

Minority Representation of the Nigeria Civil War: A New Historicist Reading of Elechi Amadi's *Sunset at Biafra* and Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*

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Abstract

The Nigeria civil war has remained topical within literary scholarship as authors continue to centralize the historical phenomenon in their works in a bid to understand the socio-political dynamics in the country. A significant amount of critical scholarship on the war has also emerged, a natural response to the outpour of creative works. However, critical attention on the creative works on the civil war has been on the accounts of writers who dominated the discourse; writers who belonged to the seceding group, the Biafran section of the divide. The accounts of the war from the perspective of groups of people who were unwilling parts of the seceding Biafran divide has not enjoyed similar attention. The Niger-Delta minority ethnic groups within the larger Igbo ethnic grouping have not received commensurate attention. This has created a gap in the critical response to the depictions of the war experiences of the people from the Eastern region. This study, therefore, aims to investigate, from a New Historicist theoretical standpoint, the civil war experiences of the minority ethnic groups within the Eastern region during the Nigerian civil war. Using Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, the study revealed that while both the Igbo people and the other minority ethnic groups in the region suffered during the civil war, the sufferings of the minority ethnic group were intensified by lack of information, agency, and confusion regarding what their fate would be.

Keywords: Minority, Nigerian civil war, new historicism, Niger Delta, Biafra

Introduction

The African continent has recorded several civil conflicts following countries attainment of independence from colonial rule. Primarily, the lumping together of several ethnic groups in the creation of colonial territories laid the foundation for civil strife in the resultant countries as ethnic groups agitated for political domination of other groups. The severity of these civil conflicts motivated many African writers who, by virtue of their calling, respond by depicting, and thus, recording the experiences and issues that surround the wars (Nwanyanwu & Anasiudu, 26). Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra*, Flora Nwapa's *Never Again*, Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, Eddie Iroh's *Toads of War*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*, and Chris Abani's *Song for Night* are examples of creative responses to the Nigerian-Biafran civil war. Mark Bixler's *The Lost Boys of Sudan* is about the Sudanese war; Veronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana* is about the Rwandan genocide; Mark McWilliams' *Battle for Cassinga* is about the South African war with Angola; Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* is about the Sierra Leonean war while Wayétu Moore's *The Dragons*, *The Giant*, *The Women*, an account of the first Liberian war, are examples of continental responses to different war situations in Africa. To emphasize the severity of this war, the Nigeria-Biafra war motif continues to surface in works decades after the war had been concluded, both by writers who did and did not witness the war. For instance, Anthonia Kalu's *Broken Lives and Other Stories* published in 2003 is a collection of stories on the everyday lives of the Biafran people during the war. Alfred Obiora Uzokwe's *Surviving in Biafra: The Story of the Nigerian Civil War*, written in 2003 is a memoir which depicts the civil war from the perspective of a child. Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* published in 2015 recounts the effects of the war on two

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lesbian lovers who each belong to the warring faction. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* which was published in 2006 and Chinua Achebe's 2012 memoir, *There was a Country*, are seminal novels on the war. Significantly also, the outpour of literary response, which led to the emergence of a canon of war literature in the country named 'civil war literature' is dominated by writers who are of Igbo extraction. Ernest Nneji Emenyonu in "Post-war Writing in Nigeria" advances a reason for this: "A large percentage of contemporary African writers is from Nigeria, and many of the Nigerian writers (especially the novelists) come from the area designated for a while as the Republic of Biafra and are Igbo by ethnic origin" (77).

This present study focuses on the accounts of a minority group within the larger, albeit minority Eastern region which sought secession from Nigeria. The rationale being that, by virtue of their minority status in terms of number of writers, number of texts, and access to agency, creative responses which document their account of the war has not received focal attention.

The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War in Perspective and the Minority Status Definition

The regional governance system instituted at the eve of Nigeria's independence from Britain engendered tribalism and sectionalism which indigenous political leaders promoted to gain power in the country. With independence in 1960, Philips Okolo states that "Nigeria was now beset by strings of political problems which stemmed from the lop-sided nature of the political divisions of the country and the type of the existing federal constitution, and the spirit in which it operated" (15). Kirk-Greene's *The Genesis of the Nigerian Civil War and the Theory of Fear* alludes to a plethora of specific reasons which led to the war:

the appalling civilian massacres of October and the mass murder of Ibo military personnel in July 1966...the attempted castration of Northern virility by the assassination of its top military leadership in January 1966... UPGA's deliberate bid for political survival once it has seen its chance of constitutional change shattered by the fraudulent census of 1962/3, the abortive general election of 1964, [and] the death of democracy in the WR election of 1965 (7-8).

Resistance against political and economic marginalization of the Eastern region invariably led to moves which propelled the country onto the path of war. Okolo writes that the creation of 12 new states from the initial four regions in the country separated "a major industrial port, the Ibo-dominated city of Port Harcourt, and the minority areas, including a large part of the oil-producing regions, from the Ibo majority in the East-Central State; this arrangement was considered by the Eastern leaders to be a violation of the agreement at Aburi to effect greater regional autonomy" (Okolo 19).

On January 15, 1966, soldiers who were mostly from the eastern region and led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Ezeogu, attempted to effect a change of government. These soldiers staged a coup in which several northerners, including some of the highest-ranking northern army officers were assassinated. The ascension of Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, also from the eastern region, led northerners to interpret the coup as an Igbo-led conspiracy to rid the north of power and impose Igbo domination. Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi changed the governance system from federalism to unitary system by Military Decree. He was accused of sectionalism as many of his advisers were from his ethnic group. The refusal to try the coup plotters who assassinated politicians and other military officers and the widespread unrest in the country eventually resulted in another coup six months after the January coup. This coup was by northern military officers, led by Majors Murtala Mohammed, Theophilus Danjuma, and Martins Adamu who ended Ironsi's regime and assassinated him. This countercoup decimated the numbers of Igbo soldiers while mobs in northern states went on rampage, killing around 30,000 Igbos. Those who survived the rampage fled south, while northerners living in Igbo areas were also killed in retaliatory attacks. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35312370>)

Elech Amadi documents in his *Sunset in Biafra* the sectional killings during the coup and how the ethnic affiliations of the coup leaders propelled the general belief that the coup was tribal induced and a potent instigation for conflict:

The coup of 15 January 1966 took place three days after my arrival in my village my first impulse was to get back into the army. If the soldiers had decided to clean up the political mess, restore order and shape the future of the nation I ought to be there to help. However, as details of the incidents seeped out I changed my mind. The anomalies of the coup are now well known. No leading politicians of Eastern origin were killed. Again, apart from Lt-Col. Unegbe, all the high- ranking army officers killed were from the North and West. These facts would have little or no significance if the leaders of the coup had not been of Ibo stock, the majority tribe in the East.... From this point I had a strong feeling that there would be serious intertribal conflict. (Emphasis ours, 7- 8)

He also notes that after the coup, “the Ibos were jubilant over the turn of events... Among the elite there was cautious hope for a brighter future in which the spectre of domination personified by the giant north would be absent” (9). These are strong indications that buttress the perception that the coup was a tribal war rather than an attempt to correct ills in the governance system.

On May 30, 1967, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, on behalf of the Eastern region, and with little support from its non-Igbo population, declared the region’s secession from the Federation and declared itself to be the independent Republic of Biafra. This led to a 30-month war. In his surrender announcement on Radio Biafra, Major General Effiong attempted a justification for the outbreak of the war:

Throughout history, injured people have had to resort to arms in their self-defense where peaceful negotiations have failed. We are no exception. We took up arms because of the sense of insecurity generated in our people by the events of 1966. We have fought in defense of that cause (Okolo 52).

Literary accounts of the factors that led to the Nigerian civil war emphasize the political tension between the Hausa-Fulani and the Igbo ethnic groups. Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* is seminal here. There are instances where a non-Igbo man mistakes Olanna for a Hausa-Fulani woman and their conversation shows is tainted by suspicion of the Igbo people and ethnic tension: “The problem with Igbo people is that they want to control everything in this country. Everything. Why can’t they stay in the East? They own all the shops; they control the civil service, even the police” (Adichie 104). Augustine and Nwanyanwu (30) too, discuss the trauma in which the Igbo ethnic group was subjected to during the war. They describe the war as a clash that displaced the Igbo minority ethnic groups in the country thereby causing them to lose their means of livelihood.

The term “minority” is a dynamic concept with multiple definitions which are determined by the context of usage (Omaka 25). Minority group in the context of this discussion will mean a group of people within a larger group who are not given the opportunity to make decisions for themselves and as such are likely to face unfair treatments because of their limited number and weak political status. This definition allows our investigation of sub-groups within the significantly dominating Igbo ethnic group which took far-reaching decisions on behalf of other groups. The selected authors for this essay, Elechi Amadi and Ken Saro Wiwa, are indigenes of areas considered to be sub-sets of the larger Igbo ethnic group. While Amadi was a native of Ikwerre local government area in Rivers state, Nigeria, an Igbo sub-ethnic group that occupies the upland region of Rivers state, Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa, popularly known as Ken Saro-Wiwa on the other hand was born at Bori, near Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He belonged to the Ogoni ethnic group, another of the Igbo sub-ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region. Both writers fought on the side of the Federal

Government of Nigeria against the Biafran forces during the 30-month war.

A New Historicist Interpretation of the Nigerian Civil War

New Historicism is a theory which is concerned with the political functions of literature and the intricate ways cultures produce and reproduce themselves. Mukesh (118) posits that the theory encourages a “reposition[ing of] the text in the original discursive reality of the age in which it was produced”. This is why Sharma states that a literary work “should be considered a product of its time, place and circumstances of its composition rather than an isolated creation of a genius.” (Sharma 17). One of the war experiences of the minority ethnic group in Biafra during the civil war was the absence of consultation and lack of information. This is because these groups were not given prior notice about the Biafran secession neither were they given a choice whether to belong to the republic of Biafra (Perera-Rajasingham 12). Thus, the minority ethnic groups in Biafra were faced with the dilemma of fighting a blind war. Radicchia (37) posits that the minority ethnic groups in the Republic of Biafra were forced into a war they did not understand. In Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*, the protagonist of the novel, Mene, does not even understand the basis of the war, he does not know the reason why he was fighting for the Biafran soldiers, nor did he know who he was fighting against. At some point he states that:

Every time a person will speak in that lorry he is always talking of the Enemy. The Enemy. The Enemy. I don’t know what this person look like...But every time he will be calling that enemy. I begin to fear this Mr. Enemy you know... Even the Chief Commander General is fearing this man. Why? Even self, why all of us will join hand to kill him. Does he have many heads? What is wrong with him? Why does everybody want to kill him? And why they will train plenty people to kill him? (Saro-Wiwa 58).

Mene here can be used to represent the entire minority ethnic group in Biafra who found themselves fighting in a war they neither knew the reason nor were they given a choice between war and peace. When Mene would know who the purported “Enemy” was, he is again denied the choice of what to do. An air raid that depletes his company leaves Mene fleeing into the forest but he is soon captured by the federal troops and taken to the prisoner of war camp. In a confused state, he is enlisted into the federal troop and continues fighting in a war he knows nothing about.

Immediately I wear that uniform I know that I am not prisoner of war. [...] They also gave me one short thick rifle like this. Very fine rifle. I like it. [...] And na these people they are calling “enemy” all the time. How enemy will give me food chop, chook me medicine till I well, give me motor to drive, without I no get licence, give me fine fine uniform and then very fantastic rifle. So I am a fool all this time that I am wanting to kill this enemy! God of Mercy! (Saro-Wiwa 125)

It is easy for Mene to switch sides from being a Biafran soldier to being a soldier in the federal troop as he does not know anything about the Biafran movement. Mene’s narration captures the lack of information and absence of choice that the minority ethnic groups faced during the war. They are tossed from one fighting side to the other based on who held control of a locale at a particular time. Mene reveals that the minority ethnic groups of the riverine areas of Eastern Nigeria only belonged to Biafra because of General Ojukwu’s territorial claim and as soon as the regions are captured by the federal troop, they are moved to the federal side. The minority ethnic groups in Eastern Nigeria can thus be said to have suffered in the hands of the federal troops as well as the Biafran soldiers depending on the power in control of the territory at each given time.

Subsequently, Mene faces a tragedy as his townspeople begin to see him as an enemy and they facilitate his

arrest. He is then captured and taken to prison where he escapes execution as the war comes to an end. This narration of the civil war experience from the side of a minority ethnic group in Biafra shows that they were not lesser victims than the Igbo minority ethnic groups in Biafra. From Mene's narration in Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, one can deduce that the minority ethnic group in Biafra land suffered in different ways. They were caught between the Biafran militia and the federal troops. As a result of little or no information about the war, the war was not a matter of choice for them, it was just a situation in which they found themselves.

At the end of the war, they discovered that the purpose of the war was never in their interest and the war did not yield any positive results for them. This is revealed in the concluding part of Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* as the protagonist, Mene returns to nothing after the war. He says,

And as I was going, I was just thinking how the war have spoiled my town Dukana, uselessly many people, killed many others, killed my mama and my wife, Agnes, my beautiful wife with J.J.C. and now it have made me like person wey get leprosy because I have no town again. And I was thinking how I was prouder before to go to soza and call myself Sozaboy. But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely.

Amadi's narration in *Sunset in Biafra* similarly reveals how the minority ethnic groups in Biafra were dominated by the Igbos: "... began to move in to trade in the riverine area... settled and by sheer force of numbers began to dominate smaller minority ethnic group" (21). He goes further to narrate that they became "aggressive and tyrannical" (52) to the extent that, "They would walk into private property and harvest plantains, oranges and pawpaw in spite of protests from the owners. This is Biafra land; was all they said." (52).

Amadi notes that minority ethnic groups suffered in the hands of the Igbo minority ethnic groups as they were victims of the activity that was tagged, "combing" (39). With the understanding that "cultural domination in Nigeria also implied political and economic domination" (21), Amadi points out that "having proclaimed their Biafra, they ignored or underestimated the fears of the minorities. These fears were fed daily by cruel arrest and detentions. **Gradually even those of the minority groups who had lost relations and property in the north came to feel that their salvation lay in a united Nigeria**" (Emphasis ours, 52). This shows how disillusioned the people became with the treatment they received from the Igbo soldiers. The obvious loss of confidence in the war propelled these people to antagonism against their oppressors.

In his reconstructing of the Nigerian Civil War, Amadi's narrative is compelling in his deployment of diary entries, eyewitness accounts, depictions of torture, suffering and bombardment of the minority people. The Igbo soldiers' intelligence gathering which Amadi describes as 'combing' was used to commit unspeakable war crimes among the minority ethnic groups with the claim that the minority groups are sabotaging the Biafran agitation. This is also depicted in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* where it is mentioned that other people from the minority ethnic groups in Biafra were referred to as saboteurs. These are the words that Ugwu hears from an ex Biafran fighter: "Our town would not have fallen but for the saboteurs in our midst! ... I was a Civil Defender. I know how many infiltrators we discovered, and all of them were Rivers' people. What I am telling you is that we can no longer trust these minorities who don't speak Igbo" (Adichie 111).

Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* echoes the fact that the notion of Biafra was not a collective agreement of all the minority groups in Biafra. The historical reality Amadi captures in his autobiographical novel also makes

vivid references to the further marginalisation of sub-groups in the Biafran territory. Soldiers of Ibo extraction raided, plundered, and subjected other minority groups to arrest: “No one was safe. Rebel troops took the law into their own hands and carried out private vendettas” (*Sunset at Biafra* 60). In fact, there are incidences where fellow Igbo citizens were arrested, but most victims were non-Igbos. Perhaps, the fact that most of the key personnel in charge of the war was Igbo gave them upper hand over the other groups and made them suspicious of tribes that were not Igbo. As an autobiographical work, Amadi records in this novel the experiences of minority people who were annexed into a war.

Conclusion

It is revealed in the works of several authors that the major cause of conflict in Nigeria has been the issue of ethnic domination and political rivalry. Some of the tragedies experienced by the minority ethnic groups in Biafra is revealed in Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra*. These two narrations are similar in the way they revolve their plots around the hardships faced by the minority ethnic groups in Biafra. Before the civil war, the Igbo ethnic group was seen as a minority in the country, maybe because of their population in comparison with other ethnic groups in the country. It is important to note that within a certain ethnic group that identifies themselves as a minority ethnic group, there will always be sub-groupings that will bring about the question of majority and minority within the same group. After the brief secession that gave rise to Biafra, the majority and minority dichotomy reveals itself within Biafra as one minority ethnic groups is seen to dominate the others. The investigation of the perspective of the Nigerian war from the selected novels shows the domination of less populated and less politically strong minority groups in the eastern region of Nigeria by the more populated and dominant Igbo group. The selected authors give a different perspective of the war. Rather than focus on the war and the alleged grievances which contributed to the war, the authors focus on the minority groups and how they understand the situation. There is the concern that people have been compelled into a war without consultation. They are depicted as mere tools and pawns in the hands of the dominant ethnic group which decides their fate and determines their future. These texts are departures from the conventional Nigerian civil war texts where the emphases usually are on causes of the war, the effects of the fighting between two sides, and the individual, collective, socio-economic crisis therefrom. These texts put up critical concerns of marginalization, domination, and the denial of choice by an ethnic group which purportedly embarked on a war for secession because of the same reasons. As Chidi Amuta puts it, the Nigerian civil war literatures represent a—significant step towards the politicization of the Nigerian literary imagination. And the selected texts for this enquiry have demonstrated this.

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