

**FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE RIDICULOUS: A STUDY OF AKACHI ADIMORA-
EZEIGBO'S *ROSES AND BULLETS***

**By
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The paper x-rays the extent to which Adimora-Ezeigbo captures memories of the Nigerian/Biafran war. It moves on to illustrate how she utilizes the atmosphere of war as an arena for symbolic relationships. It also probes into the deteriorated nature of these relationships with a hint of optimism. Using New Historicism and Post colonialism as platforms for analyzing the text, the work concludes that despite the greatness of human prospects, individuals or societies end up with little or no satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

The natural bond that binds people together as a family or community does not cancel the existence of differences among them. In relation to this, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O in *Decolonizing the Mind* states:

No man or woman can choose their biological nationality. The conflicts between peoples cannot be explained in terms of that which is fixed (invariables). Otherwise the problems between any two peoples would always be the same...there would never be any solution to social conflicts except through a change in that which is permanently fixed, for example through genetic or biological transformation of the actors. (1-2)

Bill Ashcroft et al, in the introductory pages of *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* add:

The concept of boundaries and borders has been crucial in the imperial occupation and domination of indigenous space. And the question of borders and borderlands has now become a pressing issue in an age of increasingly hysterical border protection. Cultural borders are becoming recognized as a critical region of colonial and neo-colonial domination and economic marginalization. (viii)

Every community is characterized by such conflicts, and it is the responsibility of every committed writer to fictionalize the happenings of his community and provide a way forward

for the society. Wole Soyinka rightly puts it when he declares at the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference in Stockholm in 1967 that "The artist has always functioned in African societies as the recorder of mores and experience of his society and the vision in his own time" (Qtd in Adimora-Ezeigbo, 122). He goes further to say that the writer "anticipates, he warns. It is not always enough for the writer to be involved in direct physical struggle of today; he often cannot help but envisage and seek to protect the future which is the declared aim of contemporary struggle". (119)

By 1967 when Soyinka made this declaration, there were some post independent issues which he thought can only be addressed by the writer in his or her fictional works. One cannot ignore Soyinka's thought because of the timing due to the fact that, these same post independent concerns are inherent in contemporary societies though not in the same magnitude.

Among the numerous Nigerian writers, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo aptly suits Soyinka's definition of a good writer. Adimora-Ezeigbo thinks that conflicts, characterized by situations of armed struggle, often lead to imaginative literature. She states that "War creates a new kind of reality which is different from what is understood as reality in normal times. This is illustrated by the unusual reactions manifested in people's attitudes and disposition after a war" (1-2). In the late nineteen sixties, the Nigerian-Biafran war did not only bring a new experience to the Nigerians but ushered a new genre of literature referred to as "the war novels", which are the end products of the Nigerian experience of civil anarchy (13).

ROSES AND BULLETS AS A SUBLIME WAR NARRATIVE

Every human society is characterized by conflicts and sometimes war which help expose the real or hidden intents of many. Since literary artists draw inspiration from the society, their works cannot be fully understood or interpreted without a proper look at the historical epoch from which the works emanate. Louis Montrose in an attempt to describe New Historicism as a mode of criticism says it is "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Qtd Abrams, 191). In other words, history cannot be seen as a set of fixed objective facts but like literature with which it mingles; it is a text that is subject to interpretations. All texts are conceived as discourses that, even though they may mirror an external reality, have some hidden representations which, according to Abrams, are: verbal formations which are the "ideological products" or cultural constructs of the historical conditions specific or characteristic of an era; which in the view of New Historicists, only

produce, confirm and propagate the complex power structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society. (191)

New Historicists emphasize the role of shaping a text on social and economic conditions because they believe that literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings operating in the time and place in which the text was written. This is due to the fact that the text itself is “part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning” (Qtd Abrams, 191). Thus, literary text and historical situations from which they emerged are equally important because the text and context are mutually constitutive or create each other. In other words, literary texts shape the historical context and are shaped by their historical contexts (Tyson, 291-2).

Furthermore, New Historicists seek to read texts as part of diverse and at times contradictory social and ideological network of power-knowledge relations. This involves not just canonical but also marginal, fragmentary and seemingly inconsequential texts that have previously been ignored or simply passed over by literary historians (Lane, 143). Stephen Greenblatt, one of the leading propounders of New Historicism, posits that literature functions in three interconnective ways that an elimination of one will mar the interpretation of a text. He says literature functions “as a manifestation of the concrete behaviour of its particular author; as itself the expression of the codes by which behaviour is shaped; (and) as a manifestation as a mere abstraction but a constitutive culture” (Lane, 144). In schematic terms, Greenblatt sets out a triad of the two modes of power being the shift from church to book to absolutist state and the shift from celebration to rebellion to subversive submission; and the literary mode from being a shift from absorption by community, religious faith, or diplomacy towards the establishment of literary creation as a profession in its own right (Lane, 144). This explains why this mode of criticism confines itself largely to the studies of the author’s life in order to discover his or her intention in writing the work, or to the studies of the historical period in which the work was written, in order to reveal the spirit of the age which the text was then shown to embody.

Adimora-Ezeigbo in conformity to the above thought, asserts in *Fact and Fiction in the Nigerian Civil War* that:

Nigerian artists perceived the crisis and civil war and through their recreation of the reality of the war, the writers hope to

provide new insight into these experiences for the purpose of enlightening their people so that the lessons of the past are applied to solve the problems of today for future direction. (124)

Since it is impossible to recreate reality in its perfection, most African writers, in a bid to pave a way forward for their societies, recreate their perceptions with some artistic niceties. Thus, Chidi Amuta says without doubt that:

The historically conscious Nigerian writer who seeks to adopt as the locus of his art the important social questions which the war raked up is confronted with a familiar dilemma (which) centres around the larger theoretical problem of the relationship between history as empirically verifiable experiential data on the one hand and the literary artefact as a created totality with its own internal ontological dynamics on the other. (Qtd Adimora-Ezeigbo, 17)

In other words, even though most Nigerian writers draw their inspiration from the Nigerian Civil War, the literary piece has distinct structures or characteristics that make it unique. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in her assessment of the works of other Nigerian authors like Cyprian Ekwensi, Buchi Emecheta and others with regard to their capturing of the realities of the horrors of the war thinks that they are sensational in the way in which they present the facts without the “niceties of arts.” She states that

These novelists cannot have created a genuinely fictional world because they have not succeeded in transforming their factual material into artistically satisfying artefact. They have shown their anger against the excruciating effect of the war on their society. However, an uncontrollable rage on the part of the artist most likely would ruin any artistic effect he may hope to achieve. A writer of genius does not merely imitate or reproduce reality, but must manipulate reality towards the creation of valid fictional world. (Qtd in Ifekwe, 123)

It is in this light that one explores the extent to which Adimora-Ezeigbo has been able to capture “memories long forgotten” by “recreating fresh pains from decades-old cadavers of civil mayhem” in *Roses and Bullets* using the words of Joseph Omotayo (1-2)

Ernest Jünger in *Storm of Steel*, a memoir of World War One (WWI), gives a vivid description of the desperate need of his generation to encounter wartime experiences. In the opening pages of the text he writes:

Grown up in an age of security, we shared a yearning for danger, for the experience of the extraordinary. We were enraptured by war. We had set out in a rain of flowers, in a drunken atmosphere of blood and roses. Surely the war had to supply us with what we wanted; the great, the overwhelming, the hallowed experience. We thought of it as manly, as action, a merry duelling party on flowered, blood be-dewed meadows. (Qtd Licht, 16)

Unlike Jünger who creates a situation whereby his characters have never experienced war and desperately desire one, Adimora-Ezeigbo describes a generation that does not only hear of war but also partakes in the activities and challenges of such a time in the society. Adimora-Ezeigbo writes *Roses and Bullets* against the backdrop of the Nigerian Civil War which occurred between the years 1967-1970, after the independence of Nigeria. This war resulted from the counter coup by the Northerners aimed at revenging the 16th of January 1966 coup planned by most Eastern Nigerian leaders, which led to the death of several Northern Nigerian leaders. Major Abubakar A. Atofarati thinks that this war was fought to establish a strong and unified nation that is void of corruption and internal strife. Since the Easterners were so involved in the coup, the Northerners saw it as a deliberate attempt by the Easterners to eliminate all their leaders and take command of the leadership positions in the country. This did not only alter the political equation or balance that existed but also destroyed the fragile trust existing among the main ethnic groups. With the arrest of the ring leaders of the 1966 coup, General Aguiyi Ironsi appointed governors to control the various regions. In July 1966, Northern military officers launched a counter coup against the Easterners which recorded the death of many Easterners as well as General Aguiyi Ironsi and other senior officers of Eastern origin. These killings caused most Easterners who were out of their region to flee back where

they were treated as refugees because they had lost most if not all of their property. The failure of the conference in Lagos on the 9th of August 1966 intended to put an end to the continuous killing of Easterners instead led to the division of the country into twelve states from the original four regions in May 1967.

The failure to adopt the decisions made in the Aburi Conference organised in Ghana by General Ankrah of Ghana, led to several accusations by the Eastern region and Federal Government leaders of each other through the use of propaganda. Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka declared Eastern Nigeria as “the independent sovereign state of Biafra” on the 30th of May 1967. This led to the declaration of war on the Easterners by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, the then head of the Federal Government, on the 6th of July 1967. By April 1969, the envisioned rapid victory had disappeared from the Federal side but the Biafrans were still holding on. The Federals engaged in strategic envelopment of the remaining Biafran enclave after the failure of many conferences to achieve a cease fire and an end of the war. Thus, the few Biafran soldiers were left with no option but to surrender to the Federal Government of Nigeria on the 14th of January 1970, bringing an end to the war.

Adimora-Ezeigbo has created a situation carved out from this period of crisis in *Roses and Bullets* in a manner that permits the readers to see, know, understand and experience the crisis. This is due to the fact that literature is a replication of daily happenings in the society as evident in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* when Ashcroft et al posit that

More than three quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the shared experience of colonialism. It is easy to see how important this has been in the political and economic spheres, but its general influence on the perceptual frameworks of contemporary peoples is often less evident. Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writing, and through their other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day-to-day realities experienced by colonised peoples have been most powerfully encoded. (1)

The author's creative picture of Biafran soldiers disguising as civilians in a bid to capture mature men who are fit for battle and later when there is shortage of soldiers, immature boys to train for the defence of Biafra, can be better understood when the reader flashes back to the historical account of the Nigerian Civil War. This is illustrated when Eloka Odunze has a narrow escape from the Biafran soldiers and they have an exchange of words with Ginika in

their compound. The soldiers are so angry and determined to get their victim despite Ginika's feigned ignorance of what they are asking and the later intervention of Chief Odunze who does not only yell at them but also informs them that many of his family members are fighting in the various war fronts to protect Biafra. Ginika, in her response to the soldier's question says:

Which man are you talking about? I didn't see any man. It dawned on her that the soldier was after Eloka to conscript him. As she watched, three other men in plain clothes walked in and she understood they were with the sergeant. She had heard that most soldiers on conscription exercise didn't wear uniform any longer, so that the people they targeted, who naturally were none the wiser, could be more easily caught. (p.291)

The desperation in which Biafra finds herself, represented by the attitudes or behaviours of the conscription officers, is also evident when Udo is almost taken to the battle front despite his tender age and inexperience. This forceful conscription of untrained youths and their release to the battle fronts with little or no war equipment, knowledge or food to protect and preserve themselves and Biafra, is what catches the satirical eye of the author. But Adimora-Ezeigbo's preservation of Udo when he finally goes to the war front and escapes successfully among hundreds who were conscripted, betrays her secret prayer for the war to come to an end. This is due to the fact that the future of every nation is dependent on its youths which Udo represents. Thus, we can envisage a glimpse of hope to hang on, for all is not lost amid the continuous oppression of the Biafran army and air raids by the Nigerian army. This brings in the limelight the New Historicists' idea of analysing a text in the context of the historical milieu in which the text is produced and received. The historical background from which Adimora-Ezeigbo draws her inspiration serves more as the readers' previous knowledge to facilitate their understanding of such creativity than when it is not taken into consideration.

Gbemisola Adeoti in "The Re-making of Africa: Ayi Kwei Armah and the Narrative of an (Alter)-native Route to Development" thinks that

Post-independence years in many ex colonies of Africa are characterized by indices of underdevelopment: economic dependency, huge local and foreign debts, ethno-religious violence, mass unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, electoral

fraud, corruption, inadequate or dysfunctional infrastructures.

(4)

It is the infestation of African countries with such ills of neocolonialism that accounts for the numerous uprisings inherent in these countries. These uprisings do not only affect the infrastructure of these nations but affects the population since there are records of death. The Nigerian war recorded many cases of death both in the Nigerian and Biafran camps due to air raids, face-to-face confrontations of opposing army and starvation within or without the camps, which Adimora-Ezeigbo has vividly presented in *Roses and Bullets* in order to give the readers an opportunity to experience the devastating effects of war. As a way of exercising their power or prove their leadership superiority, the Nigerian army used among other war strategies air raids to suppress the Biafran army, who wanted to shy away from the laws placed by the Federal Government by declaring themselves independent. After the persistence of the Biafran army despite their limited resources, the Nigerian army resorted to air raids to intimidate and put the Biafrans to order. One glaring enactment of the air raids is that of the Orie market which recorded material and human loss but for few survivors like Ginika and Udo. Perplexed by what happened, Ginika takes hold of Udo's hand and leads him home. As they find their way home, Ginika sympathetically says:

The dead and the wounded littered the ground. Many had died instantly and might not have suffered any pain... As she passed one woman moaned, "Please, help me; it's my leg." Ginika looked and saw a bloodied leg, looking pulpy like a sponge... All she wanted was to get out of this gory scene.... she saw limbs ripped off from their owners, and other body parts lying around as if they were for sale.... Ginika cringed at the sight of blood spattered on trees, on the ground, on merchandise and on the dead bodies lying everywhere. (p.212)

This explains the intensity of the destruction of life and property in Biafra and Nigeria's determination to humble the Biafrans where even the market is relocated to the forest area. Not too long after the market air raid, a Nigerian plane bombed Ejike Okoro's house because they thought it to be a military camp. This attack ends Ejike Okoro's life and instils more fear in the hearts of Biafrans. All these killings can be considered as a few of the aftermath of colonialism. This is due to the fact that Aimé Césaire talking about the negative impact of colonialism on Africa says:

I am talking of societies drained of their essence and life, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out. (Qtd in Adeoti, 3)

In this light, we can understand why Ginika is gripped with fear when she sees Easterners who have been battered and shattered into pieces by Northerners at the train station. Some of these corpses are with no hands or legs, others' heads have been separated from their bodies and those who are wounded, smeared with blood. The site is so horrifying that Ginika who can be seen as the voice of the author cannot withstand the pains to the extent that she collapses and loses appetite. This shows Adimora-Ezeigbo's emotional breakdown caused by the prevalence of the war. Thus, she unconsciously produces a sensational effect which may influence the reader to accept her viewpoint concerning the war which she has accused other writers of.

Such incidences destroyed the Biafran hopes of autonomy and fostered Nigeria's grip on them. It is shocking that Nigeria wages a war against Biafra on the grounds that they want to discipline rebellion but looking at the Orie market air raid, the slaughtered corpses at the rail and the scrambling out of Enugu, one wonders whether their course was genuine. These aspects of dominance and subjugation are not only found in Nigeria as Adimora-Ezeigbo presents but are characteristic of what obtains in most, if not all post independent African countries. The exposition of such ills by authorities brings to mind one of the major concerns of postcolonialism. This main point of interest is to analyze the ideological forces that on the one hand, promoted the resistance of colonized peoples against their oppressors, a resistance that is as old as colonialism, and on the other hand, forced the colonized to internalize or incorporate the colonizer's values.

Due to the persistence of the war, people left the Northern region where Easterners were being massacred in their numbers because the Nigerian army has taken over their cities and their villages have been converted to refugee camps. These camps are characterized by indecency, embezzlement, bestiality and other ills of war. In most of the refugee camps, people die as a result of the uncomfortable conditions of the camps. Some people are kept in isolation rooms. People in these rooms are rarely visited except to give them relief materials. This abandonment precipitated their death. For instance, there is a room reserved for kwashiorkor

victims who cannot survive again. In one of the rooms Ginika encounters a little girl of ten who has messed up herself due to her inability to get out of bed. Ginika gives her a helping hand and comforts by assuring her that when the workers come “they will change your dress and clean you up” (301). According to Ginika, this little girl’s

Eyes were like umi, shallow wells filled with muddy water. Her head had a few tufts of hair which ironically had the colour of gold. With her jutting wrinkled forehead, sallow skin, sunken cheeks and emaciated body, she looked more like a wizened old woman than the child of ten that she was. (p.301)

In other words, she is an epitome of rejection, abandonment and moral degradation orchestrated by the political instability, which has caused people of great visions to become helpless and hopeless. This explains why Pa Matthew gradually shifts from singing war songs to chanting religious songs as a means of solace. Leopold Sedar Senghor, in conformity to the concerns of Post colonialism, thinks that Africans are forced to look for their own ways of achieving economic, democratic and spiritual freedom because till date, the colonial masters and their representatives have not been able to satisfy those spiritual and economic needs. He states that:

The satisfaction of the spiritual needs which transcend our natural needs has to be achieved. This has not yet happened in any European or American form of civilisation: neither in the west nor the east. For this reason, we are forced to seek our own original mode, a Negro- African mode... paying attention to ... economic democracy and spiritual freedom. (Qtd in Bell, 38)

According to Senghor, the resistance that is inherent in most African societies is a means of obtaining satisfaction for the spiritual, economic and why not political needs which have not yet been achieved neither by the colonizers nor the colonized.

Despite the availability of workers to ensure the equal distribution of relief materials to the refugees, many of them die of starvation as most of the workers give relief materials to their family members. People like Chief Odunze take advantage of the war atmosphere to exploit women in varied forms. Though married, he keeps a mistress - Nwoyibo in the camp. This emphasizes the decadent nature of the administrative authorities who take advantage of every

situation to satisfy their lustful desires. Those who refuse to adhere to their demands suffer the consequences. This is the case of Janet who refuses to give in to Mr. Asiobi's desires and is bound to receive punishment from him. He condemns everything that Janet does in the camp. He goes unpunished just like the soldier who drugs Ginika and rapes her in the Nkwerre military camp, which sets the pace for her marital misfortune.

This wayward, indiscipline and beastly attitudes of post independent leaders is also seen in the behaviour of the sergeants who kidnap Ginika, rape and imprison her within the military camp without the knowledge of their boss. Ginika is brutally punished for using a polite means to turn down the love advances of Sergeant Suleman. She tells him to be circumcised before anything can happen between them. Unfortunately, he goes for the act and when he dies, his Muslim colleagues take upon themselves to violate her sexually under the pretext that she is the cause of Sule Ibrahim's death. The Sergeant's feint bitterness is seen when he says: "You kill Sule. He be better man pass all your rebel brothers. Dat thing you no give Sule, I go take am today. Ashawo!" (p. 495).

Adimora-Ezeigbo uses irony as a double-edged sword to criticize both Nigeria's claim for waging a war against Biafra as a pretext of preserving unity, which ends up with thousands of lives lost and Biafra's swift acceptance to take the bull by its horns without a corresponding preparedness to sustain the war. This is seen in the forceful conscription of untrained youths for reinforcement at the battle fronts and propaganda through the plays of the theatre troops that moved from one military camp to another. The invitation of musical bands to entertain the soldiers so that they relax, forget the past defeats and gain strength for future battles and why not victories are other Biafran strategies that kept them moving. This could be likened to the Directorate of Propaganda that produced and distributed pamphlets and booklets that helped sustained the Biafran resistance for long. The 1966 Pogrom published by the Eastern Nigerian Military government which showed the massacre of Easterners in the North smuggled into Ginika's school symbolizes this propaganda material. The narrator notes that

The Eastern Nigerian Government published a small book *Pogrom 1966* which documented the massacre of easterners in the North and some parts of the West. The book was widely circulated in the East. Ginika saw a copy someone had smuggled into her school. It reminded her of the dead and mutilated bodies she had seen at the railway station. She recognised the headless body she had seen which was pictured on the cover of the book. (168)

This booklet does not only remind her of the mutilated bodies she had seen at the railway but makes her to join the Enugu women in the preparation of snacks as their own win-the-war efforts.

Though a Biafran, Adimora-Ezeigbo's ability to manipulate her feelings towards the sufferings or plight of the Biafrans, coupled with the fact that she does not only suffer the consequences of war but is an eye-witness of it, shows the extent of her objectivity in the presentation of facts as opposed to other Nigerian writers like Flora Nwapa, Cyprian Ekwensi and Buchi Emecheta who recreate the Nigerian Civil War showing their open disgruntlement towards those who caused the war (i.e. the incompetent visionless Nigerian and Biafran leaders) by betraying their emotional involvement with their preoccupations of interest in their various works (Ifekwe, 116). Adimora-Ezeigbo does not just recount the historical event but in the course of recounting or reproducing this fact, she employs some artistic skills to package the event more beautifully than a historian. This "niceties" is what New Historicists think must be considered with the author's background for a reader to arrive at a better interpretation of a text. The fact that the author of our text is an eye witness of the Nigerian/Biafran war renders the text more credible or authentic as she states:

My interest in writing on the Nigerian Civil War dates as far back as the seventies soon after the war had ended; that was when published works on the war started to emerge in local bookshops. I was curious then to find out what people had to say on the tragic historical event which brought so much unhappiness to many homes in the area where I come from. Perhaps the fact that I had witnessed the unforgettable event fist-hand as a young school girl aided in no small measure in stimulating my interest in researching into this area... (Qtd in Ifekwe, 108)

In the same light, Joseph Omotayo in his critical review of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*, thinks Adimora-Ezeigbo succeeds in recreating the civil war in a way that does not only captivate the reader's mind but also makes use of "much writing ardour" or artist skills to paint the event. He says:

"There are deluges of books on the subject. Each time, these books only realise different actualisations in various opinions without offering new perspectives ... The similarity of events/

thematic organisations in Biafra-majored pieces are easily noticed and quite predictable ... In reflecting the civil struggle that once threatened the country's unity, *Roses and Bullets* packs much writing ardour in recreating fresh pains from decades-old cadavers of civil mayhem. It encloses the worn-out with the imaginative creativeness that unburdens the reader from the ordinariness that is likely to seep out from the main theme. In the imagery thought impossible, memories long forgotten are juggled". (1-2)

According to Omotayo, irrespective of the numerous books which have been published concerning the Nigerian/Biafran civil war, *Roses and Bullets* stands out unique. This is due to the fact that it does not just recreate the tensions, instabilities or chaos that characterized that period, but Adimora-Ezeigbo does this recreation with a lot of devotion. Thus, the themes she seeks to develop are not easily predicted as in previous works on the subject

Conclusion

The work examined the extent to which Adimora-Ezeigbo was able to recreate the war in the text. In the course of the analysis, we realized that even though she succeeds to convince the reader by producing factual events with artistic embellishments, some facts are recreated in a way that leaves the least emotional or sensational reader no option but to agree with her viewpoint. This is buttressed by the fact that she is a living witness of her subject matter. She commits the sin of exposing her emotional attachment to the preoccupation in her work which she accuses other writers of, though not in a very glaring or exaggerated way. Adimora-Ezeigbo like any other prolific writer uses aspects of style like symbolism as the main vehicle for transmitting her major thematic concerns.

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