, Dolise, the agent of change remains alive and well.

Interestingly, in Nigeria, even male writers have recognised the need to bring women to the centre of literary discourse as a way of granting them some level of equity in the society. Gimba's novel *Sacred Apples* (1994), Rotimi's *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* and Onwudinjo's collection of poems *Because I'm Woman* (2006) are apt examples. In *Sacred Apples*, the novelist protests against a situation where men hide under the guise of religion to oppress and dehumanise women. According to him, no man has any right to question the moral probity of any woman when the man himself has many questions to answer in that regard. This is most striking especially when this Gimba comes from the part of Nigeria where the veil, and all it represents, is still intact.

In Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Liza, Lejoka-Brown's Kenyan-born, American-trained Medical Doctor wife, is the focal point of women liberation. Liza changes the outlook of Sikira who just realized that she's been married not out of love but to satisfy a man's caprices. Sikira begins to wear fitting dresses made for her by Liza, packs out of her slave marriage and eventually becomes the flag bearer of the National Liberation Party. Sikira's campaign slogan "MEN AND WOMEN ARE EQUAL!" (p.76, emphasis authors) is symbolic. Sikira cries out to all women "Rise up! All women of our land! Rise up and vote for freedom or forever be slaves" (p.76). For Mama Rashida, the knowledge gained from Liza about demand and supply and capital, changed the fortunes of her chicken trade. This change translates into a change in her outlook to life. She is no longer particular about being just a wife, but is concerned now about being a wife with full potentials for self fulfilment and independence. She also smokes cigarettes against social/patriarchal dictates.

For Onwudinjo, the woman must be allowed the right to family inheritance. He also argues that childlessness during marriage must be seen as the responsibility of both the husband and wife and not just as matrimonial failure of the wife (woman).

Mabel Segun ("Exploitation", "Bride Price" in *Conflict...*), Amadiume (*Passion Waves*), Acholonu (*The Spring's Last Drop*), Ekpa (*Rhythms from Womanity*), Kato (*Victims of Love*), are examples of poets and poetic renderings that are engaged in the gender war. For Kato, race and colour does not change her second class status as a woman. And this she does glaringly in the naming of her characters: Grace (English), Deborah (Hebrew), Regina

(Latin), Hauwa/Amina (Arabic/Hausa), Deji (Yoruba), Uloma (Igbo), Ekaette (Efik/Ibibio), Ajoni (Delta) and Ogama (Northern Cross River). These artists use poetry in challenging men in particular and society in general "to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which is different from generalised oppression of all... peoples" (Davies & Graves, 1986, p.19).

## 5. THE CRISIS IN THE NIGER DELTA

The crisis in the Niger Delta is political, economic, social, ecological and moral, all rolled into one. It is a war against political oppression, economic exploitation, social neglect, environmental degradation and devaluation of moral precepts. These wars are waged in the region to draw Government and international attention to the inequities that go on in a region that is the treasure base of the nation.

Oil from the region is said to have been the bedrock of building and transformation of Nigeria's former and present capitals—Lagos and Abuja, respectively. The wealth of the nation, at both individual and collective levels, is traceable to the economic fortunes of oil in the Niger Delta. Darah (2011) opines that even "the pomposity and buffoonery of the political elite are paid for by the oil revenue hijacked from the Niger Delta" (p.11). The people of the Niger Delta have, ironically, been the least beneficiary of the wealth from their land. Ojaide (2012) notes that "while oil exploration and exploitation are meant to bring wealth to the region, this has not happened in the Niger Delta, which remains not just one of the poorest parts of Nigeria but also the entire world" (p.vi). The land is degraded, their traditional means of livelihood (fishing and farming) has been lost to oil prospecting and exploitation, and yet expected Government presence has been lacking. The Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) of 1960, Oil Mineral Producing and Development Commission (OMPADEC) of 1990s and presently Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) have all been more of political programmes for political goals.

Expectedly, the neglect of the Niger Delta provoked resistance from the exploited but neglected people. From Isaac Adaka Boro's revolutionary insurgency of February, 1966, to Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) founded by Ken Saro-Wiwa, to Ijaw National Congress, to Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), and other "militant" and "non militant" groups, the people of the Niger Delta have used these media to express their anger and to advocate for not only a more equitable distribution of the wealth from the region but letting the region control her resources. The Government (in collaboration with the multinational oil companies) have responded in many ways—through open fire as in the case of the killing of Saro—Wiwa in 1995



and the Odi massacre of 1999, or through the formation of Boards and Commissions believed to spearhead the provisions of infrastructure in the region as in NDDDB, OMPADEC and NDCC. Recently, there is the amnesty programme of rehabilitating “ex-militants”.

The literature produced in the Niger Delta has been a response to the situation described above. According to Daniel Ogum (2001), “Writers in the Niger Delta region find themselves in an environment that occupies economic centre stage in Nigeria today. They find themselves also in a region of intense oil and gas exploitation with its attendant consequences... The creative artists in The Niger Delta draw inspiration from his environment to produce literature” (pp.3-4). Nwahunanya (2011) opines that “although, we’ve got to the stage of “amnesty” for the militants, the journey indeed began from Literature” (p.xii). Darah (2011) collaborates that “the contradictions and fury generated by the injustice perpetuated by the Nigerian ruling class are what animates the literary and artistic output of the Niger Delta...” (p.II). Ojaide (2013) also agrees that the situation in the Niger Delta has attracted creative writing and criticism in/from the area. Some notable creative voices include J. P. Clark (*The Wives’ Revolt*; 1991; *All for Oil*, 2000), Ken Saro-Wiwa (*A Month and a Day*, 1995), Ojaide (*The Activist*, 2006; *Day-dream of Arts and Other Poems*, 1997; and *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, 1998), Okpewho (*Tides*, 1994), Agary (*Yellow- Yellow*, 2006), Ikiriko (*Oily Tears of the Delta*, 2000), Nnimmo Bassey (*We Thought It was Oil But It Was Blood*, 2002), and Tess Onwueme (*Then She Said It*, 2002; *What Mama Said*, 2003), Kalu Okpi (*The Oil Conspiracy*, 1988), Joy Chinerokwu (*Clouds at Sunrise*), Ogaga Ifowodo (*The Oil Lamp*, 2008), Ngozi Agoh-Jacobs (*Our Wealth, Our Worries*, 2003), Ebi Yeibo (*A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems*, 2003), Hope Eghagha (*Rhythms of the Last Testament*, 2002); Sophia Obi (*Tears in a Basket*, 2006), Barine Ngaage (*Rhythms of Crisis; The Earth Listens; Song of Dawn*, 2010), Joe Ushie (*Eclipse in Rwanda*, 1998; *Hill Songs*, 2004).

The insensitivity of the oil companies, the connivance of the government and betrayal by some local elements, in degrading the sustaining power(s) of the people of the Niger Delta are the impetus for the revolutionary pressures in Okpewho’s *Tides* (1994). Okpewho’s stand is that the above agents of oppression and exploitation must be curtailed by progressive elements of leadership of the people from the Niger Delta itself. The characters of Tonwe Brisibie, Piriye Dakuma and Noble Ebika Harrison (a.k.a Bickerbug) of Committee of Concerned Citizens are platforms for launching these revolutionary activities. These characters are a statement by Okpewho that the people of the Niger Delta must rise against the injustices that has become the order of the day in the region. That the people must take their destiny in their hands and refuse to be cowed or daunted by all the combined forces of oppression and exploitation. The likes of Tonwe stand

for determination, hope, vision, courage: attributes which every well-meaning Niger Deltan must possess if the desired changes in the region must come to be.

What one finds in *Tides* is the existence of war on many planes—the economic, political and social. It is an economic war between the oil companies and government and their agencies who are not ready to give up the petro-dollar benefits of exploring oil on one hand, and the Beniotu, Ebrima and Seiamo people (representing all Niger Delta) whose traditional means of livelihood have been destroyed. This is aptly demonstrated by two incidents in the novel. Some representatives of the local community have gone to complain to the operators of Atlantic Fuels, an oil company, that the enormous searchlights on the waters were driving the fish away:

They wondered if there was anything the company could do to save them the trouble; their lives are dependent on fishing, and they faced certain disaster if the schools of fish were forced permanently out of their area of activity. The spillages from the rigs and pipelines have done enough harm to their trade, and the activity of this new rig would only snuff out their lives for good (*Tides*, p.11).

The aim is to seek a middle ground that would be beneficial to both the oil company and the oil people. However, as Okpewho notes in the novel:

The reply of the white engineer was uncompromising. He was fed up, he said, with these agitations and representations from illiterate natives who knew nothing about what the oil company was trying to do for them. What, he asked, did the inconvenience suffered by a few scruffy fishermen matter to the general prosperity which oil had brought to Nigeria? ...As it was, their business around Ebrima was strictly offshore and he didn’t see any reason for them to curtail their operations because a bunch of ignorant fishermen now caught fishes than they were accustomed to. He said he hoped he would never see them again at the rig (p.12).

As Feghabo Cliff (2013) rightly notes:

...the musings of the white engineer discloses the profit-centeredness that obscures the sensitivity of the imperialists represented by the multinational oil companies. This profit-mindedness, even at the expense of the lives of the oppressed as evidenced in the above referenced statement of the white engineer, also reveals what informs their employment of the state apparatus—the security agents—as well as their deception (p.53).

The second incident, accentuated by the Niger Delta people, is the bombing of oil installations in the Niger Delta. For Harrison, “a bolder and more decisive strike” like this bombings is necessary “in defence of our land and our livelihood” (*Tides*, p.162).

In *The Activist*, Ojaide presents a nameless protagonist, the Activist, who is optimistic that something must be done to change the conditions of his people. The Activist, on his return from America finds out that his people have lost their land, water, air, lifestyles, economic mainstay, etc., to the ravaging activities of oil companies exploring and exploiting oil in his part of the country. The trip

through the creeks with Ebi affords the activist the opportunity to experience and understand the magnitude of the environmental destruction occasioned by the activities of this oil companies. The erstwhile flora and fauna is gone; the water has turned oily and messy; and the economy of fishing is no more because the fishes are dead from pollution. The women fertility rate has dropped, even as the men experience impotency problems. Meanwhile, Government agencies and some local chiefs collude with oil companies to ensure that environmental degradation continues without attendant actions by those involved to ameliorate the sufferings of the people.

The Activist, therefore, becomes Ojaide's voice in decrying this injustice and charting a positive and more beneficial path for his people. The 'Delta cartel' is meant to provide a means of economic survival for the people. With people like Chief Ishaka, Pere Ighogboja, Omagbemi Junior and Ebi, the activist is able to sensitize and mobilize his people against the perpetrators of this criminal exploitation and negligence. He decides to take the case of his people and region to the United Nations. Photographs of environmental degradation are taken as supportive evidence. However, at the airport, the photographs and other materials are seized and the Activist and his group are prevented from travelling. Joining politics becomes the new window through which his dreams for his people will be realized. *The Activist* is a fictional representation of what Ojaide has done several times in his poetry (see, for example, *Delta Blues and Home Songs*).

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* interrogates the moral consequences of the situation in the Niger Delta. The young girls become easy sex preys to the white oil workers and expatriates. Yellow-Yellow (the major character) herself is a function of such social malfunctioning, and, unfortunately, later found herself being also a sex object for self-sustenance. This too, is the story of many young ladies, who, against their inner desires, are forced to subject their bodies to sex exploiters (many of whom are the architects of the economic situation that turned them to such in the first instance). Agary therefore advocates girl-child education as a panacea to this problem. Yellow-Yellow's mother understands from the beginning that only proper education will give her daughter a different kind of future from her own.

Though Yellow-Yellow deviated on reaching Port-Harcourt, she still realizes that she could dare to make a difference with a university education. The presence of many Yellow-Yellow, with different names such as "African-profits", "born-troways", "ashawo-pickins", "father-unknowns" (*Yellow-Yellow*, p.171), is Agary's own way of waging war against the moral decadence that has become a feature of the present day realities in the Niger Delta.

The consciousness that "... the real wealth of my land/ Has become the pain of my people/ And a curse to my people" (*Iyene*, p.37), necessitated the agitation by women

like Pheba in Arnold Udoka's play *Iyene: A Dance Drama* (2009). Here, again, what the people have been given is "nothing except hunger, pain, diseases and poverty", while the expatriates "have been given weapons to cut us down" (Iyeni, p.31). The agitation for equity also finds voice in another Udoka's play, *Long Walk to a Dream* (2009). However, it seems for Udoka, dialogue between the parties concerned could bring the needed positive change to the people of the Niger Delta. What the playwright does, therefore, is to first chronicle the background to the struggle before presenting the grounds for dialogue.

Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of The Delta* is "dedicated to the finished and fed up people of the Delta including the dead and the dying". This dedication itself is a summation of the state of the people and their environment: the people are finished, hopeless and dead. This is amply echoed in the title poem "Oily tears of the Delta" where the poet laments the loss of the 'Lord forest' and 'Lord Mangrove'. The lives of the people are confiscated and everything is stolen. What one sees is the "oily tears on your wrinkled face" (p.33). In "Oloibiri", Oloibiri streets are not tarred with Gold,

Instead the minerals  
Is tilled and used  
To lubricate sex  
And crime and bigotry  
Everywhere else (p.30).

This is reminiscent of Sophia Obi's poem "Oloibiri" (*Tears in a Basket*). Obi was born in the Niger Delta region. Oloibiri, her village, was where oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria and exported in 1956. In the poem titled after her village name "Oloibiri", Obi indicts the multinational oil companies of exploitation and articulates all that is to be said about the life-threatening predicament of the communities in the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta. After the "Zebra string of pipelines running through my belle/ causing me to ache from relentless exploitation", Oloibiri lays "on the altar of faded glory/ only tears running through my veins" (*Tears in a Basket* 7). Again, there is the sad irony, that the Niger Delta itself suffers neglect while the wealth from its bowels makes others rich:

Niger Delta.....  
With the milk from her breast  
She moulds dusty earth into mansions  
While her children peep through tattered huts (p.18).

Indeed, "her children who give bountifully/... feed on remnants" (p.18). The result is that the people are "wrapped in cobwebs of pain" (p.19); pain that has enveloped their thinking and eroded their joy:

How do we think?  
When our thoughts are images lost in muddy streams,  
Dangling on hooks that mock our existence?  
How can we sing?  
When our folksongs are distorted grunts



Raking up our sorrowing lungs?  
 Why do we even smile?  
 When beneath our plastic joy  
 Painful tears flow freely (*Tears in a Basket*, p.19).

It is pertinent to add at this juncture that no single study of the literature emanating from the Niger Delta can ever be exhaustive. For every day, as the pain in the Niger Delta increases, the literary imagination is kindled and propelled not to be silent. Again, while initially the artists merely portray the situation in the Niger Delta (example early Clark and Ojaide), latter works depict calls for action (example Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* and Ojaide's *The Activist*). In addition, for the Niger Delta literature, it is a case of a masquerade dance watched by many people for different motives. That is why while novels like Agary's *Yellow—Yellow* will deal with mostly social/moral issues of the Niger Delta crises, Nnimmo Bassey's poetry will concentrate on the environmental degradation aspect. However, from whatever point the masquerade is watched and commented on, the aim is to ensure that the masquerade does not out dance its dance. It is to ensure that the entertainment and spiritual values of the masquerade dance is not relegated to the background. It is to consistently remind the masquerade that it is a communal and not individual property. It is for the masquerade to never forget that it can be stripped of its mask.

## NOTE

Chidi Amuta (1986) noted that "As a refraction of social experience through the prism of human imagination, the ontological essence of literature is to be located in terms of the extent to which it recycles social experience and transforms it into an aesthetic preposition" (pp.38-39). This is what has been the case of the different wars in Nigeria, on the political, cultural, economic, gender, ethnic and moral planes, and the creative process of the Nigerian literary artists.

## REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (1964). *Arrow of god*. London: Heinemann.  
 Achebe, C. (1966). *No longer at ease*. London: Heinemann.  
 Achebe, C. (1975). *Morning yet on creation day: Essays*. London: Heinemann.  
 Acholonu, C. (1985). *Nigeria in the year 1999*. Owerri, Totan.  
 Acholonu, C. (1985). *The spring's last drop*. Owerri, Totan.  
 Aderinokun, E. (1990). *Dance of the vulture*. Ibadan: An S & S (International) Publication.  
 Aderinokun, E. (1995). *Dark days are here*. Ibadan: An S & S (International) Publication.  
 Adewale-Nduka, T. (2000). *Naked testimonies*. Lagos: Mace Associates.  
 Agary, K. (2006). *Yellow-yellow*. Lagos: Dtalkshop.  
 Amadi, E. (1966). *The concubine*. London: Heinemann.  
 Amadi, E. (1973). *Sunset in biafra*. London: Heinemann.

- Amadiume, I. (1985). *Passion waves*. London: Karnak.  
 Amuta, C. (1986). "Literature of the Nigerian civil war". In Yemi Ogunbiyi (Ed.), *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present I* (pp.85-94). Lagos: Guardian.  
 Amuta, C. (1986). *Towards a sociology of African literature*. Oguta: Zim Pam.  
 Bassey, N. (2002). *We thought it was oil but it was blood*. Ibadan: Kraft.  
 Belolisia, A. (2006). *Torn asunder: A Nigerian civil war odyssey*. Abuja: Yaliam.  
 Ce, C. (2002). *African eclipse*. Enugu: Handel.  
 Chukwuma, H. (1994). Introduction. *Feminism in African literature: Essays on Criticism*. Ed. Helen Chukwuma. Enugu: New Generation.  
 Clark, J. P. (1991). *The wives revolt*. Ibadan: University Press.  
 Clark, J. P. (2000). *All for oil*. Lagos: Malthouse.  
 Clark, J. P. (1966). *Ozidi*. London: OUP.  
 Clark, J. P. *Casualties: Poems* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1979 ). London: Longman.  
 Cliff, F. (2013). "Isidore okpewho's *Tides* and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A month and a day*: A Kinesis of Eco-activism from Theory to praxis". In O. Okuyade (Ed.), *Eco-Critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes* (pp.47-73). New York: African Heritage Press.  
 Darah, G. G. (2011). "Revolutionary Pressures in Niger Delta Literatures". In C. Nwahunanya (Ed.), *From boom to doom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the literature of the Niger delta* (pp1-16). Owerri: Springfield.  
 Davies, C., & A. A. Graves, eds. (1986). *Ngambika: Studies of women in African literature*. New Jersey: African World Press.  
 Eghagha, H. (2002). *Rhythms of the last testament*. Lagos: Concept.  
 Emecheta, B. (1974). *Second class citizen*. London: Allison and Busby.  
 Etiowo, J. M. (2005). Power and Sanctity: A reading of innocent victims and sunset for a Mandarin. *The African Literary Journal*, B5, 141- 153.  
 Gimba, A. (1988). *Innocent victims*. Enugu: Delta.  
 Gimba, A. (1991). *Sunset for a Mandarin*. Lagos: West African.  
 Ikiriko, I. (2000). *Oily tears of the delta*. Ibadan: Kraft.  
 Iyayi, F. *The contract*. London: Longman.  
 Kato, C. (1999). *Victims of love*. Ibadan: Sterling-Horden.  
 Lovenduski, J. (1986). *Women and European politics: Contemporary feminism and public policy*. London: Wheatsheaf.  
 Ndibe, O. (2000). *Arrows of rain*. Essex: Heinemann.  
 Nwahunanya, C. (2011). *A harvest of tragedy: Critical perspectives on Nigerian civil war literature* (Revised & enlarged edition). Owerri: Springfield.  
 Nwapa, F. (1966). *Efuru*. London: Heinemann.  
 Nwapa, F. (1976). *Never again*. Enugu: Nwamife.  
 Obi, S. (2006). *Tears in a basket*. Ibadan: Kraft.  
 Ogum, D. N. (2001). The creative writer and the environment: The Niger delta experience. Paper presented at The 2001 Annual Convention Of Association of Nigerian Authors, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria.

- Ojaide, T. (1989). *The endless song*. Lagos: Malthouse.
- Ojaide, T. (1998). *Delta blues and home songs*. Ibadan: Kraft.
- Ojaide, T. (2007). *The activist*. Lagos: Farafuna.
- Ojaide, T. (2013). Foreword. In O. Okuyade (Ed.), *Eco-critical literature: Regreening African landscapes*. New York: African Heritage Press.
- Oko, E. (2005). *The west African novel and social revolution*. Calabar: Thumprints.
- Okpewho, I. (1993). *Tides*. London: Longman.
- Onwudinjo, P. (2000). *Women of Biafra and other poems*. Port Harcourt: Double Diamond.
- Onwudinjo, P. (2006). *Because I'm woman*. Calabar: Wusen.
- Osifo, G. (2004). *Dizzy angel*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Osofisan, F. (1975). *Kolera Kolej*. Ibadan: New Horn.
- Rotimi, O. (1971). *The gods are not to Blame*. London: OUP.
- Rotimi, O. (2006). *Our husband has gone mad again*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Segun, M. (1986). *Conflicts and other poems*. Ibadan: New Horn.
- Soyinka, W. (1963). *A dance of the forest*. London: OUP.
- Soyinka, W. (1971). *The strong breed*. London: Rex Collings.
- Soyinka, W. (1975). *Death and the king's horseman*. London: Methuen.
- Tutuola, A. (1964). *My life in bush of ghost*. London: Faber.
- Udoka, A. (2009). *Iyene: A dance drama*. Ibadan: Kraft.
- Udoka, A. (2009). *Long walk to a dream*. Ibadan: Kraft .
- Ushie, J. (2001). *Many voices, many visions: A stylistic study of 'new' Nigerian poetry* (Doctoral dissertation). Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Zell, H., Bundy, C., & Coulon, V. (Eds.). (1983). *A new reader's guide to African literature* (2nd ed.). London: Heinemann.