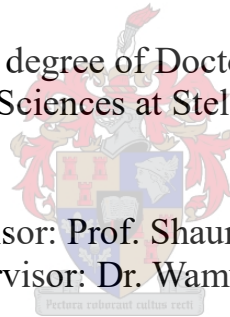


Biafra as Third Space: Reading the Politics of Belonging in Nigeria-Biafra Civil War Literature

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Declaration

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Dedication

Iba ibeji,
Iba ejika tio j'asọ o bọ,
Iba Taiwo ati Kehinde
Inexhaustible fountains of strength
From whence I suckle with a mouth full of teeth.

To Olamide, Atinuke, and Modupe David:
Hear the rumble of rain,
Can you hear it?

Abstract

The image of Biafra as a space of belonging has assumed currency in contemporary secessionist discourse. Wartime Biafran society is framed as a utopia where everyone belonged and felt safe. Consequently, this framing has birthed a robust following among Igbo youths who desperately seek an alternative to the ‘unfriendly’ Nigerian space. This deployment of memory/remembrance stirs up a need to question how people belonged within Biafra as well as the dimensions of violence that being ‘an outsider within’ might have created during the war. Thus, this thesis examines the representation of un/belonging in Biafra in selected literary texts to map the violence and layers of exclusion which the politics of belonging generates. This is to map and listen to those marginal voices that often ‘fall through the cracks’ in the war’s historicity.

I employ Nira Yuval-Davis’s situated intersectionality as my methodological anchor in teasing out the unique experiences of vulnerable ‘Biafrans’ who were differently located within the wartime society as ‘outsiders within’ due to their ethnicity, gender, age, ability/disability, sexuality and class. I pay attention to the ways in which the interaction of these axes of identity creates characters whose fraught narratives of unbelonging spill outside the binary narrative frame of Nigeria-Biafra which is mostly deployed in writing and reading popular histories of the conflict. My reading is further moored to Nira-Yuval Davis’ conception of the politics of belonging and Homi Bhabha’s idea of third space.

I position literary texts as my canvas in engaging with Biafra and Biafranness due to the poignant way fictional narratives represent private suffering. I read nine fictional narratives and two memoirs to curate a conversation between literature and history as ‘cotexts.’ Memoirs are selected across victims/hegemony divide to question the politics of memory and remembrance. I have selected texts written by erstwhile Biafrans due to the intimate manner in which they narrate the Biafran experience, and to facilitate my aim of listening to Biafran voices and stories. My aim is to get a more nuanced reading of the ‘Biafran’ experience by bringing the victims into conversation with the power brokers in wartime Biafra.

The study finds that the unavowed narratives of Biafra that are trapped within the binary approach are revelatory of the excess which plagues most hegemonic accounts of the war. Within these stories from in-between, which I have framed as third space stories,

the idea of Biafra as a homely space is unsettled to reveal the multiple forms of violence deployed against characters caught at the margins of belligerent positions in order to police belonging, ensure dogmatic solidarity, and to smelt a linear Biafran identity. These stories that emerge from the interstices of the Nigeria-Biafra dichotomy indicate that adopting an intersectional frame in thinking about the civil war produces a much more nuanced encounter with Biafra. More importantly, the voices that come to light within this mode of reading speak of excess and absences in a way that calls attention to an unfinished business of mourning and healing. They speak of a lack of return in the post-war moment, and of a continuity of trauma which is tied to a ruptured sense of belonging. These voices, and the stories they tell, also reveal that by creating spaces for narrative engagements where speaking and listening can thrive, unencumbered by hagiographical histories, a measure of belonging could blossom.

Opsomming

Die beeld van Biafra as 'n ruimte van samehorigheid het 'n vorm van ruilmiddel geraak in huidige afskeidingsdiskoers. Die Biafra-samelewing in die oorlogstyd word voorgestel as 'n utopie waar almal 'n gevoel van veiligheid en samehorigheid gedeel het. Hierdie raamwerk het gevolglik 'n stewige navolging onder Igbo-jeugdiges – wat desperaat na 'n alternatief vir die 'onvriendelike' Nigeriese ruimte soek – opgebou. Hierdie ontplooiing van memorisering / herinnering wek 'n behoefte om te bevraagteken tot watter mate mense binne Biafra die area as 'n tuiste ervaar het, asook die dimensies van geweld wat 'binne-buitestanders' gedurende die oorlog geskep/ervaar het. Hierdie tesis ondersoek dus die voorstelling van on / samehorigheid in Biafra in geselekteerde literêre tekste om die geweld en lae van uitsluiting wat die politiek van samehorigheid genereer, te karteer. Dit beoog om na die marginale stemme wat deur die krake val van die oorlog soos histories uitgebeeld, te luister en ook op te teken.

Ek gebruik Nira Yuval-Davis se toepaslike konsep van interseksionaliteit as my metodologiese anker om die unieke ervarings van kwesbare 'Biafrane' wat anders in die oorlog gemeenskap geleë was, as 'binne-buitestaanders' – as gevolg van hul etnisiteit, geslag, ouderdom, vermoë / gestremdheid, seksualiteit of klas – uit te lig. Ek let op die maniere waarop die interseksie tussen hierdie asse van identiteit karakters skep wie se gekwelde verhale van on-samehorigheid buite die binêre narratiewe raamwerk van Nigerië-Biafra val – 'n raamwerk wat meestal ontplooi word in die skryf- en leesvaardighede van gewilde geskiedenis van die konflik. My perspektief word verder vasgemeer aan Nira-Yuval Davis se opvatting van die politiek van samehorigheid, asook Homi Bhabha se idee van die derde ruimte.

Ek lees literêre tekste in gesprek met Biafra as beide 'n historiese werklikheid en 'n gekose identiteit as gevolg van die aangrypende wyse waarop fiktiewe vertellings private lyding uitbeeld. Ek lees nege fiktiewe vertellings en twee memoires ten einde 'n gesprek tussen literatuur en geskiedenis as 'ko-tekste' saam te stel. Memoires word geselekteer om die slagoffer / heerser verdeling wat geskep is binne die politiek van herinnering en herdenking te bevraagteken. Ek het tekste gekies wat deur destydse Biafrane geskryf is, vanweë die intieme manier waarop hulle die Biafra-ervaring vertel, en om my doel (om te luister na

Biafraanse stemme en verhale) te bereik. Ek beoog om 'n meer genuanseerde lesing van die 'Biafra'-ervaring te kry deur die slagoffers in gesprek te bring met die krag-makelaars van die oorlog.

Die studie bevind dat die onerkende vertellings oor Biafra wat vasgevang is binne die binêre benadering, die oorskot van onverklaarbaarheid wat die meeste hegemoniese verhale van die oorlog teister, belig. In hierdie tussentydse verhale, wat ek as derde-ruimte verhale bespreek, word die idee van Biafra as 'n verwelkomende tuiste ontwig, om die veelvuldige vorme van geweld wat ontplooi word teen karakters vasgevang op die rand van vyandige posisies te onthul. Sulke vertellings weier om samehorigheid te polisieer, dogmatiese solidariteit te verseker, en binne 'n lineêre Biafraanse identiteit te versmelt. Hierdie verhale wat uit die kernpunte van die Nigerië-Biafra-digotomie te voorskyn kom, dui daarop dat die aanvaarding van 'n interseksionele raamwerk in die verdere na-denke oor die burgeroorlog, 'n veel meer genuanseerde ontmoeting met Biafra oplewer. Die stemme wat na vore kom in hierdie leeswyse spreek van oormatigheid en afwesigheid op 'n manier wat aandag gee aan 'n onafgehandelde taak van rou en genesing. Hulle artikuleer die gebrek aan terugkeer na die na-oorlogse oomblik, en spreek van 'n kontinuïteit van trauma wat gekoppel is aan 'n gebroke samehorigheid. Hierdie stemme, en die verhale wat hulle vertel, onthul ook dat, deur ruimtes te skep vir narratiewe verbintenisse waar praat en luister kan floreer, sonder om hagiografiese geskiedenis na te streef, wel 'n mate van samehorigheid sou kon kweek.

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Chapter One

Biafra and the Project of Belonging

“Sacrifice. Indeed we are sacrifices then ... figurines ... made-up dolls ... puppets of a doomed circus.” (Yerima, *Abobaku*)

Introduction: ‘Give us Biafra or Death’

What hidden stories of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war¹ come to light when one adopts an intersectional mode of reading which pays attention to the ways in which multiple axes of identity interact to create and recreate borders of belonging? How do these narratives from the margins unsettle, but also contribute to the historiography of the civil war? These are some of the questions that motivate this exploratory journey into the literary landscape of the civil war to examine the complexity of belonging in wartime Biafra through the eyes of those situated at the margins of the society, those caught in-between the Nigeria-Biafra positions. I engage in an intersectional reading of narratives of lived experience within wartime Biafra to tease out unavowed narratives of violence buried beneath metanarratives that dominate the narrative landscape of the civil war. Essentially, I am interested in the insights we can gain by bringing together axes like ethnicity, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, age, class, and religion in analysing stories of the civil war. My aim is to examine how an intersectional interaction of these axes might complicate the idea of belonging and ‘Biafranness’. I map the unique experiences of ‘Biafrans’ who were differently located within the wartime society to call attention to how their location at the fringes of the society exacerbated their suffering, but also imbued them with lucid views of the multiplex flows of violence within the wartime society.

To gain some insight into the lived experiences of Biafrans, I employ literature as my canvas due to the robust way fictional narratives engage with private suffering and its

¹ Since naming is often a political decision, I have opted for naming the war as Nigeria-Biafra civil war to ensure adequate representation of both belligerents. In a sense, in my naming of the two belligerents and connecting them with a hyphen, on a metaphoric level, I call attention to the nature of the in-between stories that I seek to mine, they are stories that are similar to the hyphen in the middle. They symbolise gaps, or excess, which continue to plague stories narrated from either of these two positions. In a sense, it invokes the absence of those caught in the middle of the violent binaries.

polyphonic capacities, in the Bakhtinian sense, which allows many discordant voices to inhabit the same narrative space². Thus, I have selected two civil war memoirs and nine prose fiction texts. The selected memoirs are Diliorah Chukwurah's *Last Train to Biafra: Memoirs of a Biafran Child* (2015); Achebe's *There Was a Country* (2012)³. Selected fictional narratives are Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976), Chukwuemeka's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976 [2014]), Eddie Iroh's *Toads of War* (1979), Ken Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985 [2004]), and Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* (1986). I will also read Uzodinma Iweala's *Beast of No Nation* (2005), Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2006), Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) and Akachi- Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* (2014). I selected texts written by 'Biafrans' who either witnessed the war or listened to stories from parents or relatives to allow for a measure of objectivity. Also, in my selection of texts, I favoured texts that have received little to no critical attention. This is to curate a space where other stories of Biafra could indeed emerge. I am interested in the ways in which dynamics like social location in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, level of education, age, sexuality, physical strength (ableism or disability) and refugee status conflate to introduce a deeper level of suffering for the vulnerable characters by mapping them outside a supposedly homely space. And how this outsider-within status produces a form of absence from the war's historiography.

The selected fictional narratives will be read in conversation with selected memoirs as 'cotexts.' I also employ memoirs on the war written by victims and hegemonies to question the politics of memory and remembrance present in popular narratives of Biafra, and to erect a backdrop against which I present my arguments – to get a more nuanced reading of the 'Biafran' experience from the margins. Essentially, the memoirs are deployed to reveal the forms of absences and narrative excess that my study seeks to address. The overarching essence of my study is to question the version of Biafra which features in the politics of nostalgia employed within contemporary secessionist discourse to tool and retool memory

² While reading the prose of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Mikhail Bakhtin calls attention to the polyphonic capacity of literature, that is the capacity of literature, or prose narratives to be precise, to archive "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness" (Bakhtin 6).

³ I read Achebe's memoir as hegemonic because of his position as a Biafra diplomat during the war. He could be said to have wielded power during the devastating war. This class of globetrotting diplomats, to which he belonged, has been described as complicit in the continuation of the war. See Akpan Ntueyong. *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970* (Frank Cass, 1971). Obversely, I read *The Last Train* as a subaltern narrative of Biafra to position the text as a narrative that speaks back to the hegemonic historiography that thrives on silencing.

and remembrance. More broadly, I seek to trouble the autochthonous framing of belonging which is a defining presence in the spectre of violent conflicts plaguing Africa. In the end, I focus on the ways in which the selected texts, and indeed much of the civil war literature, call attention to a need for the creation of spaces of narrative engagements where ‘other stories’ of the war could emerge, and a form of communal abreaction achieved through narration.

‘Give us Biafra or death’ and ‘we are Biafrans’ are chants that have become rallying cries of secessionist groups in Nigeria. And indeed, some members of these groups have been killed during clashes with law enforcement agents⁴. The yearnings for Biafra among Igbo youths who did not witness the traumatic war is connected to how Biafra is framed within secessionist rhetoric as a bucolic space of belonging – a homely space – which was an alternative to the beleaguered Nigeria during its brief existence. Essentially, this creates or re-creates Biafra within Igbo collective memory as an idyllic past which was snatched from the people – and that which must be reclaimed. Thus, it is positioned as a home to which they must return. Essentially, this imagined version of Biafra becomes a lost home “for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill” (Boym 13).

Zionist groups, such as IPOB and MASSOB⁵, garner support by framing Biafra as a cartographic space of belonging where the ills of Nigeria are non-existent, and this has created a willingness to ‘die for Biafra’⁶. This willingness to die is fast translating into the creation of a military wing by IPOB, and consequent recruitment of able-bodied but

⁴ For instance, on the 23rd of September 2017, the Nigerian government launched a military exercise to crush secessionist groups in the Eastern part of the country. This led to loss of lives and wanton destruction of properties in the region. For more on the violent clashes, see Ujumadu and Anayo. "Operation Python Dance II: One Week After" (*Vanguard* 2017), www.vanguardngr.com/2017/09/operation-python-dance-ii-one-week/.

⁵ In this thesis, I refer to secessionist groups as Zionist groups to account for the role of religion in their rhetoric. The groups cast Igbo people as the Jews of Africa, and Biafra as their promised ‘Canaan’. IPOB is the Indigenous people of Biafra, and MASSOB is Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra. Clashes between these groups and security operatives often lead to the death of many of their young members. The Nigerian army recently claimed that they were ambushed by IPOB members. See www.vanguardngr.com/2017/06/biafra-how-nigerian-military-escaped-ipobmassob-ambush-army/

⁶ Nnamdi Kanu, the IPOB leader, who jumped bail after his release from government detention, has declared his willingness to die for Biafra on several occasions. See www.nigerianmonitor.com/nnamdi-kanu-addresses-crowd-despite-court-order-video/amp/. Hayden White categorises such historical narratives as radical/anarchist. To him they frame the state as irredeemably bad, thus a revolution is needed to achieve a utopian community – which is usually a new state. See White, Hayden *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (John Hopkins, 1975).

unemployed youths into BSS (Biafra Secret Service)⁷. The leaders of the secessionist movement foreground Nigeria as ‘unhomely’ by referring to the country as a zoo, thus an undesirable place⁸. Also at the heart of the secessionist agitation is the celebration of Igbo nationalism which features an essentialised image of Biafra as Igbo citadel, a safe space. This ties into the autochthonous narratives of identity and collective memory that are deployed to engender solidarity in Africa by casting suffering and trauma as a collective experience⁹. This rhetoric is polemical due to the complications that surround definitions of belonging and multiplicity of solidarity – particularly what Biafra means in terms of ‘quality belonging’ and solidarity¹⁰.

It is important to note that the quest for home which anchors secessionist agitators’ demand for Biafra indicates a failure of the post-war reconciliation program tagged 3Rs (Reconciliation, Restitution, and Reconstruction). The program was introduced in 1970 by General Yakubu Gowon to help the erstwhile Biafrans heal and as a gesture of welcoming them back home to Nigeria. However, as secessionist groups continue to argue, Biafrans were never welcomed back into Nigeria. And since Biafra had ceased to exist, there was no home for them to return to¹¹. I pay attention to this question of return in my reading of selected texts to comment on the need for the creation of spaces of narrative engagements like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Since a brief survey of civil war literary texts reveals that protagonists are rendered homeless both literally and metaphorically, I will argue that this loss of a home, after one has fought a brutal war to

⁷ Although the Biafra Secret Service is a ragtag gathering of youths, the Federal Government responded to their activities with full military might. Ultimately this led to a bloody harvest of young vibrant people. For more on BSS see www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT3IYodLE5I.

⁸ Nnamdi Kanu is particularly forceful in his description of Nigeria as a ‘zoo’. He is presently on trial for allegations bordering on treason. See www.today.ng/tag/ipob; massob.biafranet.com, www.facebook.com/hopeforbiafra. His whereabouts are presently unknown after the Nigerian Army invaded his home. See www.vanguardngr.com/2017/09/breakingvideo-nigerian-army-invade-kanus-home-allegedly-shoot-ipob-supporter.

⁹ Struggles with a nationalistic bent in Africa often present narratives that do not take ‘other voices’ into account. For instance, the ‘intra’ dimensions of subjugation and oppression are often excluded in narratives of the MauMau struggles, anti-apartheid struggle and in the Matebele conflict in Zimbabwe.

¹⁰ The rhetoric of Biafra as an Igbo citadel is problematic when one considers experiences of minority ethnic nationalities captured within borders defined as Biafra.

¹¹ To defend these claims, Biafra agitators cite some post-war government policies that were designed to exclude them from the country’s commonwealth. For instance, the “Abandoned Property Act” of 1969 ensured that they could not return to the properties they abandoned in Nigeria at the start of the war. They were only entitled to twenty Nigerian Pounds of monies left in their pre-war bank accounts – regardless of its value.

protect it, can be described as a ‘lack of return’, which also signposts the continuity of the war in post-war Nigerian space and the freshness of its wounds.

Within the framing of Biafra as a cartographic space of belonging and communal acceptance¹², being a Biafran is automatically tied to one’s presence within the geographical borders of Biafra. However, both ideas of Biafra as cartographic – clearly mapped space of belonging, and Biafra as a neat mould of identity are fraught with layers of contestations because they do not acknowledge the many ways that people belonged, or not, within Biafra. To give voice to these contestations, I interrogate this grand image of Biafra which has its roots in popular histories of the Nigeria-Biafra war written from the top. I read Biafra/Nigeria war literature within a third space which provides a suitable site for complex engagements with the lives of those who belonged differently during the war – those who were caught in-between the belligerents. By paying attention to the ways in which different axes of identity intersect to unsettle fixed ideas of belonging, I aim to tease out stories of the civil war that lie between and betwixt the two hegemonic positions of Nigeria-Biafra to create a space where marginal characters are given voice and listened to.

To unsettle the linear framing of belonging within celebrated histories of Biafra, I tease out marginal stories of Biafra that are mostly unacknowledged in the binary Nigeria versus Biafra, Igbo versus Hausa-Yoruba, East against the rest, and man versus woman interpretations of the civil war in selected literary accounts of Biafra. I pay attention to the multiplicity of voices, and other stories inherent in the war literature and how they signal subliminal ambiguities that are unavowed in popular narratives of Biafra. My reading maps how these voices, and stories of belonging in Biafra, trouble the neatly bounded conception of Biafranness. My position is that voices of vulnerable Biafrans/Nigerians are often silenced within hegemonic narratives, deliberately or inadvertently, to engender a neat historical platform from where the ruling class on both sides jostle for spaces for staging the moral correctness of their actions. As a result, stories of those who were excluded within a space they called home are silenced so that the custodians of grand histories can be heard. Thus, I examine the systemic oppression which renders marginal characters vulnerable by

¹² However, in mapping Biafran territory, they include the south-south territory against the wish of the minority groups that inhabit the land. See Ugochukwu Alaribe. “S-South is Part of Biafra – MASSOB” (*Vanguard*, June 5, 2017), www.vanguardngr.com/2017/06/s-south-part-biafra-massob/.

casting them as ‘outsiders-within’ in the wartime society, and which further erases their voices, lives, and footprints within the history of the conflict. This thesis is not a search for the facts of the traumatic war, or a reading of literature as secreting pearls of truth. I do not seek to unearth a ‘real Biafra’; rather, my reading seeks to cast literature as a site where the fixed, homogenous notions of belonging in Biafra is troubled in a way that allows other stories to emerge. In a sense, I hearken to Edward Said’s admonition that we direct our critical gazes “towards the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never travelled beyond the conventional and the comfortable” (Said, *Kindle Locations* 6868-6869). Hence, in directing my gaze towards the margins to reconnoitre voices hidden therein, I also seek to insert the interstitial stories of belonging into the historiography and discourse of Biafra. Essentially, the Biafra I seek is one that is a fluid, constantly morphing metaphor which reveals multiple narrative positions.

In keeping with the fluidity and instability which surrounds identity and belonging within Biafra, I have chosen to read selected texts within the framework of Homi Bhabha’s idea of third space. Bhabha writes that the third space engenders an awareness of ambivalence which troubles fixed ideas of being (Bhabha 37). In exciting ways, this unsettled attribute of the ‘space between’, provides a canvas where “signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Ibid. 37). Thus, in this study I attempt a re-reading of the image of Biafra by rehistoricising the war through literature. I situate the selected literary narratives of the civil war within a third space to unearth accounts of Biafra that are in-between the hegemonic positions, and consequently hidden beneath popular and spectacular narratives of the conflict. Ultimately, through these ordinary stories of Biafra, I intend to investigate how characters belonged and the narrative tools that are employed to map belonging.

My focus on interstitial stories contributes to extant scholarship on the civil war because critical readings of literary texts on Nigeria-Biafra war have mostly employed binary lenses which do not adequately explain the conditions of those situated at the margins of such binary oppositions. Also, wartime Biafran society is narrated by secessionist groups as a space where everyone belonged, was homed, and suffered

together¹³. This thrives on the specious notion of a common war, and a universal ‘Biafra’ where wartime suffering was solely due to Nigerian oppression. By investigating the stories of intra-Biafra brutality and exclusion within literary narratives, I hope to mine stories “left in the dark” (Auerbach 404)¹⁴, and to make sense of the “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) of Biafra. Essentially, I believe that the framing of Biafra as home to all might have left some stories and voices in the dark, thus, I engage literature to tease out these other stories of Biafra.

I interrogate the utopian framing of Biafra as home by asking the following questions: How did the vulnerable ‘belong’ within Biafra, and how do narratives situated between the Nigeria-Biafra dichotomy capture the complexity and elusiveness of belonging? How do the texts narrate intra-Biafra violence and subjugation? What intersectional identities are represented in the literary texts? How do literary accounts of the war signal a need for a narrative space like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? My research seeks to examine these issues that border on the politics of identity, belonging and history by reading socio-political histories embedded in literary narratives of Biafra for insight into the realities of wartime Biafra. Essentially, I read selected literary texts as alternative spaces of enunciation where other voices and versions of history irrupt.

¹³ Emeka Emefiena argues, like all pro-Biafra writers, that the Biafra created during the war catered for everyone. He controversially claims that all minority groups within Biafra supported secession. See Emeka Emefiena. *In Biafra Africa Died* (Veritas Lumen, 2014). However, Phillip Aghoghovwia (2014) and Godwin Alabi-Isama (2013) present a different view. In fact, Aghoghovwia notes that the minority groups felt that they were under invasion by Biafra. See Aghoghovwia, O. Philip. *Ecocriticism and the Oil Encounter: Readings from the Niger-Delta* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2014). See also, Ken Saro-Wiwa. *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Civil War* (Saros Publishers, 1989) and Elechi Amadi. *Sunset in Biafra* (African Writers Series, 1973). Both Amadi and Saro-Wiwa narrate the atrocities committed against their people (the minority ethnicities in the East) during the ‘invasion’ of their land by Biafrans. Philip Effiong, General Ojukwu’s second in command in Biafra, also confirms that refugees from minority areas were attacked and sometimes killed by Igbo people. See Philip Effiong. *The Caged Bird Sang No More* (30° South Publishers, 2016).

¹⁴ Erich Auerbach, in a chapter titled “The Interrupted Supper” in *Mimesis* (1953[2003]), remarks that these things left in the dark are what enables the ‘truth’ to appear to be true. In essence, these narrative strands that would threaten the neatness of the ‘truth’ are excised and “left in the dark”. See Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Literature* (Princeton University Press, 25th edition, 2003).

I should state here that the choice of prose fiction as a preferred site for my reading is not indicative of a dearth of literary works in other genres¹⁵. While I am aware of the robust corpus of creative work which span many genres that were produced, and continue to be produced after the conflict, the undeniable dominance of prose-fiction makes it a favoured site for analysis. Beyond the proliferation of fictional accounts of Biafra in the novelistic mode, novels have polyglottal capacities due to the multiplicity of stories which they string together. This presence of many voices and stories in the novel form makes it appropriate for my search for many voices and stories.

Taking the many axes of identity and belonging into consideration is particularly important when one considers Amartya Sen's argument that the main problem in the framing of belonging within violent politics of identity is that only one axis of belonging is taken into account in defining people.¹⁶ Thus, I favour an intersectional reading which concatenates multiple axes of identity observable in the selected texts since it will provide deep insights into characters' lived experiences within Biafra. Also, this thesis traces the dynamics of belonging and violence along their horizontal and vertical manifestations to mine instances of intra-Biafra, and intra-group violence.

Biafra in the Spectre of Remembrance

There are three strands of 'Biafra' that are observable in contemporary secessionist discourse; Biafra as identity, as cartographic space, and as memory. Although all three manifestations are polemical, they continue to enjoy tremendous currency. Biafra as identity is plagued by the erasure of minority ethnic groups when it is framed as synonymously Igbo, which also creates the contested notion that all Igbo are Biafrans. On the cartographic side, the Biafran territory was mapped during the war, and in contemporary secessionist propaganda, to include territories which belong to minority ethnic groups. These claims have been met with stiff resistance from minority ethnic groups within territories formally mapped as Biafra. In terms of Biafra as memory, social location,

¹⁵ Marion Pape writes that over 152 texts had been produced as at the time she published her monograph (Pape 20). Thus, a conservative up to date figure would be around 170, since the war continues to stimulate even more literary output. For instance, texts like *Beasts of No Nation*, *Roses and Bullets* and *Under the Udala Trees* are some of the new texts published after Marion Pape's publication and which I read in this thesis.

¹⁶ Amartya Sen in his book, *The Politics of Violence* (WW Norton, 2006), notes that identity discourses often exclude other axes of belonging when defining identity and belonging within political projects.

ideological position, ethnic affiliation and the tenor of national politics have continued to shape who remembers, how, and why. Biafra as memory is the womb from which the other strands emerge in popular narratives of Biafra. This is evident in the way secessionist leaders pivot their rhetoric on history, remembrance, and memory, and since a large portion of the agitators for secession did not witness the war, they rely on the versions of history which have been made popular within these discourses¹⁷. Especially, due to the government-sanctioned “code of silence” (Ejiogu 741) which has forced an amnesiac relationship with the events of the war within Nigerian pedagogic encounters with history, youths are left exceptionally pliable to retooled histories. Consequently, such histories which emanate from hegemonic accounts of the war have continued to shape the remembrance¹⁸ and to evoke a potent form of nostalgia which motivates solidarity. Thus, I argue that it is pertinent that such constricted and sometimes closed histories be opened-up by including other stories of Biafra in the war’s historiography.

I position literary narratives of the war as “moral witnesses” (Mangalit 147) because of the way they challenge the neat heroics that are propagated in hegemonic memoirs and popular history. Avishai Mangalit writes that the moral witness is driven by a hope that there are people somewhere in the world that will listen to their stories (Ibid. 149). Thus, in the story they tell, they exorcise the demons of the traumatic event which they witnessed from their memories while also presenting us the opportunity to see the conflict about which they speak from another angle. They also demand that we listen to their accounts. Mangalit presents Anna Akhmatova’s shocking preface to “In Requiem” as an example of how narrative mandates are often bestowed on moral witnesses, and the kind of closeness to suffering that renders their stories profound (Ibid. 148). He quotes copiously from Akhmatova’s account:

I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold, who had of course never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone

¹⁷ Secessionist groups make extensive use of the internet and social media for rallying support for their agenda; these platforms serve as my point of reference when I refer to contemporary secessionist discourse in this thesis. These platforms include Facebook: www.facebook.com/ipob; YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvYYnVFR2UI; and Web pages: www.naij.com/Biafra; www.Ipob.org.

¹⁸ Jay Winter (2006) argues that remembrance is a much better term than memory because it captures the place of agency in remembering events, how they are remembered, and the end to which they are used. Thus, in this study, I will prefer remembrance in my discussion of memory and memorialisation.

whispered there) ‘Can you describe this?’ and I said ‘I can.’ Then something like a smile passed fleeting over what had once been her face. (Mangalit 148)

Akhmatova was in the same line as the “blue lipped” woman, thus she got a first-hand view of things. The story is embedded in her very being, made even more concrete through the woman’s plea that she describe the events – and her consequent assent to tell her story, their story. The fleeting smile that crossed the woman’s face implies the relief that witnesses seek in their exercise of narrative authority and agency. This also reveals the burden of narration which many marginal narrators bear; their mandate is to speak for themselves and for many others who need them to describe what happened.

Citing Avishai Mongalit, Jay Winter explains in *The Battle Between Memory and History in the Twenty First Century* that the “moral witness” is motivated by anger at the grand, neat narratives shared – often to international acclaim, by those who did not really suffer. In response, moral witnesses present the untidy part of history as a challenge to the celebrated versions of history (Winter 239). I should state that despite reading the selected texts as “moral witness” accounts, they are more driven by a need to narrate other stories than by anger, and unlike Mongalit’s moral witness, they do not claim ownership of “truths.” However, they do present panoramic insights into the civil war history by teasing out other stories, particularly, private experiences. Thus, in this study, the “discourse of the novel” will be used to interrogate, “reconstruct”, and contribute to history (Gallagher, 1997) and to query social narratives – much in the tradition of how Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Honour* (1895) opened-up the history of the American civil war¹⁹. My study situates civil war fiction as part of its historiography because they are canvases for alternative histories that unsettle simplistic but grand tales of the war by highlighting the complexities of belonging in wartime Biafra.

Questions might arise concerning the potency of fiction for this kind of historicizing, to which my immediate response would be to spotlight the ineluctable bind that exists between storytelling and history in Africa. To be sure, I mean to refer to the griots of

¹⁹ Crane’s *Red Badge of Honour* is often seen as a ‘factive’ text, consisting of a blend of fact and fiction that is canonical to the history of the American civil war in that it wrote the quotidian experiences of suffering into the grand histories of the war. Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi explains that Stephen Crane did some deep archival research and came up with a profound account of the war that has remained relevant to date (Okonjo-Ogunyemi 203).

western coasts of Africa who were regarded as both historians and poets. They memorized the epochal events of the day and codified them within formulaic poems which consequently served as archival troves and performance masterpieces²⁰. In their compositions, they documented the reign of kings, great wars, famines, births, and deaths. This tradition of storytelling and the storyteller as custodian of history has continued into the writing tradition to which the novel form belongs. This effectively situates the African writer as a storyteller saddled with the responsibility of recounting events and creating history as observed by Chinua Achebe. Using anthills as a metaphor for the embeddedness of history within the blood of the writer and his stories, Achebe argues that the anthills witness the burning of the savanna during dry seasons, they witness the sprouting of new grasses during the rains, and convey the stories of the past to the newcomers. In Achebe's thesis here, the stories and their tellers are important links between the past and the present.²¹ Hayden White also establishes a profound interlink between history and literature by arguing that both are narratives woven around the imaginary. In history, he identifies four devices that are employed in writing: "Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony" (White x). He also identifies "emplotment" as a tool used by historians to string bits and pieces of historical facts together by filling the missing gaps with imagined narratives (Ibid. x). In essence, there is no historical account that does not rely on creative imagination to achieve a measure of coherence.

Writing about Ngugi's commitment as a storyteller to re-writing history, James Oguide argues in his book *Ngugi's Novels and African History* that "Ngugi posits narrative [...] as an agent of history because it provides the space for challenging our notions of national identities, uses of history, and ways in which they are deployed in power contestation" (Oguide 2). Oguide signals the capacity of literature to create spaces for other voices to emerge; however, as he observes, and contrary to Ngugi's stated project of painting a true

²⁰ Several scholars have explored the history of the griots, their role in African oral traditions, and the continuity of their art in contemporary creative forms in Africa. See Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970, Open Book Publishers, 2012); I also find the ways in which Edward Sackey teases out the connections between African oral arts and prose fiction in the writing of Ayi Kwei Armah quite instructive. See Edward Sackey, "Oral Tradition and the African Novel." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 37, no.3, 1991, pp.389-407.

²¹ See Chinua Achebe. "Conversation with Chinua Achebe" (*Youtube*, Afrikaliberation, 2012), www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzVUXxqNdw.

picture of things, Ogude complicates the idea of “truth”²². He achieves this by alluding to the contested nature of Kenyan history, and the slippery nature of truth; instead, he inserts Ngugi’s writing into Kenyan historiography. In this sense, Ogude’s study relieves literature of the burden of facticity which hangs around its neck like the albatross in Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Ngugi is not alone in this grand framing of literature as a site for truth telling. In fact, the postcolonial project of writing back to the centre made many African writers complicit in casting literary texts as possessing archival verity, consequent upon which there is a demand for historical precision which robs texts of creativity and imaginative freedom. Also agreeing with this coterminous relationship between history and literature, Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes in *Globalethics* that “[i]t was to the novel that I turned for a way of ordering my history” (30). He explains further that within the confines of literature, he could make sense of historical events in a way which also created him as both witness to and writer of history. Thus, within literature, history and history-making become complementary fields of imagining and re-imagining.

Like Ogude, my intention is to read the selected novels as offering other ways of thinking about and imagining diurnal encounters within Biafra. In a sense, literature will be brought into conversation with historical accounts and memoirs to produce a robust

²² One of the ways in which Ogude complicates the idea of historical truth in Ngugi’s writing is by unmasking the linear, sometimes romantic remembrance of the Mau Mau struggle which is present in Ngugi’s oeuvre. He writes that “One of the major gaps [in Ngugi’s writing] has to do with [his] linear representation of the Mau Mau as a monolithic nationalist movement devoid of any contradictions. If the colonialists gave an extremely one-sided and perhaps an entirely biased historical version of the Mau Mau war, it would seem to me that Ngugi, in his anxiety to counter this, has tended to provide a wholly romantic picture of the Mau Mau war”(Ogude 97). In essence, in the process of writing back to colonial narratives, Ngugi subsumes some narratives that could threaten his version of history.

‘cotextual’²³ entrance into history. This is also pursuant to M.H. Abram’s observation regarding new historicists’ explication on literature and history – that “many literary texts consist of a diversity of dissonant voices, and these voices express not only the orthodox, but also the subordinated and subversive forces of the era in which the text was produced” (187)²⁴. And as Wale Adebaniwi observes, literary texts, “[i]n observing the social process, both past and present, [...] reflect, and reflect on, extant perspectives in understanding reality by creating new maps of existence, [they] also transcend existing possibilities and ways of apprehending those possibilities” (407)²⁵. Consequently, I harness the capacity of literature to ‘transcend’ extant possibilities by ‘highlighting dissonant voices’ within fixed narratives to critically engage the hegemonic framing of Biafra as home in popular discourse. Such an exercise entails being teleported historically through literature into wartime Biafra to pay close attention to quotidian specifics within the society, and to use literary history to contribute to contemporary discourse. This return to the past through fictional lens will help interrogate the utopian framing of Biafra in social histories narrated

²³ New Historicists regard literature, historical accounts, and other documents of a similar temporality as ‘cotexts’ because they narrate the same moments in history. Louis Montrose’s oft cited maxim: “the historicity of texts and textuality of history” (Montrose 8) gives force to this cotextual reading of history and literature. In this cotextual relationship, Montrose argues, lies the potency of literature. He notes that in literature’s “refusal to observe strict and fixed boundaries between “literary” and other texts (including the critic’s own), this emergent social/political/historical orientation in literary studies is pervasively concerned with writing as a mode of action” (emphasis in original, Montrose 11). In essence, when literary texts are subjected to readings unencumbered by disciplinary strictures, the effectiveness of writing as a form of action becomes achieved. See Montrose, Louis. “Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History.” *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 16, 1986, pp. 5-12. And within this framing of writing as a form of action, the combative and insurgent capacities of literary texts become apparent. This is what Salman Rushdie invokes when he observes that: “writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official, politicians’ version of the truth” (Rushdie 14). Essentially, both the hegemonies and literary texts are ensconced in an eternal struggle for worldmaking. While hegemonic accounts often claim transcendental truths, fictional narratives pull these truths at the seams to reveal other stories. However, this does not imply that writers of fiction and their texts are forever “denying” official ‘truths’, rather, they unlock the fixed framing of the truths to offer-up other possibilities.

²⁴ In a sense, M.H. Abram echoes Mikhail Bakhtin’s “dialogism” here. Bakhtin argues that novels contain diverse voices and forces which must be accounted for in literary readings. See Mikhail Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

in secessionist discourse, and some memoirs²⁶, as well as to re-interpret the Biafran experience presented in literature. In a sense, this return to the past “renews the past, refiguring it as contingent ‘in-between’ space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (Bhabha 7). Essentially, the past becomes positioned as a space for questioning the present – in this case, questioning hegemonic histories. The idea of hegemonic narratives in this study refers to histories that were produced and continue to be produced by members of the elite class who supervised the brutal war on both sides. Obversely, I have framed literature as presenting other narratives – to signify the polyvalence that comes to life when the texts are subjected to an intersectional reading.

Unlike Niyi Adediji who argues that history feeds literature with “factual events” (280), I neither read literature as a footnote to history nor read history as supplicant to literature. I read both as ‘cotexts’ since they interpret the same event through different media of narration²⁷. Beyond the pedestal on which Adediji erects for history as a canonised space for truth telling or fact production, his idea of ‘fact’ is quite polemical when one considers how the politics of remembrance, narration, and the place of a writer’s gaze determine the shade of stories that will emerge. Regarding remembrance, Jay Winter argues that it is an act of agency. How we choose to remember or interpret an event is largely connected to feelings and attachment to the event:

To privilege “remembrance” is to insist on specifying agency, on answering the question who remembers, when, and how? And on being aware of the transience of remembrance, so dependent on the frailties and commitments of the men and women who take the time and effort to engage in it. (3)

²⁶ The secessionist discourse is a popular one in Nigerian airwaves and on the cyberspace. See www.ipob.org and www.vanguardngr.com/2017/06/s-south-part-biafra-massob/. Also, several historical accounts have romanticised Biafra as the beacon of hope, prominent among them are Emefiena’s *In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot* and Achebe’s *There Was a Country*. On the Nigerian side, memoirs have also presented Nigerian unity as non-negotiable, and painted the secessionists as greedy rebels. See Obasanjo’s *My Command*, and Isama’s *The Tragedy of Victory*.

²⁷ Another polemic that spins off this framing of literature/history interface is that it assumes that the moment of history-making precedes that of story-making. Whereas, in most instances, both processes are not entirely separate epistemological processes. For instance, Toyin Falola, a celebrated historian, calls attention to the inseparable nature of history and storytelling in Africa in an article written for *Punch* newspaper. He writes about the effect that Akinwunmi Ishola’s theatrical representation of Efunsetan Aniwura, the legendary Iyalode of Ibadan, in *Efunsetan* has had on the way she is remembered and written about. Falola argues that the unreasonably mean disposition written into the character of Efunsetan in the play continues to affect how she is historically remembered. See Falola Toyin. “Celebrating Bolanle Awe: The Matriarch of Feminist History.” *Punch*, (November 9, 2018), www.punchng.com/celebrating-bolanle-awe-the-matriarch-of-feminist-history.

Beyond the intentionality of “commitment” – that is, to deliberately select what gets remembered and forgotten, human frailties and the nature of memory itself also account for the incompleteness of remembrance. In essence, when historical moments are remembered, or recreated within narratives, there are fragments that would have been lost to memory due to the ‘pastness’ of the event, and there are also those sections which are deliberately left out because they either complicate the story or they just do not fit into the frame of the narrative being created²⁸. Bhabha also calls attention to the political nature of remembering by punning on “re-membering” in his introduction to Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*. He writes, “[r]emembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (xxxv). The active nature of the word “re-membering” suggests a selective piecing together of historical episodes to create an acceptable mosaic of history which, in the end, is more focused on the aim of remembrance than what truly happened. It is in acknowledging this flux, deliberate or not, that I use remembrance in this study to refer to memory and memorialization of Biafra within memoirs, fictional texts and secessionist discourse in electronic spaces.

The aim of this research is to contribute to existing studies on the Biafra war in that it unpacks depictions of Biafra in popular narratives to search for the voices of those who ‘do not count’, and whose pains have not been properly acknowledged in readings of Biafra²⁹. In the larger picture, it aims to contribute to the body of knowledge that examines identity politics within conflicts and processes of reintegration in Africa. It sees literature as a fecund site for exploring and imagining overlapping identities and belonging, a site where everyone can speak and sub-identities are acknowledged. By taking an intersectional look at the conditions of the vulnerable, the study expands critical readings of the war texts beyond popular binary readings that dwell on ethnicity, binarist feminism, and genocide by

²⁸ Daniel Schacter goes deeper into the polemical nature of memory in his book *The Seven Sins of Memory*. He identifies the “sins” as “transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence” (Schacter 2001). All these “sins” make it contentious to rely on the term memory.

²⁹ I have chosen historical prose fictional texts and memoirs as my canvas because they provide robust engagements with historical contexts, navigating between history and literature. The texts will be used to examine the framing of Biafra in popular discourse, and within literary milieu. Since they drill down to the level of private experiences within history, I hope to tease out the unique struggles of the vulnerable in the narratives they present.

locating “solitary figure[s] fighting [their] own battles” (Viljoen 52)³⁰.

Brief Historical Background

The Biafra/Nigeria war was a grim episode in the history of deadly African civil wars.³¹ It broke out because the eastern region of Nigeria attempted to secede. This precipitated a war aimed at forcing them back into the federation. The war raged from July 1967 to January 1970, accounting for the death of between one to two million people on both sides (De st Jorre 1972; Gould 2012; Bourne 2015; Ejiogu 2013; Venter, 2015)³². The outbreak of the war could be traced to the 1966 putsch which is often called the Igbo coup³³ in which a group of young military officers, mostly of eastern extraction, attempted to effect a change of government. Although the coup failed, it left several northern political elites dead.

The coup, which was seen as a revolution in regions like the West, the East and even in parts of the North (James 2011; Madiebo 1980), was read by the northern elites as an attempt to destabilise northern hegemony.³⁴ Thus, the Igbo were hounded out of their homes in the northern part of the country and murdered. The military leader Aguiyi Ironsi, being an Igbo, avoided a forceful response to the killings³⁵, and his inertia could be said to

³⁰ By reading how Sello Duiker’s fiction navigates feelings of racism at the level of ‘they and I’, Shaun Viljoen opens up the unique experiences of characters caught at fraught intersections like race, sexuality and immigrant status. His reading unpacks the centrality of ‘survival’ as the main concern of people at the margins. Their battle is for survival and not resistance.

³¹ Africa has suffered several devastating wars: the anti-colonial wars, the Congo war, Ethiopia-Somali war, and Nigeria-Biafra war stand out in terms of the devastation that was unleashed in their wake.

³² Michael Gould (2013), however, disagrees with this figure as he believes that 150,000 might be closer to the truth – such is the nature of the controversies that surround narratives of the war.

³³ It is indeed difficult not to read the coup as Igbo planned given the number of Igbo officers involved in the planning and execution, and the fact that Igbo politicians were spared in the political killings that heralded the coup. Also, one of the principal actors of the coup, Major Ifeajuna, escaped to the east when the coup failed and was subsequently helped to escape to Ivory Coast by Pius Okigbo – brother to Christopher Okigbo. He eventually returned to Biafra after secession to fight for Biafra (De Jorre 1972 [2012]). He was eventually executed by General Ojukwu on accusations of coup plotting. See Effiong (2016) Gould (2012); Baxter (2015); Alabi-Isama (2013).

³⁴ This thought might have been aided by the way the Igbo people suddenly started asserting themselves in the North. De st. Jorre (1972) writes that Igbo people in the North publicly mocked the northern elites assassinated during the coup. Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*, though sympathetic to Biafran cause, also depicts how Igbo people mocked their Hausa hosts after the coup. See also Ntieyong Apkan *Struggle for Secession* (1971).

³⁵ However, his actions/inactions seemed to help confirm the theory around Igbo takeover; he promoted 18 Igbo officers to the rank of Colonel within months of taking power, he also stalled on prosecuting the officers that executed the northern leaders. See Bourne Richard. *Nigeria: A History of a Turbulent Century* (Zedbooks, 2015).

have eventually cost him his life – he was murdered in 1967 by northern soldiers. This led to the emergence of General Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner, as the commander in chief. Although, power had returned to the North with the emergence of Gowon, the killing of Igbo people continued and even spread to the army (Baxter 2015). This led to a mass flight of the Igbo back to the eastern region, and offered grounds for a subsequent declaration of Republic of Biafra in July 1967 by Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu³⁶.

Overview of Literature

The Nigeria-Biafra war occasioned a boom in the production of literary works which span different genres. However, according to Craig McLuckie (1990), the preponderance of prose narratives is easily noticed. Discussing the boom that occurred at the close of the war, McLuckie, in his robust study of Nigeria war literature, *Nigerian Civil War Literature and the Imagined Community*, remarks that although a few novels were published at the close of the war, the immediate post-war years saw tremendous literary verve:

Since 1972, the Heinemann African Writers series has published over twenty-three novels by Nigerians; this does not in itself indicate a re-flourishing of the novel form. Nonetheless, a review of recent literary production shows that over twenty-nine Nigerian works have been written about the civil war. Moreover, ten autobiographies which relate thematically to this period have also been identified. (9)

The boom discussed above is largely dominated by literary works from writers of eastern origin who had a strong urge to document their harrowing war experience. This corpus of work is driven by a desire to enter into a dialogue with history by employing literature as didactic lens. Thus, literature becomes situated as a space for filling the many absences and erasures that defined, and continue to define, many of war memoirs and official historiography. Ernest Emenyonu in his “War in African Literature: Literary Harvests, Human Tragedies”, notes that this need to fictionalize the desolation of war revolves around “the role of the writer as historical witness” poised to foreground the “lessons that can be learned from the devastations of war” (xii). He explains further that writers harness their

³⁶ The historical background given here is propaedeutic, many of the undercurrents that could present credible rationale for the outbreak of the war are not captured here because they have been extensively studied by several scholars; in fact, it’s almost impossible to write an extensive account of the war without slipping into terrains of plagiarism. For a deeper engagement with the history of the war see Gould Micheal (2013); John de St. Jorre (1972); Effiong (2016), and Ntieyong (1971).

creativity to grapple with complex questions thrown up by wars:

All through history, creative writers and historians have been known to bring their imaginative visions and critical skills to bear on the important events in the history of their people. Historians and literary artists of each era base their discourse and postulations on particular wars, but their implicit philosophical inquiries point to a range of universal dilemmas – *why are wars fought? Do wars achieve their declared initial objectives? Is war the ultimate solution to a human crisis at a point in time? Who benefits from war? Who are the toads of war? Who are the innocent victims of war? Is war inevitable in human society?* (Emenyonu xi, italics in original)

The questions posed by Emenyonu are crucial to any endeavour that seeks to understand the overarching goals that drive wars; even more profoundly, the questions speak to the essence of this research in many ways. All the questions represent the ideological trajectories that have been followed by literary engagements with the civil war, thus, my search for other stories of Biafra demands that I examine how fictional works have attempted to answer these important questions. Essentially, all the questions are summed up in the politics of belonging, particularly regarding the “who” questions – because the roles of the “who” and how the “who” is defined and identified are synthesized within the process of mapping insider/outsider status.

Indeed, the post-war literature in Nigeria is politically committed and ideologically loaded, and this is based on the pressing need to grapple with the horrors of the civil war and the challenges of reintegration. The desolation witnessed by the writers – as victims, participants and as onlookers in some cases – stimulated a body of literature that is more conscious of its “social environment” (Said 2003) than its predecessors. Commenting on this radical shift in commitment of literary works in post-war Nigeria, Kole Omotosho observes that literary narratives before the war hardly engaged with issues around lived experiences of Nigerians. He remarks that the war birthed narratives that advocated a united Nigeria (145). While texts have indeed focused on deeper issues of nationhood, not all advocate the continued existence of Nigeria as it is presently structured, for instance, Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982) calls for a restructuring of post-war Nigeria.

The rise in literary activities which has defined post-war Nigerian space is not limited to production of literary texts alone; there has also been an accompanying critical analysis which seeks to piece together, through literature, a mosaic of war events to create a whole. McLuckie’s study is remarkable in this regard because it was among early critical attempts

to understand the war by bringing together many literary texts. He presents a deep reading of five war novels³⁷, and highlights the importance of narrating stories of the neglected masses, and how narratives can be used to forge a false sense of community. However, his use of the Chiwezu et al³⁸ project of decolonisation as theoretical frame makes his reading focus more on the ‘colonial’ dimensions of the war, consequently, he sacrifices a properly reflexive view of Biafra. Again, his creation of a ‘populist community’ which includes literate and semi-literate, working people, peasants and traders” (McLuckie 15), is problematic. Using markers such as education, or profession, will not adequately present a picture of the ‘others’ within Biafra. Above all, by highlighting the centrality of the masses to narratives of the war, McLuckie’s work opens up discussions around the capacity of literature to present other stories.

Some of the critical engagements with the war literature have examined how literary texts narrate the experiences of the vulnerable – women and children in the war in the hands of ‘men’ and the Nigerian government. Writing on how women have been depicted as silent and docile in the war narratives³⁹, Marion Pape (2014) argues that the silence and erasure observed in the corpus of civil war literature has been perpetuated by men. She states that writings from women have been largely excluded from literary analysis of the war, thus, female voices are not accounted for in literary studies. Since Pape is of the opinion that the silencing of female voices is largely perpetuated by men, it also implies that she has assumed that all literary critics are men – except we can accuse female scholars of the same sin as their male colleagues. Beyond the writer’s problematic appeal to gender divides in a sense which reifies a closed homogenous reading of what it means to be woman, her thesis seems to hinge on a form of partisanship wherein men support male writers while women support theirs. The danger here is the sacrificing of creative finesse on the altar of gender politics. Curiously, she observes that only a few women-authored texts were in existence by the end of the 80s (Pape 26). This could mean that critics had a predominantly male-

³⁷ He reads Omotosho’s *The Combat*, Ekwensi’s *Survive the Peace*, Mezu’s *Behind the Rising Sun*, Aniebo’s *Anonymity of Sacrifice*, and Soyinka’s *The Man Died*.

³⁸ Chinwezu et al. argues that a decolonisation of African literature is a prerequisite for proper decolonisation. See Chinwezu, Onwuchekwa, et al. *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature Vol 1* (Howard UP, 1983).

³⁹ I find the writer’s usage of Igbo and Biafra interchangeably problematic. I think casting Biafra as Igbo home excludes the minorities and other groups that share the space with them. This creates the kind of exclusion which her study seeks to question.

authored pool of literary texts from which to draw. Since some of these critics whom she takes issues with wrote in the 80s and early 90s, it might be difficult to defend her position that gender was a factor in the way critics selected texts. I do not believe that gender is a major factor in selecting texts for literary explication in this case; rather, it seems truer that critics would select literary texts based on narratology⁴⁰, that is, their view of the discursive context. Understandably, her reading seems designed to tie into the focus of her book, which is titled *Wo/Man Palava* – a title which indicates a binary reading of the war experience⁴¹. In general, Pape's study is a deep and systematic exploration of several literary accounts of the civil war. Her inclusion of unpublished manuscripts in her reading gives her analysis a wide scope.

In the same vein, Abioseh Porter (1996) and Adams (2001) decry the exclusion of female narratives in the analysis of the war, while Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1983) declares that the first wave of literary narratives of the war were written by men and for men, and as such, they painted poor images of women. Oike Machiko laments these “male focused” literary studies of Biafra. Oike berates Craig McLuckie for not mentioning “even a single woman writer in his (1990) book-length study except in two brief notes” (Machiko 60). The writer is even more dissatisfied with Adimora-Ezeigbo because as an avowed feminist, her analysis is expected to foreground women's suffering: “since the critic [Akachi] is a well-known feminist and still she provides only a diffuse survey on war literature without any clear feminist perspective” (Ibid. 60); thus she is adjudged to have failed the womenfolk. More interestingly, Oike goes on to blame the ways in which women writers situate the trauma of the war within home spaces in their writing as responsible for their

⁴⁰ Narratology refers to the relationship that exists between history and the discourse used in its narration; it questions the idea of facts in stories. The point is to highlight that narration is a systematic piecing together of events in a certain manner. It is used here to capture how narrative structure and technique are often nuanced to convey the author's point of view, and how style is often a reflection of this. In the latter part of my research, I bring texts from different temporal divides together to test how point of view could provide an inlet into the authors' perception of Biafra. For a deeper engagement with narratology, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (The John Hopkins UP, 1975).

⁴¹ Her thesis that women-authored texts are derided by male critics is troubled by her discussion of Adimora-Ezeigbo's critique of Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (Pape 26). Since Adimora-Ezeigbo, like male critics, also argues that Nwapa's text is lacking in creative depth, one could suggest that the attitude of critics to women's stories is not indicative of gender bias or “war” as she frames it. Also, she problematises essentialist – and binary – framing of gender in her introduction but conversely, she is interested in how “women experienced the war as women” (Pape 11).

exclusion from literary explications. One wonders if focusing on the meta-dimension of war suffering is indeed preferable in teasing out the subterranean violence that is written out of grand histories. Also, as Njabulo Ndebele argues in his book, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991 [2006]), simple daily events have the capacity to unpack the dynamics of systemic oppression which plague societies.

Machiko's passionate call for privileging grand narratives over private ones seems symptomatic of a kind of feminism which seeks to engage with oppression solely on a macro scale. J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, in an essay titled "Buchi Emecheta: Politics, War and Feminism in Destination Biafra", questions this strand of feminism that is often employed in critical reading of some of the war literature. The major issue with such binary positioning is its assumption that all men had 'power' during the war, or all women lacked agency. In her reaction to this essentialist framing of gender, Jane Bryce (2008) examines the problems of homogenising gender in Africa by explaining its performativity. She remarks that identity is not fixed in the third-generation female authored novels she reads; rather, what she finds is a negotiated identity that ruptures national borders of belonging and definition. Bryce's finding signals the fluidity of gender identification and its implication for understanding the dynamics of power within a particular context. Hence, a fixed gender based binary reading of societal interactions will not present a beyond-the-surface epistemological engagement with the workings of power and subjugation.

Chidi Amuta is particularly vociferous in his criticism of what he calls 'feminist' narratives of the war; using Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* as a canvas, he remarks that the text is an "unenviable foray into the novelistic mode" (95). His grouse with the text lies neither in its structure nor language, rather it is in his belief that the writer's 'feminist' focus makes her novels lack creative depth. While it is true that Nwapa is a self-acclaimed feminist, her focus on the plight of women and children does not render her work bland, neither does it make them read like feminist manifesto. Her oeuvre is fecund with stories that go beyond the 'versus' axis which Amuta decries; she mainly puts the vulnerable at the centre of her stories. Although, Hodges (2009) simplifies the reading of *Sunset at Dawn* as blaming nagging women for the loss of the war, he demonstrates a deep understanding of the ethnic dynamics that defines relations in Nigeria. He observes the unique experiences of 'ordinary' people forced into a senseless war – a fact also acknowledged by Firine Ni

Chrechain (1991). However, Hodges' claim that Iweala's *Beast of No Nation* is not a Biafran war text is contestable. While it is possible to read the text as speaking to a universal conflict, it is unarguably situated within the Biafran conflict – as evident in character names which are largely Igbo. For instance, the protagonist is named Agu, and his friend is named Dike. There is also reference to government being controlled by the Northerners, this is a recurrent theme in Nigerian political discourse. Reading *Beast of No Nation* as a Biafran war text, Hawley (2008) notes that the conflict is deliberately narrated without close reference to Biafra to imbue it with a global reading.

Jane Bryce (1991) explores the contradictions present in the female telling of the war and Adimora-Ezeigbo (2005) reads the toll of the war on women as well as the politics of remembering; Mike Lecznar (2016) weaves a beautiful “text(ile)” link that connects Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* to Nwapa's *Never Again* and Chukwuemeka's *Sunset at Dawn*. His exploration of fashion and fabric as depicted in the texts is engaging; however, his reading of the fashion of female characters as performance of gender politics is polemical because of the linear way he conceptualises gender and the experiences it produces. One would have expected a reading of fashion along class lines, or an intersectional one that combines gender and class. Eustace Palmer (2008) investigates the literary representations of female suffering in Biafra/Nigeria war literature, tracing the diverse forms of women's suffering narrated in Nigeria-Biafra war texts. He explains that in wars, “the position of women is bound to change dramatically” (7); in essence, their position changes to that of perpetual victimhood. But one could argue that literary texts narrate a lot more than the victimhood of female characters; they present instances of agentic manoeuvring by women to the extent that they sometimes become lifelines for their families and spouses. Reading the portrayal of women in literary narratives of Biafra, and in war novels in general, Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi argues that male writers, in their quest to regain “manhood”, create three stock character types in their works:

Since the war novel is written by men, for men, and to influence men, women characters tend to be few and stereotypically drawn. Hemingway, noted for his inadequate portrayal of female characters, has three broadly based groups: the marginally treated woman destined to be raped as we see in the minor characters in *A Farewell to Arms*; the better favored female meant to be taken to bed but not married, such as Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*; and the advantage-seeking woman, hardened by circumstances of war and

lacking any sense of honor, like Brett in *The Sun Also Rises*, a victim of WWI and a suitable candidate for the lost generation. (213)

Okonjo-Oyeyemi's trenchant critique of male authored texts pivots on the discipline and policing of female bodies by men. By categorising women on the basis of their encounter with the male organ, she decries the simplistic casting of female characters as agentless victims reliant on their men in order to have a few drops of ink devoted to them in narratives of war. Conversely, she tropes on the same casting of women; her argument is built around the female body and its despoliation by a ravaging male, essentially feeding into the man versus woman binary opposition which implies that there must be an oppressive male character in the scheme of things before a female character can be hailed into existence. Another fallout of such positioning is that it employs the phallus, or "manhood" as a marker of belonging to the male hegemony, consequently making it difficult to see how some men suffered or how some women suffered in ways much more traumatic than other women.

Joya Uraizee (1997) also reads how *Destination Biafra* narrates the female body as a site for border marking and contestations, and Eustace Palmer (1993) identifies this phallic struggle in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. While Uraizee concludes that the text recommends the education of women as the solution to Nigerian integration – a curious conclusion given the myriad themes which the text foregrounds – Palmer concludes that the 'weak men' are also victims of the phallic battles. The gender war theme is also echoed by Moji Polo (2014) when she argues that Debbie Ogendemgbe in *Destination Biafra* represents a deconstruction of the 'male war hero' which pervades narratives of the war. What Polo does not address however, is the impossibility of Debbie to speak for all women in the text, and if one could indeed see the character as a sort of victory for 'women' considering her status as a blue-blooded, educated⁴² woman. Indeed, this is one of the pitfalls of conceptualising gender in a linear manner which does not take into account the ways in which other axes of identity intersect to complicate such neat frames of reference.

⁴² Majority of Biafran women narrated in literature are either semi-literate or illiterate, so Debbie's experience is cushioned by her rich background and education status.

Emmanuel Ngwira (2013)⁴³ navigates controversial waters in his reading of the civil war as an ‘unhoming’ experience suffered by a minority ethnic group; indeed, attempts to cast Biafrans/Igbo as a ‘minority group’ is often contradictory⁴⁴, and Darie Daniella-Irina (2016) argues along this line too. While she presents an interesting reading of selected literature on the war, her usage of ‘Biafra Igbo’ suggests that it was only the Igbo who suffered attacks before, during, and after the war. Also, her reading of texts like *Sunset at Dawn* and *Sozaboy* seem polemical in the way they are made to speak only to the corruption on the Nigerian side – when the texts do mock the foolishness of both belligerents. By employing a Biafra/Nigeria binary reading in her overview of texts, she inadvertently pushes the idea that the suffering witnessed during the war was solely perpetuated by the Nigerian side as evident in her unsubstantiated claim that the killing of ‘Biafran-Igbo’ continued even after the war. While Darie’s minor slips concerning the war’s historiography could be excusable based on her outsider status, the same can not be said for many of the hagiographical accounts that have emerged after the war.

A lot of these historical narratives of the war seem self-exculpatory, or celebrations of ‘excess’ as seen in the ‘genocidal war’ movement – Chima Korieh (2012) and EC Ejiogu (2013) make an unconvincing case in this regard. Paying little to no attention to the dimension of intra-Biafra violence and oppression, E.C.Ejiogu argues passionately that Biafra was the place of refuge that stopped the genocidal push of Nigerians:

[B]ut for the declaration of the Republic of Biafra, which emerged as the replacement state that functioned for the protection of the well-being and larger interests of the Igbo and other targeted peoples of the Eastern Region, given the prevalent scenario epitomized by the new state industry, all bets were off that it could have been only a matter of time before the purge pushed right into the Eastern Region and the Igbo heartland in the same wholesale and free-wheeling style that had characterized it all along. (750)

⁴³ Ngwira (2013) erroneously casts the Igbo as a minority group; the Igbo are in fact one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. See Ngwira, Emmanuel. *History, Authorship and Gender in the Fiction of Zoe Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2013).

⁴⁴ On the one hand, the population of the Igbo people puts them at par with the Yoruba people, and on the other, the multiplicity of ‘minority’ ethnic groups that were forcefully subsumed within the Biafran enclave defeats arguments that seek to cast them as weak. Akpan Ntieyong, who was the Chief Secretary to the government of Biafra, demonstrates this Igbo domination by explaining that Ojukwu often referred to the minority ethnic groups as Igbo wives. This captures the power dynamics of wartime Biafra. See Akpan, Ntieyong. *The Struggle for Secession 1966-1970* (London: Frank Cass, 1971).

Contrary to Ejiogu's position that Biafra was created to safeguard the lives of Igbo people, many accounts have made it abundantly clear that there were plans for secession well before the pogroms (see Gould 2013, Baxter 2014 and Venter 2015). Closer to my concern in this study is the way the complexity of Biafran identity, and the ambivalence of the Igbo as both oppressor and oppressed, immediately tear through Ejiogu's well marshalled arguments. For instance, Ejiogu's statement throws up issues around the subsumption of minority identities under the Igbo identity. Although he declares that Biafra was created as a haven for "the Igbo and other targeted peoples of the Eastern region", his summation of the casualty figure features only Igbo casualties. This erasure of other groups within Biafra, and how they suffered might be a deliberate monochromatic attempt to frame the Igbo people as victims. This framing is particularly useful to discourses that cast the war as genocidal.

Richard Bourne (2015) observes that the genocide rhetoric was a Biafran tool for sustaining the war and courting Western attention, and Peter Baxter (2015) probes how the rhetoric of genocide was used to fuel the conflict. Also, some narratives of Biafra have focused on the role of foreign diplomacy at the start and during the war (Baxter, 2015; Gould, 2013; Isama, 2014). In fact, one could claim that the bad alchemy of ethnic politics and Western meddlesomeness helped ferment the conflict. More importantly, identity politics fuelled with notions of ethnic superiority, stereotypes, difference, and marginalisation are believed to be responsible for the secession of 1967 and contemporary agitations for Biafra (Achebe 1968; CIA Files 2006).

Chinua Achebe observes in a 1968 interview with *Transition* that the war represents an implosion of the colonial marriage of different ethnic nationalities midwifed by the colonialists. He admits that the war was a fallout of a power squabble among the ruling class, but he situates this squabble at the realm of ethnic sentiments in a manner which reduces the war politics to mainly ethnic rivalry:

There is also the sheer desire to complete the revenge, and you find this coming out in the statements of the military people-the people who are actually fighting. They feel that the Ibos [sic] have given so much trouble in the past that they really must be taught a lesson. They will not admit this to the foreign press. But if you listen carefully you will hear this. (33)

There are certainly many more undercurrents to the war beyond ethnic rivalry, or how does

one account for those Igbo people that stayed in Nigeria during the war? What Achebe does not account for in his statement is that there were indeed several peace moves initiated by the federal side, genuine or not, which were simply rejected on the basis of a battle of who blinks first by the commanders on both sides. Ejiogu (2001) also follows Achebe's trajectory of casting the war as an attempt to subdue Igbo people and subject them to perpetual servitude. Thus, he reads the war as a northern caliphate's attempt to annex the southern part of the country⁴⁵. AJ Venter (2015),⁴⁶ like Ejiogu, examines the role of religion in the war; he argues that the war had religious undertones. Korieh (2010) reads it as a pogrom, while Ukoha Ukiwo (2009) notes that the war gave eastern minorities more autonomy through the creation of states. Philip Effiong (2016)⁴⁷ paints a troubling picture of how minority groups suffered within Biafra, and he notes that Ojukwu's pride and deception contributed to the outbreak of the war.

To Ntieyong Akpan (1971), the outbreak of the war was due to General Ojukwu's unbridled desire for power. Chinua Achebe (2012) paints a romantic image of Biafra as a lost space of perfection where Igbo agency blossomed, yet Olusegun Obasanjo (1980) observes that it was a space created mainly out of a greedy quest for oil control⁴⁸. While one must agree that the Igbo achieved some technological feats during the blockade, Achebe's celebration of Igbo agency casts creative fervour as an exclusive preserve of the Igbo; such narratives feed into the creation of an autochthonous Igbo identity. Michael Gould achieves a remarkable level of balance in his reading by highlighting the role of the egos of the two commanders in the war. He follows up with interviews with the two leaders years after the guns had become silent, and he concludes that, in retrospect, the leaders

⁴⁵ He observes that the war represents a continuation of the caliphate's precolonial attempts to conquer the southern part of Nigeria. This position seems to give breath to the religious war angle, which seems correct when one considers that the northern part of the country is predominantly Moslem. However, the commander in chief of the Nigerian army at the time the war was fought was a Christian.

⁴⁶ Venter's book opens with a quote that casts the onset of the war as a Jihad. This position is quite problematic in that the war was supervised by Christian generals on both sides; in fact, scholars like Gould (2013) and Baxter (2015) note the initial support that the 'Igbo coup' received across the country. One should also add that Venter's book lacks narrative objectivity. His narrative is close to Fredrick Forsyth's 'fictional' account of the war in his book titled *Biafra: The Making of an African Legend*. (2015[1977]).

⁴⁷ He was second in command to General Ojukwu, and he was the officer that surrendered to the Nigerian government.

⁴⁸ Obasanjo's narrative has a self-celebratory and self-exculpatory point of view. Also, explaining the quest for Biafra as solely born out of greed is unfair. Certainly, the Igbo had genuine concerns for their safety after the northern pogroms.

wish they had handled things differently. However, he ends on a binary oppositional level in his epilogue. He remarks that “[a]rguably this war was a conflict between northern Nigerians who have a strong middle-eastern culture and religion stretching back several hundred years, and eastern Nigerians: a pragmatic people who readily grasped European ideas, education and religion” (Gould 204). The framing here speaks to the clash of religion/culture discourse in which the war was framed for international audience.

Also, Laarse Heerten and Dirk Moses seem to advocate for an inclusion of the war as a genocide in their introduction to an otherwise robust collection of essays titled *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide* (2018). They berate several genocide scholars for not including the Nigeria-Biafra war in their canon of genocides. However, they do not pay adequate attention to the complex nature of the conflict which makes reading it as a genocide quite polemical. For instance, in their bid to show how the Igbo people were victimised during the war, they cite the creation of states, which, according to their view, deprived the Igbo of regional control of the oil rich region (26). However, what they fail to reference is that calls for the creation of states preceded the Nigeria-Biafra conflict. Several minority ethnic groups in the oil rich areas of Nigeria’s east had consistently demanded the creation of states in order to escape the oppressive hegemony of the Igbo in their region. This was the *raison d’être* given by Isaac Adaka Boro when he led a rebellion against Nigeria in 1966⁴⁹. Other stories which might complicate victim claims of Biafra would not come to light when the eastern region is homogeneously framed as Igbo as Heerten and Dirk have done.

These studies and others have examined some of the dynamics that precipitated the war focusing on themes like religious war, a war of egos between the commanders, foreign meddlesomeness, ethnicity, linear gender struggles, ethnic superiority, and cultural difference – sometimes giving teeth to the ethnic stereotypes that birthed the war. Critical readings of the war literature have read axes of subjugation independently without much attention given to how their intersection throws up deeper suffering. Belonging is mostly presupposed along a binary divide, that is, Nigeria-Biafra, man/woman, Igbo/Hausa-Yoruba. Such an ‘Us/them’ divide is often argued for; however, the divides are more

⁴⁹ Isaac Adaka Boro’s manifesto is well documented in his memoir, *The Twelve Day Revolution* (Idodo Umeh Publishers, 1982).

complex given the exclusionary tendencies inherent in wartime Biafra encountered in literature. I believe that reading the war at that vexed binary level of Nigeria-Biafra will continue to fertilise the violent identity politics that created the war and is being presently used to recruit followers for hegemonic interests.

Line of Enquiry of the Study

This study engages in an intersectional reading of literary depictions of Biafran society in nine historical prose-fiction texts and two memoirs. This is to question the validity of framing Biafra as a space of belonging in secessionist discourse. My focus will be on characterisation, point of view, theme, and tone in selected texts⁵⁰. I will read how age, social class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability/disability intersect to compound the suffering of those at the margins of Biafra. Also, the study traces layers of exclusion and personal suffering of characters to locate how inclusion and exclusion was determined, and how marginal characters were rendered vulnerable due to their ‘outsider’ status within a space they called home.

Relying on insights from literary narratives, and the relationship between history and literature as ‘cotexts’⁵¹, my study will question the utopian framing of Biafra like the one found in Emeffena Ezeani’s book *In Biafra Africa Died* – an account which seems to propagate a paradisiacal framing of Biafra; in fact, Ezeani concludes that the achievement of a prosperous Africa is ineluctably tied to the emergence of Biafra as a nation. Due to the situatedness of the literary texts – and this research – within a historical context, historical narratives of the war will provide some backdrop to my discussions. However, my focus would be on characterisation, thematic preoccupations and tone of selected texts; this is to read how the fraught belonging or exclusion of some characters complicate the idea of Biafra as a homely space. I am also interested in the ways in which these complex stories gesture towards the import of exploring these other stories, like those of ethnic minority

⁵⁰ Tone refers to the writer’s attitude to his subject. Here I plan to read how imagery is deployed in the narratives to examine the writer’s emotional distance.

⁵¹ New Historicists see historical texts and the literary as ‘cotexts’ because they narrate the same moment in history. They believe that ‘context’ presupposes a back and forth intertextuality of historical texts and the literary. I find this idea useful because it troubles the notion of fixed truths, thus, leaving ample space for literature to question historical ‘truths’ and present lost voices. See Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (University of Chicago Publishers, 1980). This relationship is even more profound in Africa where myths and legends played the role of historical archives before the advent of literate culture.

characters in the texts – like Bassey in *Sunset at Dawn* who lives in constant fear of being called a saboteur, and Aku in *The Last Duty* whose ethnicity, gender, and class push to the limits of the society where she is sexually exploited by Toje and Odibo. While she is a ‘Biafran woman’ her experience of the war is more horrendous than that of other Biafrans/Biafran women. It is such narratives that emerge within a space that is beyond the strictures of Nigeria-Biafra binary positions that I have framed as third space stories. The insurgent fervour of these narratives which burst the contours of neat histories demand that we pay attention to what happens in-between, at the interstices.

In this study, the Biafra in the third space refers to the one encountered in many literary narratives of the war. It is situated in-between the Nigeria-Biafra positions in the civil war discourse as a site where the marginal characters, often unacknowledged in mainstream discourses – but thoroughly subjugated on several grounds – are given voice and narrative space for enunciation which then produces a form of listening. Situating ‘Biafra’ in the middle of these two hegemonies also opens up the image of Biafra to a new reading in a manner which raises questions concerning the facticity of its deployment within secessionist discourse. This is a reading against the grain of popular framing of Biafra as a space desired by all Easterners. My take is that since Biafra invokes an image of freedom and belonging, but conversely, featured the exclusion of those that ‘do not count’ during the war, the Biafra in literary texts should be one where the weak have a voice, and their unique suffering is given centre stage. I agree with Nira Yuval-Davis that “struggles for recognition always also include an element of construction” (201), and this implies that attempts to create a different ‘Biafra’ by the vulnerable to reclaim their voices also engenders the emergence of a reconstructed identity neither beholden to Biafra nor Nigeria – a new way to belong, and the creation of a transversal community that crosses ethnic, religious, gender and sexuality divides. I am interested in this emergent trans-divide identities and notions of belonging.

‘Belonging’ and a search for ‘home’ are strategically employed within the secessionist discourse to garner tremendous followership and support among Igbo people. Such narratives are effective due to socio-political realities of Nigeria which does not guarantee ‘quality belonging’. Belonging, to Micheal Ignatief (2001), is a feeling of being at home and feeling safe. To belong evokes emotions such as inclusion and safety. However,

exclusion is also synthesised while mapping belonging; this is because belonging often indicates closure and “requires uniformity” (Ignatief 8), consequently creating layers of others. The boundaries that determine those who belong or not are drawn based on the “nature and value of their capital”⁵² (Ibid. 10).

Akanji Olajide writes that this dilemma of belonging, as encouraged in the Nigerian constitution through the indigene/settler dichotomy, is at the heart of inter-ethnic crises (119). A Nigerian could be considered a settler even within his/her country, thus creating spaces where difference is used as a tool to deny the ‘other’ of capital by mapping him outside. Mahmood Mamdani explains that this indigene settler dichotomy is a creation of the empire. He argues that the ““native” was the creation of intellectuals of an empire-in-crisis” (2) with the aim of simplifying their interactions with the colony. It is this politics of mapping and gate-keeping that Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) refers to as the politics of belonging. It explains “specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectives” (197)⁵³. In this politicking around belonging, there is the mapping of boundaries which determine the rules of us/them relationship, inclusion and exclusion as well as their contestations by other political agents. While belonging is the emotional feeling of inclusion, the politics of belonging speaks to the ways in which this emotional feeling is instrumentalised for diverse purposes. It is the process of setting the boundaries of who and what belongs or not. While belonging is tied to emotion, politics of belonging is connected to political manoeuvring and action. Yuval-Davis argues in her essay, “Theorizing Identity: Beyond Us and Them dichotomy” (2017), that this mapping and sometimes remapping of extant boundaries of belonging is largely tied to identity politics:

Central to these projects is the construction and reproduction of particular boundaries of belonging according to some specific principles that can be of many different kinds, from the phenotypical to the social. Identity politics tend to elevate specific location categories of belonging, assume a necessary and homogeneous narrative of primordial or quasi-primordial. (266)

⁵² Capital is used here to explain what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital, it refers to how one’s skills, knowledge or ability allows for social mobility, and acceptance within a community. See Pierre Bourdieu. *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford UP, 1992).

⁵³ Within this project, belonging is mapped to include those with skills and abilities that would service the hegemonic class, while, those without ability are mapped outside.

Yuval-Davis teases out the link between the politics of belonging and identity by highlighting the centrality of identity/identities creation, belonging and self-definition to politics of belonging. The importance of the “primordial” narratives of belonging which she discusses above, lies in the way it produces recognition, and a community of care; essentially, it synthesizes “situated gazes [which] delineate boundaries of recognition and care” (Ibid. 8). This process of creating recognition also produces stereotypic ways of knowing the other; that is, knowing the outsider as ‘enemy.’ The boundaries mapped within politics of belonging are sometimes ambivalent in that an erstwhile insider could mutate into an outsider based on social location – as in class, gender, age, religion, sexuality, cartographic location, ability/disability, and many other axes that might be adjudged signs of not belonging within the gamut of set rules of belonging.

Politics of belonging is employed in this study to read how belonging is negotiated, and how being an ‘outsider-within’ deprives characters of social goods such as food aid. Here I aim to call attention to the fact that every time a boundary is mapped, certain marginal groups are automatically excluded; for instance in Biafra, minority ethnic groups such as Ijaw, Ishekiri, Urhobo, and others were excluded based on language. An extra burden of proving their solidarity was placed on them – yet they ‘belonged’ within Biafra. Belonging (inclusion or exclusion) is produced within the politics of belonging; Yuval-Davis calls this divide “me/us and them” (“Theorising Identity” 276). Explaining the centrality of hegemonic discourses to such mapping, she remarks that “the individual’s fate is perceived, at least by hegemonic discourses of identity, to be closely bound with their membership of a particular collectivity” (Ibid. 276). This rhetoric of not ‘belonging’ except in solidarity with the ‘collective’ – defined by hegemonic narratives – stifles dissent, or difference. Conversely, politics of belonging also presents a space where the ‘others’ stage “their contestation, challenge and resistance” (Yuval-Davis, “Power, Intersectionality” 3), thus making it a site for synthesising, and questioning hegemonies. I am particularly interested in how hegemonic projects of belonging are challenged by the literary narratives I read. Importantly, how they interrogate the fixed “doxa”⁵⁴ which govern identity – Igbo/Nigerian identity and belonging – through representations of identities as fraught with

⁵⁴ Pierre Bourdieu describes “doxa” as a set of rules which govern a field of interaction. See Pierre Bourdieu. *The Logic of Practice*, pp.110-11.

ambivalence, as constantly in a state of flux and never homogenously neat as hegemonic narratives would have us think.

Theoretical Points of Departure

This study draws on postcolonial cultural identity theory, Homi Bhabha's concept of third space, and Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality⁵⁵. My research employs a postcolonial epistemology due to the echoes of colonial politics in the spectre of violence which continues to plague postcolonial African states. These devastating conflicts on the continent mostly revolve around the question of identities and boundaries which were smelted and mapped during the rapacious colonial years. Beyond being protagonists in the traumatic colonial pasts, the empire has mutated into prefects of global markets which manifest neo-colonial control over African states. Ngugi wa Thiong'o indicates the importance of a postcolonial approach to reading African texts in the "Author's Note" to his collection of essays titled *Homecoming* (1972). He observes that "[t]he relationship between creative literature and these other forces [imperial forces] can't be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism" (xv). Ngugi's statement here supports my point regarding the centrality of postcolonial theory as a pivot for unpacking the conflicted African existence encountered in postcolonial texts. To account for these other forces and how they continue to enthrall postcolonial Africa, my arguments will be broadly framed within the ambit of postcolonial theories.

Intersectionality and Situated Intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality has its roots in black feminist studies/Law, and it has become useful in probing the overlapping social identities observable in socio-cultural relations and the dynamics of power. It developed in reaction to homogeneous identity politics that employ hegemonic identity and belonging to explain power relations. The term intersectionality was used in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw to capture the multiple axes of cultural identity that often interact in subjugation and resistance within contexts of power relations. Crenshaw identifies some of these axes as gender, class, race, and further research

⁵⁵ Scholars like Anzaldua (1984) and Smith (1983) employed this conceptual frame before Crenshaw's robust usage, and naming. See Mc Call (2005) and Yuval-Davis (2015).

has identified more axes like ability, sexual orientation and religion (see Hill-Collins 2015). Crenshaw notes that a lack of proper engagement with how these axes of identity affect dominance will make the ‘vulnerable fall through the crack’⁵⁶. Employing the idea of “sameness/difference”, Cho et al. (2013) highlight the paradox that defines intersectional identities; they are present, but neither here nor there, and their existence as minorities within minority makes them unavowed in main discourse⁵⁷. Crenshaw argues forcefully against the “erasure” of black women in her seminal essay titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989). She states that the

[...] focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that can’t be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. I suggest further that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon. (140)

Herein lies the strength of intersectionality, but also its hubris. The complex view of subjugation, which intersectionality enables, helps to unmask hidden dimensions of oppression by bringing several axes of oppression together to create a mutually constituting matrix; however, in its initial framing, and as shown above, only the black woman is allowed within this intersection. Since it owes its birth to black feminist discourse to which Crenshaw is a vibrant participant, it was framed as a model for examining the situation of black women in the society, and it is this attribute that is largely responsible for the multiplicity of variants which have sprouted from it during its movement around the world.

The theory allows for a robust examination of interactions between different axes of identity at the same time. It presents a potent tool for critical explorations of belonging and power relations, and the possibility of being in a space but not ‘homed’ in the space. This might force the creation of a unique self, of an emergent self at the margins. With intersectionality, however, there is the tendency to highlight several axes of subjugation without properly establishing how they concatenate to synthesise multiple suffering. Also, intersectional readings have the tendency to slip into “fragmented identity politics” (Yuval-

⁵⁶ In a 2016 speech, Crenshaw uses this term to explain how the ‘sameness and difference’ of black women often conflate to exclude them from getting justice. See Crenshaw, Kimberle. *The Urgency of Intersectionality*. (Tedx talk 2016), www.tedx.com, accessed 06/02/2017.

⁵⁷ This fraught relationship with the main discourse/group is also the argument of Parent et al. (2013).

Davis, “Situated Intersectionality” 93), that is, they assume a universal/homogeneous reading of vulnerability.

To guard against this, I employ Nira Yuval Davis’ situated intersectionality for reading the intersectional experiences presented in the texts. I prefer Davis-Yuval’s method of intersectional analysis because it draws a clear link between social axes of identification and power relations, particularly, the centrality, and mutually constituting nature of ‘historical, spatial, temporal, and sociological’ contexts in defining power dynamics⁵⁸. She argues passionately in her essay, “Situated Intersectionality”, that “in order to analyse discrimination and oppression, our analytical intersectional gaze has to be directed also towards the powerful and not just the powerless” (Yuval-Davis 638). Such a nuanced methodological approach allows for ‘situated gazes’ that incorporate those who are ‘differentially’ located within hegemonic class, and consequently caught in the twilight of power/powerlessness⁵⁹.

Leslie McCall (2005) describes such ‘situated’ epistemic approaches as ‘anti-categorical’ or ‘intra-categorical’ because they stretch the boundaries of intersectional studies beyond the tripartite axes of class, race, and gender. However, I believe that labelling such approaches anti-categorical/intra-categorical does not take cognisance of the ambivalence of social grouping and social categories within the spaces that intersectionality currently navigates. Also, her fear of the possibility of deconstructing all categories to an aporetic end seems misplaced⁶⁰. To address this, Yuval-Davis (2006) advises that emphasis in intersectional readings should be on those axes of identity and belonging that affect power relations within societies, or dialogical contexts. This would help mitigate against a slip into a simple enumeration, and creation of axes of subjugation ad-infinitum.

Homi Bhabha notes that theories help us interrupt/query the dominant strategies of

⁵⁸ Yuval-Davis observes that the uni-dimensional casting of marginality tied to the fixed narrative of the experiences of women of colour, as used in mainstream intersectional studies, is problematic. To her, one’s situatedness within a specific context makes it difficult to theorise generic vulnerable identities. See Nira Yuval-Davis. “Intersectional Meanings of Culture”. *YouTube*, Uploaded by Consello da Cultura Galega, (March 14, 2017), www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMTOD2JCxi8 accessed on 25/04/2017.

⁵⁹For instance, child soldiers could be seen as ‘belonging’ to the hegemonic class, but they could be read intersectionally as victims of that same hegemony.

⁶⁰ Situated intersectionality, like other ‘anticategorical’ methods, does not discard categories all together; rather, they emphasize the centrality of contexts, and ‘situatedness’ in the creation of categories. This is what I seek to explicate within the politics of belonging in this study.

generalisations within a cultural or interpretational community, and the ‘third space’ as a concept aptly captures this interrogative valence. In his *Location of Culture* (1994), he explains third space as a state of inbetween/inbetwixt-ness. Although third space is mostly invoked when explaining hybridity, I employ it as heuristic guide – in an extended sense, based on its capacity to annotate how new identities, not beholden to the dominant discourse, are smelted. Even more crucial to this study is Bhabha’s observation that the third space is a site of enunciation, that is, a space where voices that articulate other positions emerge:

The intervention of the third space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process [...] challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past, kept alive in the national tradition of the people. (*The Location of Culture* 37)

Since the Biafran identity and belonging are key issues at the centre of my endeavour, I find the challenges presented against autochthony in Bhabha’s statement quite instructive. The acknowledgement of ambivalence and excess both in terms of war stories and in the way characters belong or not in civil war literature, which occurs in the third space, has the advantage of demanding that we listen to other stories beyond the unified neat stories that claim to be the only versions of truth.

The third space is a troubled space that is fraught with the complexities of knowing and not knowing, it is a liminal state where critical questions create self-reflexivity. In a sense, one enters this space without an awareness of one’s ‘in-betweenness’, but through critical questions, one’s interstitial position becomes recognised. Fetson Kalua describes this space as “[...] a phase in the life of a subject – an individual, a community, or a nation – which belies any attempts at settled assumptions about its identity because of inherent contradictions and instabilities that often come to haunt the subject” (Kalua 24). Essentially, this site is a platform for questioning the fixity of being and belonging which defines dualistic modes of self-definition. Within the third space, there is the smelting of identities which defy “the network of classifications” (Ibid. 23) around which hegemonic modes of knowing are hinged. It is the realm of the beyond, “entailing confusion and paradox” (Ibid. 25); it is also a space of enunciation and rejection of hegemonic categorizations according to Bhabha. By enunciation, Bhabha refers to the way third space allows for an

acknowledgement of the complexity of being – leading to a process of a new self. Although this new self is not whole or perfect in terms of being and belonging, its awareness of self-definition beyond the dualist mode allows for a processual reading of identity which revolves around the fluidity of belonging. Bhabha (1996) notes that the interstitial location of the third space between dominant discourses helps to question identity and the fixity of otherness (“Culture’s in-Between” 37). This fixity is responsible for synthesizing stereotypes, and layers of exclusion, within the main discourse by foregrounding an ‘us/them’ binarist positioning.

The third space presents a canvas for questioning such binarism which subsumes, or erases other positions (Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 324). The fixed, and essentialised frame of the dominant discourse is discarded within the third space and replaced with a frame that allows for the emergence of voices, thus allowing for a negotiation of narrative agency. It is these voices that help in charting what lies “outside” the scope of mainstream stories by avowing the complexities that define intra/inter group relations and belonging (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 206). Bhabha further adds that “it is this disjunctive structure within and between groups that prevents us from representing oppositionality in the equivalence of a binary structure” (Ibid. 206). By problematising binary representation of alterity or oppositionality, Bhabha casts the third space as a vista where critical questions which border on reflexivity could be asked and grappled with – although this might shake the very foundations of ‘truths’ that we hold dear and sacrosanct. Also, this space between is fecund with creative encounters which synthesize “ambivalences, ambiguities and contradictions” (Bhabha “Culture’s in-between” 56). Bhabha’s conception of in-betweenness will help me grapple with the complexity of belonging and space within narratives of Biafra because it presents a prism for unpacking the undercurrents of hegemonic narratives, and how they subsume interstitial voices. Bhabha explains this opening up of enunciative spaces in-between binary spaces in his essay “Culture’s in-between” (1996). He avers that paying attention to the stories between

Opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an ‘interstitial’ agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. (58)

The rejection of binary fixing which “interstitial agency” allows is central to my focus in

this research – that is, how other stories irrupt in the middle of hegemonic binary casting of being and belonging. Also, the fluidity which defines identity negotiation in the third space allows for critical engagements with inclusion/exclusion and how it is synthesised. This framework for questioning fixed binaries makes it apposite in examining the politics of belonging and power in Biafra.

The theories discussed above mainly represent the mould in which I will shape my arguments, but I will also invite other important voices and concepts to my discussion if, and when they help distil my ideas in clearer terms. One of such concepts is Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic power – which he also describes as a soft form of power due to its use of non-overt forms of violence. The subliminal forms in which symbolic power manifests makes it more potent than brute force. Bourdieu argues in his book, *Language and Symbolic Power*, that social hierarchies are produced within this realm of power through what he calls as a “*gnoseological* order: the immediate meaning of the world” (emphasis in original, 167). This *gnoseological* order becomes a lens through which the world is understood, and meaning is derived in the society; it is subtly fed into the society's norms until it becomes a part of culture. The embeddedness of symbolic power within the socialization of the people synthesizes a form of conviviality that gives the power some form of legitimacy. Also within this subtle kind of power, there is the creation of a “misrecognition” of power dynamics; because the system is seen as just, the oppressed is made to believe that they are a part of a convivial “we.” Consequently, they are ready to fight to defend the status quo because they are imprisoned by a sense of “logical conformism” (Ibid. 167)⁶¹.

On the whole, this kind of power is cyclical in manifestation, it is replicated and defended by its worst victims because they believe their very existence is ineluctable tied to its continuity. This concept is pivotal to my thinking around the question of identity and

⁶¹ Bourdieu also unpacks the workings of symbolic power; he observes that the hegemonic class cultivates a false sense of belonging through language, narratives, symbols, and the use of “structuring” and “structured” activities on the oppressed (*Language and Symbolic Power* 166) through which they perpetuate “sociodicy”, that is, the belief, in the oppressed, that their existence is intrinsically tied to survival of the hegemonic class. A naturalistic myth of class superiority is multiply reinforced through all pedagogic means, through teachers, clerics etc; essentially because these ideological surrogates are also products of the system and they believe that they owe their relevance and power to the hegemonic class. As he notes, through “instruments of knowledge and communication, ‘symbolic structures’ can exercise a structuring power only because they themselves are structured” (Ibid. 167).

belonging within wartime Biafra and contemporary conceptions of what it means to be Biafran/Nigerian. It helps me account for those who are caught at the periphery of power – but choose to defend the exploitative status quo in the texts I read. Particularly, it will be helpful in interrogating the creation and maintenance of solidarity represented in literature.

Methodological Details: Selection of Texts and Chapter Breakdown

This research is situated within both literary studies as well as cultural studies. It employs a close reading of selected literary texts on the civil war to investigate how they narrate the undercurrents to the suffering of the vulnerable within literary context. My reading will examine how axes such as ethnicity, age, class, gender, sexuality, education, ability/disability, intersect to compound the suffering of some characters in the texts. I will focus on the tone, thematic preoccupation and characterisation employed in the texts. Texts with little focus on the specifics of combat, but profound engagements with wartime trauma/dilemma were selected. For clarity, texts are delineated along the line of first wave and second wave. While I am aware of the tradition of using the word ‘generation’ to delineate Nigerian literary texts⁶², using ‘generation’ as a divisional marker puts the author at the center of readings as opposed to the text itself – which happens to be the focus of this research.

Also, since my focus is on a particular epochal event that has reverberated in literary texts across temporal divides, it is safe to use the year of publication as a yardstick for grouping them. Texts considered under the first wave were written immediately after the war in the period 1970 to 1990, they were written by ‘Biafrans’⁶³ who witnessed the war. The second wave features recent works produced by writers from 1990 to 2015, and that might have relied on archival accounts or stories from parents, grandparents/relatives who witnessed the war. The division between first and second waves is to allow for a comparison

⁶² Harry Garuba notes that the fixity that words like ‘generation’ depicts is lacking in Nigerian literature. He questions the rationality of categorising a ‘first generation’ writer who is still writing in contemporary times as first generation. He is also suspicious of using thematic thrust as a marker for delineating generations; this will not work due to fluidity that defines creative processes. See, Harry Garuba, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-Figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry.” *English in Africa*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2005, pp. 51-72.

⁶³ At different points in this thesis, I will put Biafra in inverted commas to signal the ambivalence that surrounds the Biafran identity. A later section examines this complexity in detail.

of tones, and to create a conversation between both groups⁶⁴. The temporal divide will allow for an engagement with the role of memory and remembrance in the framing of Biafra and to examine how Biafra has remained relevant in literature even now. The comparison of two waves will also be productive in reading how both groups narrate post-war return home – or lack of it – to comment on the continued freshness of the wounds of the war and a need for belonging.

Chapter Layout

Chapter One: Biafra and the Project of Belonging: ‘Give us Biafra or Death’

In this introductory chapter, I weave a background to the study, and highlight the key concepts which will shape my arguments. The chapter foregrounds the controversies surrounding Biafra in secessionist discourse, identifies some of the interventions that I will make in my thesis, and introduces the selected texts.

Chapter Two: Memoir’lising Biafra: Mapping Silence and Absence.

This chapter opens with a brief conversation between two memoirs, one from a hegemonic position, and the other from an ‘ordinary Biafran’ to set up the stage for my proposed parley between literature and autobiographical history. I will read the memoirs to signal the kind of erasures which I hope to question in this project. The selected memoirs are Chinua Achebe’s *There was A Country* and Diliorah Chukwurah’s *The Last Train to Biafra*. The two memoirs are brought into conversation to map points of divergence and convergence in the remembrance of Biafra. In the second part of the chapter, having created a context with the memoirs, I will identify the vulnerable in the selected fictional texts with the aim of mapping their struggles for survival as ‘outsiders within.’ Through intersectional lenses I read how agency, or lack of it, introduced new axes in the suffering experienced by the vulnerable in the war as represented in *Sunset at Dawn* and *Roses and Bullets*.

⁶⁴ I should remark that even my careful delineation here is troubled by Akachi Ezeigbo’s *Roses and Bullets*. This is because the author witnessed the war but waits until 2011 to publish her novel. This situates her text in the second wave in terms of date, but first wave in terms of experience and narration. In fact, one could say her story has a more agonising engagement with the horrors of the war than some of the texts written immediately after the war. However, the poignancy of the Biafra experience that the text narrates makes it central to this study. The text also helps examine why narratives of the war by Biafran witnesses remain blood-soaked even after many years—narratives like Achebe’s *There Was a Country*, which he kept until his deathbed.

Chapter Three: It Was a Generals' War: Examining 'Solidarity' and Sacrifice in Biafra and Nigeria

This chapter reads the complexity and violence of belonging in wartime Biafra through the eyes of the military rank and file. It teases out the sacrifices that 'forced solidarity' demanded from the vulnerable caught in the middle of Nigeria-Biafra hegemonic positions as depicted in *Heroes*, *Sozaboy* and *Toads of War*.

Chapter Four: Queering Biafran 'Womanhood': Investigating Female Survival Struggles/Strategies in Biafra

In this chapter, I complicate the idea of Biafran womanhood by reading the ways in which some women are mapped outside the borders of belonging due to their transgressive sexual acts and desires. Particularly, the chapter reads the role of the phallus in categorising women as good or bad, belonging or not, and how social location synthesises unique gender experiences. Texts: *Under the Udala Trees* and *The Last Duty*.

Chapter Five: Beyond 'Biafra Babies'

This chapter unsettles the image of weak starving children and how this image elides critical issues like the use of child soldiers and forced conscription. I question the absence of complex narratives of the experiences of children within the civil war historiography, and position literary narratives as sites of enunciation and witnessing for 'Biafran children.' Texts: *Beast of No Nation* and *Song for Night*.

Chapter Six: Conclusion: Lack of Return in Nigeria-Biafra War Literature

In the first part of this chapter, I will trace how texts depict ruptured ideas of home and belonging in wartime and post-war moments to call attention to the ways in which the narratives reveal a lack of return even after the guns went silent. And how these open-ended narratives of Biafra signal a need for spaces of narrative engagements and healing. In the second part of the chapter, texts from the two 'waves' of post-civil war literature will be brought into conversation to read how the engagements with the event might have shifted over time, and, in some cases, moving beyond the local (Nigeria) to the global.

Chapter Two

Memoir'izing Biafra: Mapping Silence and Absence

Introduction

In this thesis, I propose that literature, due to its polyvalence, represents a veritable site for mining other stories, missing links, and the traumatized, but silenced voices in the historiography of the Biafra-Nigeria civil war. These stories are located in-between bifurcated accounts forged in hegemonic kilns; thus, my reading inserts literary accounts of the everyday in Biafra into the interstice between Nigeria versus Biafra stories of the war to create a more robust picture of the war. In a sense, I respond to E.C. Ejiogu's lament regarding the absence of victim voices in the corpus of civil war history by casting literature as filling the void he identifies. Ejiogu asks: "[w]hy has the world not read from those kwashiorkor-stricken Biafran children who survived that sadistic ordeal? How about their counterparts and others who were eye-witnesses to the horrors of the pogroms in the North of Nigeria?" (746). Ultimately, what Ejiogu invokes here is the incompleteness that has continued to plague accounts of the traumatic war. To take up this challenge in a nuanced manner, I argue that literary accounts of Biafra contain a multiplicity of voices and that these voices, and the stories of the vulnerable that they tell, are intrinsically embedded within fictional representations of Biafra. Thus, I read, and re-read fictional accounts of quotidian realities of Biafra to bring other stories of Biafra to the fore.

This chapter opens with a brief conversation between two memoirs, one from the ruling class, and the other from a Biafran child to set up the stage for a parley between grand narratives of Biafra and ordinary everyday tales of survival within the enclave. This is to erect a rostrum from which I present the incompleteness of grand tales of Biafra in order to thrash out the need for other narratives of Biafra. I start by reading, albeit briefly, Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country* (2012) and Diliorah Chukwurah's *The Last Train to Biafra* (2014) to indicate the kind of erasure which I hope to question within this project. In the second movement, I read two fictional accounts of Biafra to demonstrate how literature fills the identified silences. My reading here mainly aims to identify some of the axes of belonging/ unbelonging that I contend with in this dissertation, and how

positionality in terms of belonging or not might have erased those caught at the margins from the narrative scope of grand tales. The essence of this dialogue between memoirs is to tease out the erasures and silences that plague hegemonic – mostly celebrated histories – of the civil war and to map points of divergence and convergence in the remembrance of Biafra.

In this chapter, and in the thesis, I do not intend to question the truth value of historical accounts of Biafra; rather, my reading will indicate the incompleteness of popular accounts of Biafra, thus, signalling the need for other stories. These stories from between the Nigeria-Biafra binary positions, which seem ample in literary depictions of Biafra, would create another way of understanding the war. Essentially, I cast fictional narratives of Biafra as spaces of enunciation, thus, in the second movement, I read Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* and Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* to map the axes of vulnerability that I focus on in this study. I chart how the vulnerable navigate their struggles for survival as 'outsiders within.'

Remembering Differently: Biafra in the Memory of Achebe and Chukwurah

Chinua Achebe's popular memoir, *There Was a Country*, is undoubtedly written in support of the Biafran cause as well as to state the writer's role in the conflict; essentially, it was written to justify his support for, and participation in the war. The narrative is moulded by a binary reading of Nigeria as aggressors and Biafrans/Igbo as victims. I have chosen to read his account of the war as hegemonic history because of the elitist story it tells. It pays more attention to the politics of the war than it does to its agonising details. Indeed, the writer declares his belonging to the hegemony when he describes how the country was handed over to them. He says "[m]ost of us were well prepared [to replace the colonialists] because we had received an outstanding education" (*Country*, 49)⁶⁵. In essence, Achebe agrees that he belonged to the class of those to whom the country was bequeathed by the colonialists. One can quickly get a sense of the cracks that existed even within these imperialist foster elites from Achebe's choice of the word "most" to map a sub-group based on competence. Through this mapping, he indicates both his belonging to the group of those

⁶⁵ Achebe served the Biafran cause as an ambassador, traveling to places like Senegal to meet with President Leopold Sedar Senghor and to Britain. Also, he joined a political party, People's Redemption Party, as Deputy National President in 1980 after his stint in Biafra.

who were ready for the inheritance and their difference to those who were not. This divide, between the ‘competent’ and the incompetent groups, was to become a harbinger of the internecine power tussles that continue to mar the Nigerian space.

He starts with the story of his childhood life, taking us through experiences that shaped his worldview, but beyond this, the opening part of the book draws the reader in, to achieve a measure of affect and closeness to the storyteller. We meet his family: father, mother, siblings etc (*Country* 7), and we also gain some insight into the depth of Igbo ontology. This sets up a stage upon which Achebe builds a story – the story of his suffering and that of the Igbo. To get a deep understanding of what Achebe sets out to do in his memoir, it is pertinent to enter through the portal created by the text’s striking title. On the one hand, the title signals a need to memorialize Biafra and to weave it tightly into the fabric of Nigeria’s history; on the other hand, it also calls attention to the government-sanctioned erasure of stories of the war from the annals of Nigeria’s chequered history – here I am referring to the declaratory and corrective tone of the title⁶⁶. The title seems like a response to the subtle strategy of erasure being codified in the way the war has been named the Nigeria civil war. This is one of the ways through which the history of Biafra is being washed off the palimpsest of Nigeria’s contemporary history. By referring to the war as the Nigerian civil war, the other party to the conflict is immediately erased and banished from the memory of that turbulent period. Although Achebe also takes his effort at re-inscribing Biafra in the war’s historiography a tad too far by disavowing the place of Nigeria in the way he names conflict, it is mainly an assertion of the importance of acknowledging Biafran voices in debating and writing about the civil war. The second part of the title “a personal history of Biafra” has even more profound implications; this qualifying section of the title is to assert a measure of ownership – it is a personal story, his story of Biafra, and wrapped within this personal story is a struggle to claim an unquestionable closeness to the facts of the matter. However, after a few page turns, Achebe transfigures from telling a personal tale to speaking for the collective; ultimately, he situates himself as a voice for Biafra. He notes that the story he plans to tell is his story, but it is also a story of the short-lived embattled

⁶⁶ *There Was a Country* is no doubt a declaratory statement which immediately invokes a remembrance of Biafra. This declaratory tone also pervades the pages of the text, giving it a controversial claim to facticity. It is possible that Achebe was aware of the explosive nature of his story, hence, his decision to save the story until his deathbed. He released the book just before his death.

enclave which he documents for the sake of posterity: “[i]t is for the sake of the future of Nigeria, for our children and grandchildren, that I feel it is important to tell Nigeria’s story, Biafra’s story, our story, my story” (*Country* 3). Having set up this scaffold, he guides us into the abyss of the civil war history.

Temporally, his memoir takes off in precolonial Nigeria and ends with commentaries on the post-war Nigerian society. He gives a brief precolonial history of Nigeria, the amalgamation of 1914 which brought the northern and southern protectorates together and the excellence with which the empire managed the country. He remarks that the amalgamation is responsible for the internecine conflicts that continue to plague Nigeria: “[i]f the Berlin Conference sealed her fate, then the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates inextricably complicated Nigeria’s destiny. Animists, Muslims, and Christians alike were held together by a delicate, some say artificial lattice” (*Country* 2). The statement identifies religion as one of the reasons why the lattice could not hold the different peoples together, leaving gaps that often translate into violent battlegrounds. It is important to note that one of the silent but enduring themes of Achebe’s narrative in the text is religious difference⁶⁷, but the overriding focus is on toxic ethnicity and how it created the Igbo as victims.

Structurally, the memoir is divided into four parts with each signaling specific epochal events in the life of the author, Nigeria, Biafra, post-war anger, and a trenchant denigration of contemporary Nigeria. The story that Achebe narrates shares a concentric relationship with his life as a citizen of, first Nigeria, then Biafra, and finally Nigeria. With copious archival documents, he presents a historical account of the civil war from a Biafran point of view; he does not mask his passionate support for the Igbo as victims of a carefully orchestrated genocide – which he struggles to prove (*Country* 228-229). Also, he unapologetically declares that the Igbo are indeed superior, more educated, and civilized

⁶⁷ He leaves us guessing which areas of the country fit perfectly into this tripartite religious divide he has set up. Curiously, IPOB also employs this map of religious differences within the country to foreground Igbo people as distinct – sometimes going to the extent of casting the Igbo as Jews being persecuted for their faith. His point here is also important in the sense that his reading of the different regions as homogenous in terms of religion is problematic. It does not account for those who did not fit into this religious frame which he erects. In a worrying sense, it denies Biafrans/Easterners who are not Christians of belonging. Also, from the tenor of his critique of the amalgamation, one would have thought that he would launch a trenchant attack on the colonial enterprise; rather, he praises the expertise with which the British ran the country before independence.

than other ethnic groups; they singlehandedly fought for, and won independence for the country; they are “the Igbos[sic] who led the nation in virtually every sector – politics, education, commerce, and arts. This group, the Igbo, that gave the colonizing British so many headaches and then literally drove them out of Nigeria was now an open target” (*Country*, 66-67)⁶⁸. Such essentialist reading of the Igbo people as a group imbued with special genes of success is troubling, especially coming from an intellectual like Chinua Achebe; but what is more disturbing is that inadvertently, Achebe feeds from, and feeds into the colonial divide and rule narratives which were used to categorise diverse groups of people in order to make the job of the empire easy.

Mahmood Mamdani critiques such autochthony when he says that such primordial framing of ethnicity was for the “management of difference” by the colonialists (*Divide and Rule* 2). While my brief in this thesis does not call me to question the veracity of Achebe’s claim in terms of the Igbo unilaterally leading the independence struggle, I should quickly state that within this conquering image of the Igbo, there is no space for the ordinary, uneducated Igbo man who was not in competition with anyone. Also, for the sake of probity, it is important to note that the motion for Nigerian independence was first moved in 1953 by Anthony Enahoro, a non-Igbo Nigerian who was also on the federal side during the prosecution of the civil war⁶⁹.

The radical ideological stance taken in the book by Achebe, a respected member of the country, has made the book quite controversial. In fact, E.C. Ejiogu believes that there were attempts to scuttle its circulation (“On Biafra” 742). Consequently, the text has been subjected to different kinds of reading; from scathing critiques like Kole Omotosho’s essay “First There Was a Country, then there Wasnot” to glowing celebrations like the one found in E.C. Ejiogu’s “There was a Country: An Elaborate Deconstruction”, and many others. I find Chielozona Eze’s short but eloquent critique quite fresh because he rises above

⁶⁸ Contemporary secessionist rhetoric is rife with such claims of superiority. Agitators often describe other ethnic groups as burdensome to the polity and uncivilized.

⁶⁹ There is no doubt that the Igbo play critical roles in every facet of Nigerian life; however, to engage in an egg counting ritual of which ethnic group is most successful defeats the very essence of nationhood and it feeds the gimmicks that are used by leaders to divert attention from the systemic oppression that holds the vulnerable prostrate, regardless of ethnic affiliations. Pierre Bourdieu argues that this strategy of deception achieves “recognition” through “misrecognition” (*Language and Symbolic Power* 140). In other words, it tricks the oppressed into believing that he is the same with his oppressor, thus, he can only conceptualise his suffering as coming from an outsider.

partisanship by situating his reading in-between the warring parties⁷⁰. He observes that the same self-exculpatory tenor found in *Things Fall Apart* pervades the text⁷¹. He argues that the victim/innocence mentality which lies at the heart of contemporary agitations for Biafra could be gleaned from Achebe's narrative too. Eze raises valid points concerning Achebe's attempt to trivialise the centrality of the 1966 coup to the mindless pogroms unleashed on the Igbo in the North:

A switching of perspectives could deepen the understanding of the emotion that carried the said events to their dangerous results. If the coup had been plotted by, say, the same number of non-Igbo (Hausa) officers, and if the same number of southern (Igbo) leaders were killed as Northern leaders were, most Igbo would call it a Northern (Hausa) coup. (Eze 2017)

Eze's suggestion that Achebe, and indeed Igbo people, also walk in the shoes of other ethnic groups to have a better understanding of the events surrounding the pre-war pogrom is a much-needed approach to solving ethnic strife within the Nigerian space, and indeed, in Africa. Such an approach will engender a broader understanding of the undercurrents that contributed to the war. For instance, it points at the ethnic spins often put on power issues which weaponize the ordinary man on the street to fight in defence of his ethnic group. One could conjecture, however, that Chielo's critique of Biafran elites is because he was a "Biafran Baby", a victim, who lived through the war, surviving the scourge of kwashiorkor, thus experiencing the war in ways those at the top did not. In a sense, his reading, with its profound bottom-up orientation, is evidential of the sort of depth that victim voices can bring to readings of Biafra.

In *There Was a Country*, Achebe positions himself as a voice for Nigeria, Biafra, and everything in between. He situates himself as a "moral witness" (Mangalit 148) who feels the need to deploy facts to contribute to history as well as to challenge the false historical accounts that are being produced. His resoluteness to garner truth value for his account reflects in his copious use of documentary evidence. Also, the importance that Achebe attached to his story and his voice is revealed in his statement concerning the

⁷⁰ See Eze Chielozona. "There Was a Country: Preliminary Thoughts of a Wounded Survivor." (*Akoku Magazine*, 2017), www.akoku.org/review/, accessed 18/05/2018.

⁷¹ Chielona's argument is that it is the weakness in Okonkwo's character that is responsible for his destruction and not the entrance of the colonialists. In a passionate sense, he claims that Achebe is blinded by his Igbo-ness, hence, the Igbo people are mostly portrayed as victims in his writing.

incompleteness of any body of stories where his voice does not feature: “My kind of storytelling has to add its voice to this universal storytelling before we can say ‘Now we’ve heard it all’” (*Country* 55)⁷².

To achieve the status of a ‘now we have heard it all’ kind of story, and to attain a degree of closeness to the trauma of the war, Achebe aligns himself with the vulnerable, the voiceless, and the oppressed who unarguably suffered the most during the carnage. Indeed, this role is not too far removed from his view of the destiny of African writers as voices for the oppressed and as champions of projects that seek to write back to power (*Country* 54-55), but this is not Achebe’s goal in this case⁷³. His ultimate goal is to appropriate the voices of the vulnerable as his own to gain narrative capital. He declares his allegiance to the oppressed group in the following lament:

You see we, the little people of the world, are ever expendable. The big powers can play their games even if millions perish in the process. And perish they did. In the end millions (some state upwards of three million, mostly children) had died, mainly from starvation due to the federal government of Nigeria’s blockade policies. (226)

In Achebe’s lamentation, he casts himself as one of the “little people” in Biafra, and by extension, the world. While the writer undoubtedly suffered during the war, but to claim membership of the class of the dregs of the Biafran society seems hyperbolic, and it diverts much-needed attention and affect from the gory tales of the vulnerable within wartime Biafra to the complaints of the writer – who was a Biafran diplomat, academic, and award-winning writer. My premise here is not to discountenance the traumatic experiences that Achebe had during the war – which ranged from witnessing air raids, visiting refugee camps, the loss of his bosom friend and renowned poet Christopher Okigbo, to having to deal with an absconded driver (*Country* 201). Certainly, Achebe bore scars of the

⁷² In fairness to Achebe, he goes on to comment on the need to hear many stories: “[w]e must hear all the stories [...] And by hearing all the stories we will have points of contact and communication” (60). I find Achebe’s observation instructive for this particular project in that he highlights the crucial need for many stories – and other stories which will produce a more robust engagement with history. Also, one could conjecture that, perhaps, the need to have his story as the final word on Biafra history is responsible for his decision to publish his memoir close to his death – because then, it becomes the final word that he reads on the matter, a sort of declaration that ‘[n]ow we have heard it all.’

⁷³ Achebe’s narratorial stance in the text reveals that his aim is first to narrate his role in the conflict, to justify his unalloyed support for Biafra, perhaps in a bid to avoid a posthumous conviction like the one to which Ali Mazrui subjects Christopher Okigbo in his remarkable fictional biography, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (African Writers Series, 1971). In the text, the poet is put on trial for putting his Igbo identity ahead of his global mandate as an artist.

devastating war until his death, but it would be unfair to put his suffering on the same level as those who starved, who lived in refugee camps surrounded by daily deaths in hundreds, or those who lived in trenches, and those who trekked for miles in search of food relief distribution centres. These categories have one thing in common, they had neither power nor say in the prosecution of the war; also, they had no access to the outside world beyond the Polaroid pictures in which they were captured and represented to the world but which further exploited their suffering in exchange for arms. Essentially, it is this unique kind of violence and oppression suffered by the vulnerable that exposes the complications of Achebe's membership claim, and outs him as an outsider in this regard.

An example that clearly demonstrates Achebe's distance from the existential struggles of vulnerable Biafrans is his agreement with Ojukwu's ill-advised move to refuse a land corridor for the delivery of food and medicine for the sick within Biafra. He writes:

Gowon, under immense international pressure and bristling from the whirlwind of publicity about Biafra, decided to open up land routes for a "supervised transport" of relief. To the consternation of Gowon [and the world], Ojukwu opted out of the land routes in favour of increased airlifts of food from Sao Tome by international relief agencies. Ojukwu, like many Biafrans, was concerned about the prospect that the Nigerians would poison the food supplies. (*Country* 211)

That a writer who argued passionately in different fora that a writer's destiny is to speak for the voiceless would accept Ojukwu's excuse as tenable is surprising. Certainly, the "many Biafrans" that Achebe referenced here were not the starving lot who ate even cockroaches just to stay alive, or the refugees poignantly narrated in some of the literary depictions of Biafra as going into bushes to cut, and cook any kind of grass they could find around them (in *Sunset at Dawn* for instance). This group of dying people would not mind eating food from anywhere – they'll accept assistance even from the devil himself, to use an Achebe expression⁷⁴.

The 'fear of poisoning' excuse flies in the face of reason: if the Nigerians decided to poison Biafrans, then the Nigerian confutation of genocidal war propaganda mounted against them by Biafra would become ineffective. The decision to reject this lifesaving offer calls attention to the gap that existed between the hegemons and the "little people";

⁷⁴ During an interview with *Transition*, Achebe said that Biafra would not mind getting help from the devil regarding Biafra's search for air facilities: "If the devil himself had offered his air facilities we would have taken it, and I would have supported it" (Achebe, "Chinua Achebe on Biafra" 36).

one could argue that while the vulnerable were fighting for survival, the rulers were more concerned about power. The ruling class on the Biafran side insisted on airlifts because arms were smuggled into the country under the guise of food aid (Gould 2013; AJ Venter 2015, Ntieyong 1971, Effiong 2016). There were also the landing fees demanded from international aid agencies that risked their lives to break Nigeria's dangerous air blockade. While scholars like Michael Gould have argued that it is these monies from aid agencies that prolonged the war, General Ojukwu says the levy was to ensure speedy distribution of the food aid⁷⁵. One thing that stands out in the midst of this back and forth is that the ruling class was not genuinely invested in mitigating the impact of starvation on their people; their holy grail was to consolidate their hold on power. Without a doubt, Achebe's solidarity with Ojukwu on the above signals the hegemonic glance through which he processes the story of Biafra; particularly, it speaks to the representational trouble that plagues hegemonic narratives' attempts to capture the multivalent dimensions of suffering to which the poor were susceptible in a place they called home.

Also, Achebe's situation of Igbo identity at the centre of struggles for Biafra raises critical questions concerning how minority ethnic groups belonged in Biafra. In his account, minority ethnic groups are referenced as afterthoughts in his quest to state the Igbo case. When he explains the constituent peoples of Biafra, he refers to "Igbo and Easterner" (*Country* 95) and "Easterners mainly Igbo" (80). The manner in which he separates Igbo people from "other Easterners" is a way of othering the minority groups in an effort to focus on the Igbo as the group that suffered the most⁷⁶. Consequently, within the spectre of such othering and exclusion, minority ethnic groups become 'outsiders within'. Their pains are written out or subsumed under the debris of Igbo suffering.

Also, Achebe's account of the exploits of the Biafra Army is couched in heroics. This does not come as a surprise since he believes that the Army on the Biafran side was more

⁷⁵ Ojukwu's argument is contained in a documentary titled *Biafra: Fighting a War without Gun*.

⁷⁶ The sameness and difference of the minority ethnic group placed them in a precarious position during the northern pogroms of 1966 and during the war. During the pogroms, the maddening crowd that lynched Igbo people could not differentiate between the eastern ethnic groups as a result of their sameness, while their difference from the Igbo made them victims of intra-Biafra violence during the civil war. They were accused of sabotage, and shot or imprisoned. Even the Nigerians did not trust them.

educated, hence more disciplined than the enemies⁷⁷. Earlier in his memoir, he gives a disclaimer that he abhors wars and loss of human lives but this does not seem to come through in his description of Major Achuzia and the way he motivated his men by sometimes executing erring members (*Country* 218). Another instance is how he narrates the ‘Abagana Miracle’ – which he chooses to christen Abagana Ambush. On a first read, one might not think much of the nomenclature at play here. However, a deeper reading reveals that unlike other accounts of the war that describe the Abagana event as a miracle which occurred when a Biafra soldier fired a lone shot into an armed convoy of Nigeria Army which was led by a petrol tanker. I am interested in his representation of Biafra army because this picture of a disciplined force that did no wrong which he paints erases the dimension of intra-Biafra violence perpetrated by some soldiers – atrocities like forced conscriptions, rape, killings of civilians and the controversial use of child soldiers. When Achebe briefly touches on the atrocities committed by Biafran soldiers during their invasion of the Mid-Western region, he dismisses the stories as hearsay. In fact, he casts the invaders as victims when he narrates how local cooks poisoned them as payback for their brutality (*Country* 131)⁷⁸.

In the section on the suffering of the refugees (*Country* 188), he writes that they were housed in a camp and they got educated while there. However, if the accounts given by many of the witnesses and victims of the war is anything to go by, Achebe’s account seems to euphemise the suffering of the refugees, perhaps because he was not close enough to the refugee experience. Even more worrisome is the way he trivializes the term refugee by employing it to describe himself and his family due to the itinerancy imposed on them as a result of the invasion of Nigerian troops (*Country* 188). I believe his use of the term is flippant because unlike the real refugees, the Achebes moved around in a convoy of two

⁷⁷ When asked about the possibility of Biafra military versus civilian dimension of violence during his interview with *Transition*, he avoids a direct answer, but asserts that Biafra soldiers are more educated than their Nigerian counterparts (Achebe 36). However, Roy Doron says this might not be the case. Reading documents from the Biafra Directorate of Propaganda, he states that contrary to Biafra propaganda, the level of education in Biafra was quite low as at the time of the war (“Marketing Genocide” 236).

⁷⁸ But he devotes sufficient space to the atrocities committed by the Nigerians – and in this case, he believes all the stories, whether hearsay or not (*Country* 133).

cars, one official car and a Jaguar (*Country* 201)⁷⁹, and they were housed in proper houses and had unfettered access to food.

In conclusion, Achebe's account of the humanitarian disaster in Biafra reveals some of the ways that people became cannon fodder in the conflict, but he devotes more of his fine prose to the intricacies of diplomacy, policy, and governmental control of Biafra. Thus, not much attention is paid to the gory tales of death that the war heralded for Biafrans. His account exculpates the leadership of Biafra from blames regarding the events that precipitated it, and how it was prosecuted. This is understandable since he belonged to the hegemonic class in Biafra which ensured a continuation of the war and its attendant suffering. Achebe was not fighting for survival like ordinary Biafrans who were dropping dead while queuing for little cuts of stock fish. Beyond the air raid that destroyed his publishing house, it is difficult to read Achebe as a victim of the war; although he insists that he was marked for death by the military, he was not harmed when he was eventually found in his hideout (*Country* 68). Also, during the war, he had several brushes with Nigerian soldiers but he was not killed or molested (*Country* 194). It is possible to deduce that to him, Biafra was home to all, everyone belonged equally and suffered in similar ways. In the next section, I compare a victim account written by a Biafran child to Achebe's to fill in some of the gaps I have identified in his version of history.

Diliorah Chukwurah's *The Last Train to Biafra* is undoubtedly a victim narrative of the civil war due to the status of the writer as a child in Biafra who witnessed the 1966 massacres in the North and the destructive civil war. His account is bottom up, paying close attention to the traumatic lived experiences of the vulnerable during the blockade. Although he tries to comment on some of the politics that shaped the war, his view is largely dependent on what he heard from adults around him. Indeed, he accepts that he was too young to understand but like all children, they "worried about [things] because they [the adults] worried. We rejoiced because they rejoiced. We cried because they cried" (*Last Train* 58). However, one thing he does impeccably in his memoir is to bring home the gory details of the war, the physical and mental anguish of losing loved ones as well as the

⁷⁹ They were also well housed in all the villages they fled to, except for an instance when Mrs Achebe is stung by a millipede because the apartment they got was a mud structure (*Country* 191) – the real refugees were housed in camps, had kwashiorkor afflicted children, and died of starvation.

caustic impact of war on children and the poor⁸⁰. Right from the beginning of his story, Chukwurah demonstrates that he is aware that he has “authority of direct experience” (Scott quoted in Jay Winter, 238) due to his status as victim and witness of the conflict. He declares: “I believe that, having lived through the war, I am in a position to tell the Biafra story and to write about the crises that culminated in the war as seen through the eyes of a child” – and “[i]n Biafra, I was in a refugee camp” (*Last Train* xviii-xix). In those sentences lie his credentials as a “moral witness” who owes it to other ordinary Biafrans to narrate their ordeals in a manner devoid of the pomp of grand history.

To appreciate the importance and urgency of the story that the writer tells, it is crucial to pay attention to the incident which gave birth to his uncontrollable need to tell his story – a personal story as he indicates, but one which speaks for most of the vulnerable. He writes that he encountered an emaciated child during a ward round with a senior colleague in a UK hospital, and the colleague referred to the child as thin like the “Biafran child” (xvii). This encounter with the emaciated child immediately invoked a remembrance of the traumatic war, it opened the gates to horrendous ghosts of the war which he had repressed in order to move on. In a sense, it prompted a return of the suffering of the war. It is this kind of return that Cathy Caruth describes as “double wound” (*Unclaimed Experience* 5) when she explains how traumatic experiences stage a more potent return when a victim encounters situations that have some resonance with the original event. This return, which she describes as a searing voice, bears witness to a past and forces the victim to bear witness. It is paradoxical in that the wound finds a semblance of healing through witnessing – which could be cathartic, but conversely, it is the return of a painful and traumatic event. Both healing and pain are thus bounded together in the act of witnessing. Thus, it is possible to aver that the encounter stimulated a need to witness in Chukwurah. As he rightly notes, his victim account is important because the fraught belonging of ordinary Biafrans is either hardly narrated intimately, or erased completely in popular accounts of the war (xviii). He uses the word “compelled” to reflect the intensity of the voice calling him to witness, the

⁸⁰ His story is intimately close to the suffering of the poor. For instance, he narrates the pressure that salt scarcity imposed on Biafrans at the beginning of the war (*Last Train*, 57); most accounts of the war do not discuss this scarcity.

voice pestering him to tell us the sad tales of daily struggles for survival⁸¹. Another factor which motivates his story, but which remains unacknowledged, is the need to break the amnesiac iron curtain which was drawn to seal off the grim details of the war by the government, and the Igbo people who felt defeated. In fact, in his household, Biafra became a taboo, an unspoken curse: “[f]rom the day the war ended, I do not recall either of my parents using the word ‘Biafra’”. It seemed almost as if it was something to be embarrassed about, or like it had become a taboo” (*Last Train* xx). Thus, his story seeks to re-insert the everyday lives of common people into remembrance of the war.

Although his account is written in support of the Igbo position, it contains scathing critiques of wartime Biafra. For instance, he writes that the return home for many of the Igbo people that fled the 1966 killings in the North was not all happy reunions as one is often made to believe: “Whereas many were received with sympathy for the trauma they had suffered, others experienced the opposite. Many came home to hostility from extended family members, and were sometimes mocked for their losses” (*Last Train* 23). Chukwurah’s observation indicates that belonging within Biafra was not intrinsic to being Igbo or Easterner. These returnees were spurned for several reasons: for some, it was because “their relations had divided and distributed lands that had belonged to them by inheritance” (Ibid. 23), and for others, it was their long absence from home that foisted an outsider status on them. Essentially, this insight into Biafra questions the rhetoric of grand homecoming that one encounters in hegemonic narratives. It indicates that Biafran identity did not automatically fix all existential squabbles.

Also, the othering of ethnic minority group comes through in his account of the time his family spent in Oroma, a riverine community (100). He captions the section “Amorous Men and Floating Corpses”⁸² because his mother told him that the people in the community were promiscuous and that their unhygienic lifestyles were not good enough for the family.

⁸¹ He states that he wants to document stories of a strong Biafra for his children (xx) – this signals the vestiges of Biafra propaganda machine where the nation was presented as the beacon of hope for the black race. The propaganda must have had a great effect on him as an impressionable boy. In the later parts of his account, he agrees that had Biafra survived, it would have fallen into the kind of rut that bedevils other postcolonial states in Africa.

⁸² He writes that there was an abundance of food in Oroma and the atmosphere was “gay.” But after he is told that “their men were amorous and their women sexually loose” (100), he reinterprets the meaning of “gay” to mean sexually loose. This speaks to how much parents and other agents of socialization impact on a child’s view of life – and in this case, how he views other ethnic groups.

During the war, minority ethnic groups complained about claims of Igbo superiority which saw them relegated to the level of outsiders within their homes in the new country. It is impossible to not notice the haughtiness in Chukwurah's caption. This false sense of superiority, morally and otherwise, is still commonly invoked in contemporary secessionist discourse.

Of the many gripping events narrated by Chukwurah the story of his sister's death during a Nigerian air raid stands out. Chukwurah, his siblings, and their mother had gone to Port Harcourt to be with their father, but unfortunately, a Nigerian plane chose that period to deliver its deadly package. He narrates the harrowing event this way:

Ment's body was lying where we had all stood before the explosion the previous night. There was a big hole where her heart once was, and her body was unbelievably still. Her beautiful eyes were open and gazing, but not at us. We couldn't afford to spend much time with her; the place where we stood had become a battleground, and we had to move on. [...] Some meters away, just up the small road that led into the police station, was the body of a man, with two vultures beside it. I knew the vultures would also go for my sister's body, and even though she was dead, I wished I could defend her against the vultures. (*Last Train* 66)

His sister's death was to haunt him for many years afterward, perhaps due to the lack of closure caused by their hurried exit from the death scene. Chukwurah dreams about the little girl and constantly tries to bring her home with him in his dreams. His refusal to accept that his sister was gone from them is indicated in the way he describes her corpse: her eyes were open, and she was staring, almost as if she was still alive. Also, his remark that he would have fought off the vultures reveals his willingness to preserve her body, and her story. This story, his sister's story, is part of the voices that forcefully compelled his narration. Metaphorically, it is possible to read the vultures beyond birds that feasted on the body of his sister; they could mean the forces that are attempting to erase the memory, and voices of victims like his sister, from the history of the war.

Thus, it is possible that in telling his story, he attempts to fight off those vultures. It also reflects the psychological trauma to which children were exposed during the war, and which was not addressed post-war by the Nigerian government. His constant deathly encounters rob him of his childhood, he loses his innocence so much that he remarks that "Biafra had eventually taken away my fear of the dead and even ghosts. The human skull had become so familiar that I could drink water out of it" (*Last Train* 93). When a boy

growing up in a deeply superstitious society can only recognise the functionality of the skull of dead person as a cup, then one can begin to understand the enormity of psychological damage done to children who witnessed the war. And to the best of my knowledge, no form of therapy was offered to these children as part of post-war rehabilitation efforts. The government assumed that starvation was the only traumatic experience that children had during the conflict, hence, by providing food for these kwashiorkor-stricken children, they could declare that the work of healing was done.

The Biafra that Chukwurah remembers is one where there was tremendous suffering for the ordinary people. They lacked everything, and instead of food, they were fed on government propaganda through Radio Biafra (*Last Train* 40; 49; 52; 121), and constantly strafed from the air by the Nigerians. He describes the mass exodus that followed one of the incessant air raids in an unsettling manner:

The main road leading to Owerri was congested with people, and dead bodies littered both sides. As we walked, I saw an image of a body that stuck in my mind; it was that of a middle-aged woman. She had been carrying a raffia basket, probably walking down the road when she was hit on the back. Her body lay face down beside the gutter, with her hands still clutching the basket to her head. (*Last Train* 67)

Scenes like the profoundly unnerving one narrated above provide insights into why the author still remembers vividly forty years after the harrowing experience. In the scenario represented, one gets a sense of the kind of struggles for survival that defined the existence of the vulnerable. Shockingly, the corpses beside the road seem even more at peace than those who were still alive, the walking corpses; because unlike their living counterparts, they do not have to worry about where the next meal will come from, or worry about finding another dingy refugee camp to rest their emaciated bodies, or worry about evading marauding conscription teams. Scenes such as this awaken one to the ugliness of war, regardless of the heroic tales told in grand narratives.

Also, his story of the time spent in a refugee camp with his siblings is a sad testimony to the terrible dehumanising conditions under which refugees lived during the war. Converse to what some narratives would have us believe, the writer notes that refugee camps did not provide any kind of education; in fact, the managers of the camps were too engrossed with the business of keeping alive as many people as possible and misappropriating food aid to be able to give any form of education (*Last Train* 54). He

narrates that the first refugee camp he stayed in was an uncompleted church building sited in a forest; it was shared by fifteen to twenty families, serving as their bedroom in the night and as a church very early in the mornings (*Last Train* 53). The capacity of this first refugee experience to shock the reader pales when compared to what he endures in a full-fledged refugee camp at Ndikelionwu. The starvation had reached a head with children encouraged to hunt and eat lizards and other hitherto inedible animals to act as sources of protein. He describes his first experience queuing up for food in the camp as completely frustrating: “[t]he first time I joined the queue, I waited from around 11am to 3pm for my turn to collect a plate of food for breakfast. In the end, I concluded that the waiting was rather too long for a small quantity of corn porridge” (*Last Train* 108). In a tone which takes us beyond the still images of starving kwashiorkor-stricken children, he paints a tactile image of starving families, consequently, informing us that the belly-bulging disease was not an exclusive preserve of the children. He says:

I saw whole families afflicted by *kwashiorkor*. Their hair colour had changed from black to brown or red, and had lost its lustre. Their skin became pale, dry, and flaky; and was peeling off. Sometimes the skin broke and exuded fluid. They all had shiny pot bellies, swollen feet and puffy faces with droopy eyelids, because of the accumulation of fluid in those parts of their bodies. Because of their huge bellies, one would think the camp was overpopulated with sick pregnant women, until one took the children and the men into consideration. (emphasis in original, *Last Train*, 110)

Only a witness with direct experience could produce this kind of intimate description of the kwashiorkor victims. He is not sure of how he looked during the war, but he was certified kwashiorkor free throughout the war – this does not mean that he looked any better. As he writes, his uncle, who was in the army, wept uncontrollably when he visited them in the refugee camp (*Last Train* 111). In Chukwurah’s account, we are taken close to the victims to touch their scaly skins and look into their droopy eyes. He humanizes the diseased bodies in a way that resituates the suffering children within the context of a starving family. This presents a more emotive portrayal of wartime suffering in that it reveals that these victims are humans like us, with mothers, fathers, and even siblings. The Polaroid freezing/capturing of a temporal moment in the traumatic lives of ‘Biafra babies’ do not employ lenses wide enough to annotate these lived experiences.

Furthermore, Chukwurah’s description indicates that it was not only children that were susceptible to the ravages of starvation and kwashiorkor. The wicked humour in his

description of kwashiorkor victims as pregnant women indicates his innocence as a child who mainly saw but could not grasp the full extent of suffering and pain endured by the victims until their slow deaths came calling. But the full weight of the harrowing experiences of the starving victims comes crashing down on the writer when the scar returns. Due to the temporal distance between the wound – the traumatic event – and the scar which came calling after his encounter with the emaciated body of a child in faraway United Kingdom, he achieves a poignant recognition of the searing pain of the event. This is in line with Homi Bhabha's lucid argument that what returns in traumatic memories is the "now of recognizability", thus, the body of the boy at the hospital, although not directly connected to the Biafran experience, presents the writer with recognizability⁸³. To further exorcize the demons of this traumatic encounter, he writes of the daily deaths that occurred in the camp mostly at night (*Last Train* 114-115), as well as the way simple diseases and infections became life threatening for the refugees due to lack of drugs. In a sense, the bodies of refugees are positioned as maps for reading the devastation of the war in a way that transcends propaganda. To avoid the ravages of starvation, the writer took to hawking (*Last Train* 54); it is during his business adventures that he comes in contact with the brutality of Biafra army.

The Biafra army we read about in his memoir is as undisciplined as their colleagues on the other side. Although at the beginning of the war the army looked like a formidable fighting force which enjoyed the support of many Biafrans, they soon fell out of favour as competition for scarce resources pitted them against the civilians. They attacked traders to confiscate their goods, and sometimes killed them in the process (*Last Train* 91); in fact, Chukwurah writes that traders did not fare better with either of the belligerent armies. Thus, they are caught in the middle of the warring parties in their struggle to survive. The army was sometimes paid by people to intimidate their enemies (44), they invaded markets to dispossess people of their goods, and routinely imprisoned anyone that protested such brazen displays of power. The writer also fell prey to the misdirected wrath of greedy soldiers during his hawking experience (94). These atrocious events are usually left out of grand accounts which cast Biafra military as a great fighting force in Africa due to its

⁸³ See "Homi Bhabha. "On Global Memory: Thoughts On The Barbaric Transmission Of Culture". (YouTube 2008), www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fp6j9Ozpn4, accessed 26 Nov. 2017.

discipline. Chukwurah remembers the cold-blooded murder of a food canteen operator by a group of Biafran soldiers. She was a widow who Chukwurah knew closely. She was clubbed to death for refusing to accept a faded Biafran pound as payment for her food (*Last Train* 94-95). He speaks of the bloody scene thus: “[h]er body lay face up on the ground, eyes wide open and unresponsive. On her chest was a tattered Biafran five-pound note. Still in doubt, I leaned over for a closer look at her face. I recognised her” (*Last Train* 94). To Chukwurah, she is not some casualty figure namelessly couched in statistical warfare, instead, she is a fellow victim. Even more profound is the recognition he accords her even in death. It is this very recognition that the power-drunk soldiers lacked – they recognised neither her Biafran-ness nor her humanity.

The writer takes us closer to the army to reveal that they were also victims of the intractable leadership that piloted the affairs of both belligerents during the war. He writes of conscriptions which were sometimes carried out with the force of arms. One of his cousins was killed during one of such exercises (94)⁸⁴. The army was ill-equipped, ill kitted and sometimes as confused as the civilians. He describes his sadness at seeing his conscripted former neighbour, Titus, in rags (103), and his cousin who visits wearing a bowl on his head in place of a helmet. Chukwurah also invokes the never-talked-about stories of child soldiers⁸⁵. He explains that the Biafran “Boys Company” which started as a spy syndicate, consisted of young boys, ten to thirteen years of age, who eventually morphed into full combatants as the supply of young men dried up. The boys

[i]nfiltrated the Nigerian Army by pretending to be abandoned children who had been separated from parents fleeing the war zone. Selection was tough and understanding of Hausa language was an obvious advantage. They would gather information on enemies’ positions and movements and report back to Biafran officers. Outside the war zone, the boy spies wore army uniforms and mingled with adult soldiers. (*Last Train* 48)

⁸⁴ His father was also conscripted but released after a bribe was paid. Those who could not afford bribes were conscripted and taken to warfronts after receiving two weeks crash course in soldiering. They are invariably sent to certain deaths when deployed to the fronts.

⁸⁵ Allegations of the use of child soldiers by Biafra during the war are often vehemently refuted despite accounts from child soldiers that served in the war, and copious documentary evidence. This denial seems to be driven by a need to maintain moral high ground regarding how the war was prosecuted. However, I believe the use of child soldiers speaks more to the desperation of the power brokers to win the war militarily. By disavowing the obvious use of children as soldiers, a dimension of violence and suffering is invariably excluded from the war history. I take on this topic in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

The writer also wanted to join the “Boys Company” but they were discovered by the federal troops, tortured, and some of them were killed. Michael Gould references this when he claims that the boys had their tongues cut or their eyes gouged out before they were sent back to Biafra as kind of sadistic message to their commanders⁸⁶. This dimension of suffering which children were subjected to is hardly talked about in narratives of Biafra, essentially because it might be an indictment on Biafra’s leadership. Thus, the thrust of stories of child suffering in Biafra has focussed on children as starving victims of kwashiorkor, while excluding other dimensions of deathly experiences that was the lot of children within Biafra.

In conclusion, *The Last Train to Biafra* presents rare insights into how ordinary Biafrans suffered during the war because they did not belong enough. Chukwurah has teased out some of the ways those at the margins endured intra-Biafran violence from their kith and kin and several other manifestations of oppression. Essentially, the intersection of their social class, age, gender ability/disability mapped them outside the borders of belonging and consequently exposed them to egregious forms of violence. This narrative from below has highlighted the need to dig below the glossy surface of the beautiful prose which undergirds hegemonic narratives of Biafra written by diplomats, warlords, and politicians that supervised the desolation which accompanied the war. Unlike Achebe’s memoir, Chukwurah’s account has a profound level of closeness to the victims of the war. He knew some of them by name, lived in real refugee camps, and travelled many miles to queue up for food. To Chukwurah, the war was about survival, he did not care about the politics of it all; rather, he just wanted to live.

Also, Chukwurah’s view of Biafran Army is different from that of Achebe because he was at the receiving end of their brutality, and he witnessed their rapine of the vulnerable.

⁸⁶ Chukwurah also talks about his fourteen years old cousin, Greg, who was conscripted into the army. He visited Chukwurah sporting a “helmet made of a calabash pod” and a uniform cut out of the curtains in his parents’ living room (*Last Train* 96). Although he does not go into deep details concerning the way the boys were tortured by the federal troopers, there are claims that some of the boys had their eyes gouged out when discovered. This seems to resonate in the picture of wounded boy soldiers found on page 82 of his memoir. One of them has both eyes sealed off with plasters. Michael Gould also writes of the atrocities committed against these boys: “[t]here are several recorded incidents of atrocities carried out on these boys to curtail stolen intelligence. Some of them were interrogated by Federal troops and then had their mouths cut open and were returned to the Biafran side as deterrent for other boy recruits” (*The Biafran War* 87). Such was the gravity of suffering to which children were subjected due to their forced solidarity.

Achebe's status as a Biafran diplomat definitely shielded him from this kind of molestation. On the whole, victim narratives of Biafra have a lot to bring to discussions of the war's history. Since these victim narratives are few and far between, and since literary accounts of Biafra showcase poignant portrayal of lived experiences across class, gender and ethnic divides, my study seeks to read fictional narratives of Biafra as sites for listening to victim voices due to their imagined closeness to the carnage. It is important to state in this regard that even Chinua Achebe's collection of short stories on Nigeria-Biafra war, *Girls at War and Other Stories*, presents some insight into lived experiences of the vulnerable. When the stories in *Girls at War* are brought into conversation with *There Was a Country*, the difference in narrative voice and voices is easily noticed. This could be due to the fact that as a storyteller in *Girls at War*, Achebe did not have to account for his role in the conflict, but his memoir is written, first and foremost, to present the story of his role in the war. To me, this indicates the potency of fiction as a platform for reading quotidian relations, regardless of social class or ideological position of the writer.

So far in this chapter, I have created a dialogue between a hegemonic and a victim narrative of Biafra to indicate the silences and erasures that often define stories told from the top. Thus, to fill some of the void left by the dearth of narratives from the bottom which chronicle the fraught existence of Biafrans who were othered within Biafra, I argue that literature, prose fiction to be precise, represents a space (in-between) where these other voices and stories could be mined and brought to the fore⁸⁷.

Literature and Many Voices from the Middle

Many stories are trapped in-between binary histories which can only be acknowledged by paying close attention to the voices that inhabit interstitial spaces. Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* contains many of these voices which enact the dynamics of power and belonging, exclusion, and inclusion within Biafra. Specifically, the text tells a gripping story of the precarity of many Biafrans who were caught in-between the warring parties during the war. It is the tale of two young star-crossed lovers, Eloka and Ginika, who fall

⁸⁷Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of polyphony is also helpful in pushing this argument forward. Bakhtin argues that novels contain varieties of conflicting languages which invoke points of view, intentions, authorities, and age groups. But the idea that resonates closely with my present endeavour in this chapter is that novels contain a multiplicity of "voices". See Mikhail Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Princeton UP, 1984).

in love during the Biafra/Nigeria civil war. They nurture their love and anchor it to a beautiful post-war future together in a free country. But all end in tragedy with the violent death of Eloka in the hands of Nwakire, Ginika's brother, who also commits suicide after the act. In a sense, all the men in Ginika's life never truly return from the warfront despite surviving the shooting war. The violence of war continues and consumes them in the post-war moment. Also, Ginika is subjected to dehumanizing experiences of rape by soldiers on both sides of the war. While she survives the war, she is permanently scarred from its horrors. It is difficult to miss the allegorical value of the text. Ginika's marriage, which was supposed to provide her a measure of succour and escape from the choking discipline and oppression of her father and stepmother, ends in tragedy – very much like Biafra's struggle to free herself from the shackles of Nigerianism. And like Biafra at the end of the war, Ginika is broken, and has no home to return to.

In the text, Ezeigbo achieves a herculean task of using private stories as sites for commenting on grand trajectories of political histories by focussing on familial struggles for survival during the war. Struggles like the disillusion that pushes the men in Ginika's life into the deathly embrace of the army, suffering like Udo's traumatising experience at the warfront as a child soldier after he is conscripted – an experience which robs him of his childhood as well as the sub-human quotidian realities of refugees. Like Chukwurah's narrative, Adimora-Ezeigbo also claims some authority of direct experience for her protagonist, Ginika, by taking her through spectrums of suffering, from pre-war northern pogroms, to the devastating war itself, and the post-war phallic battles that were fought on female bodies as a ritual of belonging. And like Ginika, the writer invokes her positionality as a witness to the war's violence on ordinary people before she starts her story: “[p]erhaps the fact that I witnessed the traumatic and unforgettable event *first-hand* as a schoolgirl aided in no small measure in stimulating my interest in writing a doctoral thesis, scholarly articles, two short stories, a children's storybook and now a novel about the war” (emphasis added “Author's Note” viii). In this psychoanalytical statement resides Adimora-Ezeigbo's motivation as well as the force which fires the harrowing tale she curates as a witness. In the tradition of griots in precolonial African societies, she canonizes her story by reeling out the credentials that position her as an authoritative teller, and ultimately, a custodian of communal history by declaring that she saw it all. Also woven into the author's note is the

need to exorcise the demons of an “unforgettable experience” through cathartic storytelling.

Her struggle to archive the many fraught voices and stories plaguing her remembrance of Biafra is aptly captured in the haphazard trips she makes across genres in her effort to memorialise Biafra, from doctoral thesis to fiction. Although she turns around to state that her account is more “imaginary” than factious – as a shield from the fact/fiction debate – it is impossible to deny the novel’s close reference to historical specifics of the war like place names, exact cartographic mapping of her setting, as well as allusions to some key actors in the war. Essentially, her text can be described in the words of Buchi Emecheta as a “documentary novel” (Emecheta 1–2) because of the way it diarises the diurnal events of the troubled life of a school-girl, who, in a sense, could be read as Adimora-Ezeigbo’s autobiographical voice.

Employing a deft deployment of imagery, the writer enables us to inhabit the dangerous interstitial spaces where many Biafrans were located during the war. By contrasting the pre-war stability of many of the families around Ginika with the starvation that followed the war and attendant blockade, the text makes a profound statement on the negative effects of war on families and how it dehumanizes and unhomes the oppressed. The setting of the story is majorly Ama-Oyi a small town with little significance during the war, but the town is set as a microcosm for narrating the vagaries of life within the Biafran enclave. From a small town to even deeper recesses of home, the text represents the precarity of life at the margins. Essentially, the home becomes a battlefield where belonging and survival are negotiated. Markedly, it is in pushing the everyday stories of Biafra to the fore that lies the strength of the novel. Njabulo Ndebele argues that such profound stories of the ordinary offer more potent commentaries on grand societal relations than spectacular narratives. He describes such endeavours as a “rediscovery of the ordinary”, and observes that stories like *Roses and Bullets* “remind us that the ordinary day-to-day lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people, not abstractions” (italics in original Ndebele 156). Ndebele indicates here that it is possible to achieve deep insights into historical events by reading the human dimension of things. This, as I will argue, is what literary accounts of Biafra bring to the debate.

Through the travails of Ginika as well as her interactions with other characters, we

encounter the various dimensions of suffering within Biafra. Ginika suffers violation in several ways in *Roses and Bullets*. She is caught at the interstices of Nigeria-Biafra, raped by soldiers on both sides, she gets pregnant and loses the baby at birth. Her experience of a stillbirth is the same as Biafra's botched arrival at the portal of birth; ultimately, her suffering is the suffering of Biafra. The gory details of her rape which happens sadly after an armistice is declared are intensely rankling. A Nigerian soldier, Sergeant Sule, declares his love for her on one of her hawking trips to the army barracks, but she explains to him that she's married. Noticing the determination of the soldier, she lies to him that her tradition does can not allow her to marry an uncircumcised man. Sergeant Sule, in his foolery, compounded by a burning desire to conquer Ginika's body, decides to get circumcised, and dies in the process. Masquerading under the guise of investigating the death of Sergeant Sule, a band of power-drunk soldiers led by Sergeant Bala arrest Ginika, take her to a hideout within their barracks, and rape her repeatedly. The rape is agonisingly represented below:

“Hold the witch”, he barked. And as they pounced on her, and held her hands, he picked up his gun, which rested against a wall, and aimed it at her head. “I go kill you now,” he roared. She cried out in terror. He changed his mind, swung it before her and then hit her ankle with the butt. The pain caused her to cry out again. After he had returned the gun to its former position, he reached for her body and tore off her blouse, exposing her breasts. Her skirt suffered a similar fate and soon lay at her feet.

She struggled to free herself but they held her and pushed her to the ground. She screamed and one of them clamped a rough hand on her mouth. Divesting himself of his clothes, the sergeant grabbed her legs and prised them open. He entered her with force and as her naked body heaved under his, he stretched his hands and squeezed her breasts until they were sore. As he strove to reach his climax, his thrusts became frenzied and he taunted her. “I go fuck you, *ashawo*.” (*Roses and Bullets* 358)

In the blow-by-blow graphic account of Ginika's rape in the lair of Nigerian soldiers, we are introduced to one of the dimensions of violence to which women are exceptionally susceptible during wars. One gets a profound sense of the event in the terse prose used to describe Ginka's pains as the actions unfold, we can feel her helplessness under the weight of the soldier's animal lust. The generous use of verbs like “tearing”, “squeezing” and “thrusts” registers the violation of forced penetration like an army invasion. The agony of this aggressive rape incites readers to offer unanswered prayers that Ginika be saved. She

is left with a broken leg and a damaged spirit. But significantly, this scene holds a lot more meaning than the brutality of rape as an act of violence; it is a performance of “phallic domination” (Mbembe 13) and its attendant mutilating effects on female bodies. Achille Mbembe writes that “[i]n fact, the phallus has been the focus of ways of constructing masculinity and power. Male domination derives in large measure from the power and the spectacle of the phallus—not so much from the threat to life during war as from the individual male’s ability to demonstrate his virility at the expense of a woman” (Ibid. 13).

Ginika’s body becomes a site for power contestation, a space where the soldier strives to claim/reclaim his masculinity which has been severely tested and eroded in the spectre of war. Conversely, it is also the phallus, benignly used as a weapon by Ginika that kills Sule through circumcision. She innocently achieves what the poisonous contents of rifles could not. In that moment also, Ginika’s body becomes a representation of Biafra; thus by raping and pillaging her, the Nigerian soldier makes a shocking claim to victory. It should also be added that Adimora-Ezeigbo’s representation of rape in her novel is political. It is an intentional attempt to write rape into the suffering of war experienced by women, and in the process, to trouble the absence of rape in the narratives of Biafra written by men. She writes that “[w]hile male writers largely ignore incidents of rape and the violence it unleashes on women, they focus on women’s moral lapses instead” (“From the Horse’s Mouth” 228).⁸⁸

Also, it is hard to miss how Ginika is renamed through this devastating encounter. Right at the start of the rape, the sergeant calls her a witch as a way of convincing himself of the morality of his act – as an act of exerting vengeance on a witch who killed his colleague. After violating her, he calls her an “ashawo” – a sex worker – to further justify his actions. By referring to Ginika as a sex worker, Sergeant Bala deludes himself that she enjoyed the sex, and was probably playing hard to get at the beginning of proceedings; consequently, he excludes her from belonging to the category of chaste womanhood which should be protected. To him, he wants to “fuck her” not rape her⁸⁹. This is the troubling

⁸⁸ Marion Pape writes that the absence or glossing over of rape in fictional accounts of the war can be found also in texts written by women. She argues that this is connected to the taboo around sexual violence (*Gender Palava* 116).

⁸⁹ On a subconscious level, Sergeant Bala acknowledges the destruction that underlies his phallic invasion. He hints at this in his threat: “I go kill you.” In a sense, he rightly equates the rape to killing.

ontology behind many violent rapes⁹⁰. Writing about this disturbing belief that women were made to pleasure men in heterosexual relations solely, Pumla Gqola argues that the warped thinking is linked to patriarchy (Gqola 8). Above all, the Ashawo epithet she gets at the end of her ordeal with Bala is an attempt to situate her in a space where her narration of the ordeal will lack credibility. This is because “[s]ex workers/prostitutes are deemed impossible to rape because they are constructed as always willing to have sex with anybody. They can’t say no” (Ibid. 32). It also bears a striking connection to “win the war wife” title given to her by her mother-in-law (*Roses* 350) which also signals both an unbridled desire for sex and an unashamed transactional use of sex for power. Between these interlinked derogatory epithets which are produced from Ginika’s troubling experiences of rape, the text makes a statement regarding how victims of rape are often blamed for their ordeal. It also reveals the sublime manifestations of oppression that could be revealed when intra-group (woman to woman, man to man etc) power relations are closely read through a situated intersectional lens.

Indeed, the rape narrated above is not Ginika’s first encounter with rape and sexual harassment – she is verbally assaulted by Lieutenant Kanu of Biafra Army when she refuses his sexual advances (*Roses* 560). Her first experience of rape is perhaps not as daring as the second, but it is no less devastating. After Eloka Odunze, Ginika’s husband decides to join the army in order to avoid the indignity of having to run from marauding conscription teams, Ginika is left at the mercy of her cantankerous mother-in-law who continuously berates her for not being pregnant (*Roses* 260). As a form of rebellion against the overbearing nature of her mother-in-law, she decides to go for a party with Janet, her colleague, to get some respite. She is drugged and raped by Lieutenant Ugoro during her ill-fated journey to Nkwere; and she gets pregnant as a result of the rape (*Roses* 270-271). This sets in motion an avalanche of catastrophic events that further exacerbate her already fraught life in wartime Biafra. Ginika is thus positioned as a quintessential representative of the ‘neither here nor there’ status of many ordinary people during the war. Her safety is neither assured in Nkwere, a part of Biafra nor assured even at home. She is also violated by her father as he struggles to police her body – to keep her chaste in order to be regarded

⁹⁰ Rape and other ways female bodies are ‘disciplined’ to discourage them from transgressing the borders of belonging are further examined in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

as a good woman (*Roses* 99). The way her father violates her innermost sanctuary bears shocking similarity to the violent rape scene. Her father commands her like Sergeant Bala the rapist: “[r]emove your underwear and lie down on the bed. I am going to examine you. [...] No, no, papa, please. Get on with it! He barked, moving threateningly towards her. Slowly she pulled off her underwear. [...] Ginika lay on her back totally devastated” (*Roses* 99)⁹¹. These incessant violent attacks from men make her reduce them to “dangling things” (*Roses* 328), a synecdoche which references Ginika’s reductionist view of masculinity’s essence as being tied to the phallus.

From an intersectional point of view, it becomes clear that Ginika’s belonging gets ruptured at the intersection of her gender, sexuality, ethnicity and economic condition. She is rejected by her in-laws, her father, and her husband, because she is believed to have strayed sexually, to have committed a taboo by getting raped. The story of her first rape is not believed because she’s expected to have control over her sexuality, and because there are no scars from the incident, it is not spectacular enough to qualify as rape. Further, it is her poor economic state that forces her into hawking beans balls – which takes her to the Nigerian Army barracks. When this poor economic state intersects with her gender, she becomes exposed to a despicable war crime committed in a time of ‘peace.’ Her identity as an Igbo woman renders her rape-able even further, after all, the Igbo had been conquered. Painfully, however, instead of being nurtured after the traumatic event, she is stripped of her sense of belonging; she is rejected by her father, husband, and her in-laws for a being a victim of rape. Ginika’s rejection by the men in her life due to her rape is tied to the way female bodies are positioned as sites of power contestations. Marion Pape observes that rape is a communication from “man to man” (*Gender Palava* 116). In this case, her raped body bears the painfully emasculating message of Biafra’s defeat. Similarly, within most narratives of Biafra, little to no space is given for discussing rape as a weapon of war, or the vulnerability of women as victims of violence from both belligerents.

Events in Chief Odunze’s household, Ginika’s in-laws’ home, also launch us into the deep abyss of refugee suffering as well as into the cesspool of corruption around food-aid

⁹¹ In this case as in other cases of sexual harassment, ‘No’ does not deter the perpetrator from his attacks. Rather, it spurs him on. Essentially, this confirms that rape and domestic violence are mainly crimes of power – but with a gendered manifestation.

distribution. Chief Odunze, Eloka's father, pulls his weight as the chairman of the refugee committee to get Ginika employed as a worker in a refugee camp (*Roses* 210). Her first day at the camp reveals the worrying picture of refugee suffering in Biafra. She is plunged into a new awareness of human suffering during her introduction to the inhabitants of the camp. She "stilled her body for whatever lay ahead. But she was not prepared for the sight before her in various rooms" (*Roses* 212). Her resolve to be strong is tested when she is struck "even while they were some miles away [by] the pungent odour oozing from that direction" (*Ibid.* 212). In such descriptions, the closeness of Ginika to the refugees is established, but we get a deeper connection with the suffering in the camp when Ginika encounters a dying kwashiorkor stricken girl. The girl is described as having a few golden tufts of hair left on her head, barely able to speak and without control over her bowel movements (*Roses* 213).

The refugee that demonstrates the tragic fate of ordinary Biafrans most poignantly is Mathew 'the singer' (*Roses* 214). He catches Ginika's attention through his gospel songs which are personalized to indicate the personal nature of his battle for survival, and his lack of interest in the war.

Her attention was focused solely on Mathew. He lay on a makeshift bed with a tattered and grimy sheet. She could smell him a short distance away. As she approached, he swivelled around to look at her, his sunken eyes glued to her face. [...] "Don't cry for me," he told her. Cry for Biafra. I didn't go to war, but war found me here and finished me. [...] He was a veritable bag of bones; all flesh had vacated his body, turning him into a living skeleton. (*Roses* 214- 215)

Interestingly, he advises Ginika to cry for Biafra than mourning his pain, but his grim self-narrative portrays the personal nature of his struggle for survival. Sadly, Mathew wanted to avoid the war and escape its brutality, but he is not spared of its agony. One can assume that if hegemony like Achebe had come in close contact, within smelling range of victims such as Mathew, they might have accepted the land corridor offer from the Nigerians regardless of whatever ulterior motives might lie beneath it. Against this harrowing backdrop, the inhumaneness of misappropriating food aid meant for these starving refugees is laid bare. Chief Odunze grows fat on the food meant for dying refugees, even deploying

the food aid to seduce a desperate refugee woman for his phallic adventures⁹². The refugees are aware of the looting going on but are too powerless to do anything about it. In a sense, the refugees are present but absent in the scheme of things; a truism which is further demonstrated in their erasure from history.

Through Ginika's interactions with Udo, her younger cousin, the novel comments on how conscription was used to fuel a continued fight – and enforce solidarity, the use of child soldiers, and the deplorable conditions under which soldiers fought on the Biafran side. After putting up a show-stopping performance to save Udo from a conscription team – but knowing that the team will return at any time, Ginika hatches a plan to have him sent to the warfront as Eloka's batman⁹³ (*Roses* 256). But this is not enough to shield the boy from forceful conscription (*Roses* 313-314). The events that Udo endures at the front leave no doubt on one's mind that the conscription squad was aware of the sudden death that awaits the boys, since the boys are not trained to withstand such carnage. At the front, Udo's childhood is taken from him forever when "shells began to rain down into the trenches as if the machines and guns were guided by an unseen power" (*Roses* 316). He is getting his first baptism of fire, but nothing could have prepared him for what follows:

As Udo lay trembling and calling on his mother, a solid but wet object fell on his back and rolled down beside him. With the gentlest of movements, he stretched his hand and touched it. He gave a stifled cry – it was a human head severed at the neck which still nestled in the steel helmet that it had worn when it belonged to a body that was intact. (*Ibid.* 316)

Unable to handle the scale of destruction around him, Udo passes out; luckily, he is left for dead by the enemy troops. His gruelling journey home reveals another dimension of soldiers' suffering – shellshock, a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder which perpetually imprisons soldiers in theatres of war and carnage. Udo puts up an excellent act as an "ati ngbo" (a soldier suffering from PTSD) to escape being conscripted again. His plan works and he returns home to Ama Oyi to meet his loved ones as they wallow in

⁹² Despite his immorality, he is quick to throw Ginika out of his house when she confesses that she was raped. This is an example of the double standards sanctioned by patriarchy. While it is okay for him to have sex with the refugee woman – who is also married – the thought of a man being with his son's wife brings out the animal in him (*Roses* 294).

⁹³ Udo remarks at the end of the war that it was as if men just sprouted from the earth. Indeed, a lot of the men had been hiding in roofs like Osondu, Odunze's family servant. But conversely, Monday, the servant in Ginika's family home sees the army as an avenue for gaining agency, thus, he signs-up without telling anyone.

suffering. It is important to note that an intersection of Udo's gender and age is responsible for the kind of violence he experiences in Biafra. He does not see the 'enemy' on the other side, but he is made acutely aware of the desperation of the 'enemies within' who are willing to sacrifice children to keep the war monster fed⁹⁴. Importantly, Udo's brief but traumatic stint in the military reveals the seldom discussed underbelly of soldierly suffering: how conscription and fear of the enemy were used to cultivate solidarity during the civil war, and the issue of child soldiering⁹⁵.

The text also reveals that the hegemons kept the war raging while ordinary people like Ginika prayed for an end to hostilities (*Roses* 327). A scene that aptly captures the people's desire for an end to the destructive war is when Janet visits Ginika to inform her that the war had come to an end. Ginika's grandmother who was on the verge of death due to starvation and despondence, "looked up and touched Janet as she passed her. "My child, thank you [...] for the news you brought us maybe I will not die after all." Everyone began to laugh" (335). In the grandma's upward gaze at Janet, Janet is transfigured into a messianic status due to the good news she has brought. News of the war's end brings laughter to "everyone" and life to the old woman. This sense of relief at the end of the war is seldom talked about in hegemonic accounts. What mainly obtains are lamentations over the failure of the Biafran project.

The neat conception of Biafra as a moral space where Christian, heterosexual relations only obtained is also unsettled by introducing a dimension of same-sex relations in the story (*Roses* 70). In the almost fulfilling sexual encounter that Ginika has with Philomena, her hyper-sexualised friend, we are made aware of the many excesses that are left out of the popular framing of Biafra. It also indicates the toxic manner in which patriarchy and attendant heteronormativity polices female bodies by monitoring her sexuality. Ginika can not fully enjoy the coitus because she is afraid of what her father will do if he finds out; in a sense, she remains within the confines of heteronormative values so

⁹⁴ Udo also uses his act to get a few tins of corned beef at the relief centre in Ama-Oyi. His spectacular display of signs of PTSD ekes out some food items from relief workers who turn away starving people. This is a profound statement regarding the place of spectacular events in drawing sympathy. The sights of dying refugees had become ordinary to the workers, but Udo's madness shocks them enough to touch their corrupt hearts (*Roses* 324).

⁹⁵ I pick up on the depiction of child soldiering in selected novels in the fifth chapter of this thesis.

as to keep her belonging⁹⁶. Indeed, Adimora-Ezeigbo's narrative invokes many silent voices in the history of Biafra: voices like that of Monday, the domestic worker in Ginika's home who is excluded because he speaks a different dialect of Igbo (*Roses* 18). He is eventually forced to seek belonging and agency by joining the army. Importantly, his exclusion on the basis of linguistic difference in a place he calls home reveals the lack of homogeneity that marks Igbo identity.

There are also voices like Janet, a woman who does not fit into the conventional mould of women as pathologically vulnerable in wartime. She negotiates her belonging by using her femininity to manipulate randy men that come her way. At the end of the novel, Ginika's aunt, Chito, marvels at Janet's resourcefulness. She says to Ginika: "she's in America where she ended up after escaping in the last relief plane that flew out of Biafra at the end of the war. She met a young Igbo man there and married him" (*Roses* 373). Janet survives the horrors of the war by keeping a chain of powerful men who serve her in different ways. I do not intend to argue that Janet did not suffer like other women during the war – the fact that she has to trade her body for survival is enough evidence of her survival struggles. Rather, my point is that although she is an ordinary woman in Biafra, she plays on the systemic corruption endemic in Biafra to her advantage. Janet's agency makes one wonder: perhaps, Ginika could've avoided the traumatic rape in the hands of sergeant Bala if she had taken Janet's offer that she flies with her out of Biafra. It is thus possible to suggest that Ginika's effort to belong within and adhere to the dictates of patriarchy, is responsible for the violence visited on her.

⁹⁶ Wartime rhetoric framed the Biafrans as Christians who were persecuted for their religion. In some extreme quarters, they were even described as a lost tribe of Israel – contemporary secessionist discourse is exceptionally fond of this identification. They mount Israeli flags during their campaigns and their leader has since started wearing a skull-cap after his conversion to the Jewish religion. The fixed Igbo-Christian identity which pervades the framing of Biafran identity leaves no space for other modes of belonging. I dig deeper into sexuality as a site for mapping belonging/unbelonging in Biafra later in this thesis when I read Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and *Last Duty* by Isidore Okpewho.

The view of patriarchy portrayed in the text transcends the antagonistic man versus woman divide⁹⁷. Many of the male characters are as much victims of patriarchy as the women. Eloka, Nwakire, and Sule are victims of the violence perpetrated by the patriarchal production of violent masculinity. The three men die in their struggle to dominate Ginika's body. Sergeant Sule dies as a result of his brazen display of masculinity – through circumcision, while Nwakire's sense of ownership of Ginika propels him to execute Eloka in a fit of anger. By harping on the dimensions of violence experienced by the characters within the recesses of a place called home, the text questions our incurable love for the spectacular in understanding war and suffering. Ideally, the death of a character like Eloka in the hands of Nwakire would not make it to the pages of grand histories because there is no dimension of Nigerian brutality involved. However, the anger behind the act is intrinsically linked to the war. It is a product of the war which rages on in the minds of former soldiers who are not offered any form of psychological panacea, they are not offered any form of return from the war's violent abyss.

Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* is a satirical novel with exceptional closeness to the spectre of suffering that was Biafra. Written by a Biafran who witnessed the war first-hand and participated as a manager of a refugee camp in Umuahia in wartime Biafra, the text chronicles the diurnal struggles for survival within Biafra. It is another novel rich in voices at the margins. Like *Roses and Bullets*, the text situates a love story at the heart of the tragic civil war. In what turns out to be a romantic tragedy which ends with the death of Kanu Amilo, the protagonist, we are also provided a panoramic vision of wartime Biafra through Amilo's life in the country. The love story springs many other stories that chronicle the differing effects of war on characters selected across gender, ethnic, age and class divides. The novel centers on Kanu Amilo, a Biafran cabinet minister and his Hausa wife who is a reluctant Biafran at first, but morphs into a full-blown Biafran as she struggles for survival under a hail of bombs dropped by Nigerian planes.

⁹⁷ Mrs Odunze, Eloka's mother, is an archetype of how women act as custodians of patriarchy. She brutalizes her daughter-in-law psychologically because she agrees with her son that wartime is not the best time for childbirth – to the extent that her son's wife is driven into the arms of a rapist. Also, she visits her husband's mistress with a goon, and supervises her pulverization. These acts of brutality against fellow women positions her as an oppressor in the text – and consequently threatens the fixed reading of women as victims, or men as sole perpetrators of patriarchy. This invites an intersectional reading which combines intra, inter, and transversal reading of group interaction in Biafra.

The profundity of the text's narrative lies in its critical, sometimes cynical portrayal of the war-torn Biafran society – highlighting the corruption, idealism and foolishness that sometimes shaped relations. However, this critical stance does not rob the text of a poignant effect which invites readers to witness the pains of the characters who are mostly ordinary Biafrans trying to survive at all cost. Simon Gikandi describes the text as “an attempt to go beneath the ethnic rhetoric of the Nigerian civil war and expose its class and gender contradictions” (Gikandi, “Ike, Chukwuemeka” 329). Even beyond the two axes identified by Gikandi, *Sunset at Dawn* explores the interstitial locations of refugees and ethnic minorities. Interestingly, the text has not been given the kind of critical attention it deserves. Lamenting this lack of critical engagements with the text, Eustace Palmer writes that:

Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* is probably the most underrated African novel. Its fate so far exemplifies the tendency of African criticism to continue to concentrate on the works of the more established writers, thus ignoring some quite respectable productions of the not-so-well known. (*Women and War* 11)

One would agree with Palmer that there are limited conference papers and critical articles on the text – a fact which is also referenced by Gikandi (Ibid. 329). However, the challenge the text faces might not be due to what he describes as the author's lack of popularity. Generally, only a few texts on the war made it to the Nigerian list of popular reads, or into the curriculum under the military. This might be due to what Ejiogu calls an “imposed code of silence” (741). The imposition of this ‘code of silence’ started with the declaration of ‘no victor no vanquished’ at the end of hostilities. The declaration foreclosed all discussions that could have fostered reintegration.

By bringing voices from the margins to the fore, the text writes those voices into the narrative of Biafra. Through characters like Bassey the Duke, who is from a minority group in Biafra, the text highlights the lack of belonging suffered by non-Igbo ethnic groups within Biafra. Bassey, a successful businessman before the outbreak of the war, tries to buy belonging within Biafra by contributing financially to the prosecution of the war, but he does not belong quite enough. He is reluctant about escaping from towns that are about to be captured by Nigerians because he might be labelled a saboteur by fellow Biafrans (*Sunset* 91). His condition becomes even more exacerbated when Nigerian troops ‘liberate’ his town. He is declared a persona non-grata by his kith and kin – and almost executed

because of his closeness to the Biafrans (*Sunset* 242). The traumatic severance he experiences from both sides he calls home leaves him in a limbo, a neither-here-nor-there space of un-belonging. Consequently, his family is also endangered due to his outsider status. Although the text spares us the sad details of what becomes of Bassey's wife and children, it is possible to deduce the violence which they probably experienced from the sickening manner his driver is killed as he drove into Bassey's compound⁹⁸.

The text portrays gross human suffering and how this suffering synthesizes a politics of belonging which rides on autochthony to map those who seem different as outsiders. Essentially, within this autochthonous politics of belonging, space becomes a marker of identity, that is, even those Igbo people from another geographical space within Biafra did not feel homed within Biafra when forced to become refugees. In Ike's fine prose, we encounter how this outsider-within status complicates the suffering endured by refugees. He introduces another dimension of refugee suffering which borders on exclusion based on xenophobia. The refugees, though sometimes speaking the same language as their hosts, are mapped as outsiders because they are from another place. Hence, they are susceptible to violence within. Ultimately, the voices in the text significantly trouble the notion of Biafra as a space where everyone belonged.

Despite proclamations by Biafran authorities that everyone must be treated as brothers (*Sunset* 40), refugees are seen as saboteurs. The precarity of being a refugee is finely narrated in the following lines from the text in which the 'refugee problem' is brought up after the community adjudicates the case of Justus – a saboteur. One speaker remarks:

But we have left out the most important problem, the problem which will determine whether we shall run from Obodo or we shall not. We have said nothing about the foreigners in our midst. I mean the refugees [pronounced 'riverju']. These people are not happy that they can't return to their home towns. They covet our farms our barns, the fact that we are still living in our own homes, forgetting that if they had stood behind our army the enemy would not have set foot in their towns. Many of them will do anything possible to show the enemy the way to Obodo so that we too will become refugees. If my wishes were to prevail, I would say we bundle all of them out of Obodo today and tomorrow. No town which receives them will remain standing long after. (*Sunset* 79)

⁹⁸ Suspecting that there was something amiss, Bassey had told his driver to drive home without him.

Unknown to Bassey and his driver, a trap had been laid for Bassey by his kin; some Nigerian soldiers were carefully waiting in his house. They opened fire on his Mercedes Benz as soon as it came within firing range, riddling the poor driver's body with bullets in the process (*Sunset* 244).

The first signs of trouble discernible in the speaker's inciting speech lies in the use of 'we' and 'them' which immediately erects an insider/outsider boundary within Biafra. The outsiders do not have a say in things, and can not defend themselves because their status as outsiders does not allow them agency. They are not admitted into the community meeting where these deliberations take place and consequently, they can not plead their case. Also, the refugees are described as problems to the community; in fact, the most important problem, and one that should be treated with suspicion. The speaker does not see the proven case of Justus' sabotage as an indication of possible presence of saboteurs among their kith and kin, or perhaps he sees it but chooses to deflect the discourse from the homegrown enemies. Thus, the bigger evils are believed to be perpetrated by the outsiders. This case of mapping belonging by identifying those who do not belong, signals the sort of complexity that surrounds the idea of Biafran citizenship. Also, the speech exhibits clear symptoms of xenophobia; it contains two main explosive components which feature in discourses that justify the fear of others. One, that they covet the space of the host, and two, that they are criminally inclined, and should be kept at bay. It is interesting that the incident that necessitates the people's gathering is the anti-Biafra activity of a member of the community, Justus, who is not a refugee, but the commune quickly directs its wrath at the 'outsiders within'.

Another important point that signals the creation of unhomely spaces for the refugees in the text is their homing at the margins of the society. Their camps are situated either on the outskirts of town or in a designated enclosure that insulates the community from daily interaction with them. This distance, and border within proximal geographic spaces, promotes the view of refugees as 'different' or sub-human. Refugees are imprisoned at home – as the people of Obodo who inherit the refugee epithet after fleeing their town on the eve of Nigerian invasion soon find out. They are camped in a secondary school, and a "short civil defender" is appointed to man the gates to the camp in order to stop the refugees from leaving or carrying out any clandestine manoeuvre. By restricting the movement of the refugees, they can not engage in activities that could give them a measure of agency. Thus, they are heavily dependent on the goodwill of the host community, a goodwill that is mostly non-existent. Due to their impoverished state, they are seen by their hosts as dregs of the society who have nothing to contribute to the community. In all, they are mapped as

outsiders despite being Biafrans. It is interesting to note that the refugees are seen as never-do-wells by members of the community because they do not contribute to the commonwealth. However, their inability to contribute is directly linked to their exclusion from the socio-political economy of the village. Their abjection and unbelonging produced as result of their status as third space inhabitants then becomes the excuse used to validate their exclusion from the commune.

For instance, when Mr Sandy, one of the refugees transgresses this linear conception of refugees as agentless hangers-on, he is violently punished by the community and its windbag spokesperson, Chief Ukadike. Mr Sandy is described as a “refugee living at the Ugwu centre refugee camp [...] He spoke Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Hausa and Yoruba each of them fluently” (*Sunset* 198). He also has a car and a proper bed he sleeps in. Since his appearance defies the community’s definition of a refugee, then he must be a saboteur who used a radio to signal the Nigerians to attack Obodo. Sandy is arrested by the police after federal planes bombed Obodo. Chief Ukadike even argued that he must be shot on the grounds of the refugee camp. He is not allowed any form of defence, robbed of his voice, and his humanity. Instead of harnessing the linguistic adroitness of Mr Sandy for diplomatic purposes, or for some societal good, his status as a refugee – as an outsider – makes him irrelevant to the cause. He is a Biafran, but not Biafran enough, neither is he a Nigerian. What this portends is that a fixed either/or narrative of belonging in Biafra which is not nuanced can not account for multiple quotidian stories of ordinary people.

In daily discourse, the fraught self-other relationship between the refugee and their host is reiterated even during idle talk. This contributes to the refugee’s feeling of not belonging in the space they inhabit. A case in point is the market chat between a refugee, Nkoli and an Obodo woman. While discussing the war, Nkoli makes her support for the Biafran cause unequivocal. However, the Obodo woman declares that

[n]obody in this town heard of an air raid before the war council talked about every Biafran being his brother’s keeper and compelled us to take those refugees. Since then it has been one trouble after another. Air raid. Now Kaduna talks about “liberating” us! All because we took those Onitsha people. (*Sunset* 281)

Referring to the strangers as “those refugees” signals their exclusion from the collective. They are no longer brothers and sisters because they represent a burden to the community. This explicates the tendency to dig for non-existent difference in a bid to create borders of

belonging aimed at preserving the self by removing – or disavowing the other. For instance, the Onitsha people belong to Igbo ethnic group and their land was an integral part of the Biafran republic. However, the dislocation they suffered as a result of the war creates grounds for questioning their solidarity, which ultimately recasts them as quintessential enemies in the ontology of their next-door neighbours.

In the following chapters, I will examine the fraught belonging of marginal identities like soldiers – rank and file, women and children.

Chapter Three

It Was a Generals' War: Solidarity and Belonging in Biafra and Nigeria Army

Introduction

This chapter builds on the unacknowledged dimension of suffering and exclusion highlighted in the second chapter of this thesis by tracing how belonging is yoked to solidarity in the selected texts. Through this reading of the interlink between a non-negotiable demand for solidarity and belonging, I signal the ways some men lacked belonging during the war due to their gender, class, education, ability/disability. The overarching aim of the chapter is to trouble, on the one hand, the homogenous construction of all men as hegemons in some critical readings of Biafran war texts – as found in Marion Pape (2005; 2011) for instance. On the other hand, it is a response to hegemonic histories that represent soldiers as testosterone filled patriotic young men rearing to pillage the enemy. Thus, I trace how the intersectional position of some men map them as ‘outsiders within’ by heeding Nira Yuval-Davis’ call that “in order to analyse discrimination and oppression, our analytical intersectional gaze has to be directed also towards the powerful and not just the powerless” (Yuval-Davis 638)⁹⁹.

Since one of the demands of masculinity, as framed within politics of belonging, is the need to fight to defend the nation, or to fight “for the sake of womenandchildren” (Enloe 1990), I take the military as my canvas for mining the stories of men who were victims of hegemonic projects of belonging in Biafra as a way of tracing “the insider’s outsideness” (Bhabha 14). In a sense, by reading how the need to belong makes soldiers amenable to elitist demands for unalloyed solidarity, I argue that soldiers could be read as victims of the war too. Thus, I read soldierly suffering in *Heroes* by Festus Iyayi (1986), Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* (1994), and Eddie Iroh’s *Toads of War* (1979). This is to create a wide

⁹⁹ She observes that a gaze which homogenizes group experiences stands the risk of “easily fall[ing] into the trap of identity politics, which assumes the same positioning and identifications for all members of the group and, thus, understands each member, in principle, as a ‘representative’ of the grouping and an equal contributor to the collective narrative. This, of course, is virtually never the case.” (Yuval-Davis 271).

canvas for examining how belonging and solidarity interlink within the army on both sides. To further pursue the central aim of this thesis to mine other stories of Biafra by examining characters caught between Nigeria-Biafra binary positions, I position the rank and file in a third space – between Nigeria and Biafra to complicate the linear framing of soldiers' solidarity obtainable in popular hegemonic narratives of the civil war. This reading in the middle allows for an analysis of the dimension of intra-group oppression experienced by the rank and file. Also, from this space in-between, I read how solidarity is created and enforced, and how this creates soldiers as outsiders within who can not return home even after the guns have become silent.

The selected texts represent life in wartime Biafra and Nigeria in general, and the diurnal realities of soldiers in particular. They present narratives which capture a more robust picture of solidarity and belonging in the army than the grand narratives authored by generals.¹⁰⁰ These hegemonic narratives thrive on the exclusion of other voices and the other ways that people belonged within the two armies. It is these excluded voices, and by implication, erased strands of history, that the selected texts have re-imagined into existence. The many voices and stories that they narrate become platforms for questioning the homogenization of solidarity often encountered in grand narratives of Biafra, particularly, in the framing of the army as a group motivated by nationalist zeal to ensure victory for their side without minding the costs.

I contrast these uni-dimensional readings of the army by examining how the three texts narrate the multiplicities of belonging and solidarity within the army and Biafra. The contestations and questions that pervade the lives of the characters narrated in the selected texts invite a reading of their stories as emanating from a third space – between and betwixt the hegemonic positions. According to Homi Bhabha, in this space between, the contestations around being and belonging often produce a new way of seeing beyond the binarist dialectic which leaves out the complexities that govern the middle. By reading multiple ways of being and belonging in the selected texts, I intend to gain insights into the lives of ordinary soldiers in the trenches, their opinion on the war and how they perceive

¹⁰⁰ Many of these hegemonic narratives are in form of memoirs which celebrate the heroic feats of the generals. They are often self-exculpatory to the extent that the officers are cast as saints in the war. See Olusegun Obasanjo's *My Command*, Effiong Philip's *The Caged Bird Sang no More*, General Odumegwu Ojukwu's *Because I am Involved*.

themselves and their ‘enemies’ on the other side, as well as the exclusion they suffer when they return home wounded. Through a close reading of these texts, I intend to foreground the burden of solidarity that conscription enforces, and how “blood sacrifice” (Malesevic 44) is used as currency for belonging.

Heroes presents a deep engagement with events in the federal army, while *Toads of War* provides valuable insight into life in the Biafran army and *Sozaboy* moves fluidly between both positions. Read together, the three texts provide intimate entries into the lives of soldiers. These insights provide profound closeness to soldiers’ survival strategies and internal battles through which it might be possible to critically examine the ‘differential located-ness’ of the rank and file within a supposed hegemonic group. This chapter takes the military as its canvas to read how the politics of belonging allocates power, and social good based on solidarity and social location. Although the army is but a small section of both societies, its pivotal role during the devastating war makes it a microcosm of societal relations and transactions obtainable within the society during the war.¹⁰¹

In war narratives, soldiers are often cast as belonging to the class of oppressors¹⁰². My reading will question this framing, I will read how the unalloyed solidarity demanded from the rank and file robs them of agency and a capacity to ask questions or hold opinions contrary to those of the ruling class, especially the Generals. Consequently, they are created as ‘outsiders within’ because they neither fully belong to the army nor to the society at large. Their interstitial position is troubling because the masses see them as belonging to the ruling class, thus outside their community of the vulnerable, while the ruling class see them

¹⁰¹ Indeed, the civil war was a fallout of the internal squabble within the army; it started after its ascension to power through the 1966 coup. The army, nay, the Generals have remained principal stakeholders in the political life of the country, producing ‘civilian’ presidents like Generals Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd). For more on the sad history of the army in Nigeria’s political space, read: Osahae E. Eghosa. *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (Hurst and Company, 1998).

¹⁰² Most narratives of Biafra – memoirs and fictions written by ‘victims’ of the war often present Biafra and Nigeria armies as bands of looters who constantly harass and exploit helpless people. See Dilorah Chukwurah’s *Last Train to Biafra: Memoirs of a Biafran Child*, Emezuom Nworgu’s *Cannon Fodder*, and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *On a Darkling Plain*. Also, the suffering of ordinary soldiers hardly features in narratives from the ‘top’. See Major General Effiong Philip’s *The Caged Bird Sang No More*, Brigadier General Alabi-Isama’s *The Tragedy of Victory*, and General Obasanjo’s *My Command* for insights into how hegemonic narratives represent soldiers.

as ‘unknowable’¹⁰³ who are just tools for achieving their goals. It should be added that at the onset of hostilities, soldiers were seen as saviours that would supervise the building of a virile nation due to their vision and discipline, but things deteriorated when the scarcity occasioned by the Nigerian blockade of the new nation pitted both civilians and soldiers together in a battle for survival. In their state of lack, the civilians became aware of the crass profligacy of the military amidst a crushing privation¹⁰⁴.

Also, as a fallout of how the soldiers are employed by the ruling class to enforce discipline and dogmatic devotion to the cause – to beat the civilians into line, they are held in utmost suspicion by members of their community. However, what is most unacknowledged is that their submission is won through ‘symbolic power’¹⁰⁵ which frames belonging as intrinsically connected to the willingness to die or kill for the nation. Manuel Castells notes that the playground of this kind of power lies in language and narratives, and that they are much more potent than forms of power that rely on coercive violence (Castells 238)¹⁰⁶. These narratives of belonging ride on the strength of what Paulo Freire has called the “banking model of education” (Freire 12) which does not allow the oppressed to ask questions that would expose the root of their exploitation; rather, it deposits in and embosses hegemonic knowledge on the oppressed. Hence, it is possible to infer that the identity politics that create the nation and maps the boundaries of belonging is responsible for creating the soldiers as an unquestioning bunch of testosterone-fuelled killers.

¹⁰³ Achille Mbembe observes that the unknowable nature of the ‘other’ strips him of humanity. See Mbembe Achille. *Critique of Black Reason* (Duke UP, 2017). Homi Bhabha also advises that the way to know the ‘other’ is to know her beyond one’s frame of reference, that is, acknowledging the familiarity and the replete complexities of the other would help in synthesizing belonging and acceptance to the ‘unknowable other’. He made the statement during a public conversation at Stellenbosch University on August 15 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Many of the civil war texts narrate this shift in the way civilians saw the army during the war. For instance, see Michael Gould (2013); Alabi-Isama (2015); Effiong (2016).

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Bourdieu describes symbolic power as ‘soft power’ which elicits tacit approval from the oppressed to the extent that they are willing to die or kill in defense of the status quo. To him, the ‘gnoseaological order’ (the immediate meaning of the world) is created by this kind of power; thegnoseaological order produces systems of social hierarchies which then feed into what the people read as culture, and creates a “misrecognition” which deflects the attention of the exploited from the real source of their exploitation. The weapon that soft power uses is language. See Bourdieu Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power* (Polity Press, 1991).

¹⁰⁶ Castells argues further that language is the site where the battle for the minds and hearts of the people are staged (239). This site is important because no system of oppression can survive for a long period solely on the basis of threats and violence.

Iyayi's *Heroes* is an anti-war social realist novel, and like his other novels, it bears a stamp of his Marxist ideology. Thematically, all of Iyayi's novels explore class struggle and systemic oppression which are rife in Nigeria¹⁰⁷. *Heroes*' setting spans two minority ethnic towns (Benin¹⁰⁸ and Oganza) and the Niger Bridge. The cartographic in-betweenness of these locations signifies the betweenness of the story's thrust. The plot focuses on Osime Iyere, a journalist, whose feelings about events in the novel forms the channel through which the narrative unfolds. He is in Benin when the Federal soldiers take the city from the Biafran forces. Being a staunch supporter of the Nigerian cause due to the brutality of Biafran soldiers, he is convinced that the coming of Nigerian soldiers is a sign of stability. However, he is shocked out of his naivety when he witnesses several acts of brutality perpetrated by the federal troops. Firstly, he is kicked in his gonads during a rally to welcome the soldiers, and he also experiences the execution of his landlord, Mr Ohiali. Having witnessed the wickedness of both sides in the conflict, he realizes that the ordinary people like him are caught in-between the warring parties. On the trip to Oganza to bury his landlord, he gets a closer perception of how soldiers also suffer in wars. This creates in him a need to write the story of the soldiers as a way of ensuring that their voices are heard in the history of the war.

The novel narrates traumatic experiences of soldiers and civilians who are caught between the two warring sides during the Biafra/Nigeria civil war. It pushes an anti-war agenda by focusing closely on suffering, oppression, privation, greed, and chaos, which plague the quotidian realities of the vulnerable during the devastating war. Through a profound use of pathos evoking images, it humanizes the soldiers and their victims – it also goes further to indicate the similarity of the trauma experienced by soldiers on both sides as well as their civilian counterparts – as members of a dangerous interstitial location. Although it ends on a pessimistic note with the rape of Ndudi, it still leaves some room for

¹⁰⁷ Simon Gikandi sheds more light on Iyayi's Marxian ethos by describing him as "a key figure in the trade union movement among faculty and staff, a movement which for most of the 1980s was engaged in a protracted struggle against the military dictatorship, Iyayi was arrested on charges of treason for a brief period in 1986" (Gikandi, "Festus Iyayi" 343). Sadly, Iyayi died in 2013 in a ghastly motor accident which was caused by the recklessness of a governor's convoy – a sad testimony to the dangers of oppressive use of power which he wrote scathingly about.

¹⁰⁸ Benin features heavily in Festus Iyayi's oeuvre, perhaps because he spent his early life there. *The Contract* (1982) is set in Benin while his most popular work, *Violence* (1972), is set in Lagos but features many characters from Benin.

hope through Sergeant Kesh, a soldier on the federal side who buys into Osime's explication on the need for a third force that will unite the vulnerable on both sides. Osime wins Kesh's discipleship after the sergeant is made aware of the dangerous in-between space inhabited by troops on both sides. He emerges as Osime's ambassador, bearing the light of his new enlightenment to a space beyond the text.

Iyayi's *Heroes*: Stories between the Fronts

Heroes presents critical commentaries on causes of the civil war with its attendant suffering. The narrative structure of the text invites a class-based reading, but on a deeper level, it represents the struggle for enunciation which defines the existence of those at the twilight of power. Through emotive descriptions of soldierly suffering, it poses important questions concerning the exclusionary histories that have continued to act as the gatekeepers of truths of the war. The protagonist, Osime, signals the need to write other histories by asking:

Would it ever be possible to write the real history of this war, to capture the pain, the animal intensity of the cruelty, the razor-sharp sense of humiliation following defeat, the self-centredness of the majority of the generals, their harlotry and open treachery? (*Heroes* 241)

The "real history" Osime refers to is the bloody and dirty history of events at the fronts, not the sanitized grand narratives that have been produced by generals and the elite class. His grouse with the grand histories is how they write out those who suffered during the war. Since this 'real history' can not be authored by the ruling class, Osime is set up for a scribal role which transcends the documentation of history from the books, or from afar. He gets close to the troops, lives with them in their stinking hostels, forgoing the decent accommodation which he is offered by the military authorities. Osime forfeits the trappings of his social class in order to gain the trust of the soldiers so he can know them as individuals.

From the outset, the closeness between Osime and Festus Iyayi is quite remarkable. They are both from Benin in Nigeria, they are writers with Marxist orientations, and they belong to the middle class. In several scenarios, the author intrudes directly to give critical commentaries on the events in the text and beyond – Iyayi ties these intrusions to the burden of commitment. In an interview with Kunle Ajibade in 2001, Iyayi declares that art should

be committed, and there should be an inseparable relationship between a writer and his art:

[t]here are two levels at which a writer can be committed. One is at the level of what he writes. Another level is that of what he does in his practical life. Does he just write and allow his works to sensitize people or does he follow up in order to realise what he says in his works? (Ajibade 83)

Iyayi owns the prevalence of his authorial voice in his oeuvre as a well-intentioned creative strategy to communicate his revolutionary gospel as lucidly as possible. To him, literary texts must “sensitize” the public like Osime sensitises the soldiers. But sometimes, even Osime needs some help from Iyayi to be able to deliver deep commentaries on textual events; these are amply captured in the text as authorial intrusions which are revealed in the use of intrusive point of view added on to the third person omniscient one employed.

Although the story’s protagonist, Osime, would ordinarily as a professional belong to the elite class due to his education, he forgoes the trappings of his class in his quest to know the soldiers intimately. But he still retains some of the access to power which his status affords him. This situates him as a bridge across several divides. His identity as a member of a minority ethnic group imbues his character with an ambulatory capacity to safely cross spatial, ethnic and class boundaries.¹⁰⁹ When we meet Osime at the beginning of the narrative, he is too busy with his futile farming attempt to notice any need for an alternative version of history written from the margins. In fact, as a journalist, he contributes to the fashioning of hegemonic history through his support for the federal troops. However, he becomes disillusioned after witnessing the ‘liberation’ of Benin and the atrocities that follow. He sees federal troops shooting defenceless people on suspicion of being Igbo or

¹⁰⁹ However, being a civilian in a town run by the military strips Osime of some of the social good accruable to his class; for instance, it takes the intervention of Salome, his ex-girlfriend who is married to a General, to save him when he is pummelled by some soldiers. In a sense, he is forced to have a leg in each of the divides, but he is neither here nor there. The fluidity of his status as a floating insider/outsider, though ambivalent, grants him a robust vision of the events of the war. Also, Osime belongs to Ishan ethnic group in Benin City – a city that was first occupied by Biafran forces and later taken over by the Nigerian troops. This betwixt position of places such as Asaba, Benin and others exacerbated their experience of the war. In fact, Wole Soyinka describes them as the most vulnerable. See Wole, Soyinka. *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (Noonday Press, 1988).

Biafran supporters, or on account of harbouring scared Igbo people¹¹⁰. Osime's experience as a witness to the crimes committed against the people by both sides generates in him a deep ire against the military. Through witnessing, he is shocked out of his idyllic reading of the war as good versus bad. He becomes conscious of himself in a way which Judith Butler, reading Nietzsche, describes as achieving a deeper awareness of self after experiencing the injury of traumatic events. Butler notes that "we become conscious of ourselves only after certain injuries have been inflicted" (Butler 10). His encounter with trauma in a personal corporeal sense, and the pain of witnessing the pain of others, ushers him into a realm of questions which eventually illuminates the paradox of solidarity in the war. Thus, rabid violence becomes an injunction to give an account.

Beyond witnessing the brutality of the troops, he also becomes a victim when he is ferociously manhandled by federal soldiers at a celebration organised to thank them for liberating the city. This foretells the murderous rampage that would be unleashed on civilians on the eve of the triumphant entry of the troops. Osime's cruel encounter with the soldiers generates a deep resentment of soldiers in him – as in other civilians¹¹¹. Osime is still reeling from the disappointing realization that he was blinkered in his support for the federal troops when the destruction of it all hit close to home with the sadistic murder of his landlord, Mr. Ohiali. He feels partly responsible for Mr. Ohiali's death because he had encouraged him to honour the invitation put out to innocent Igbo men by federal forces – but that was before his near-death encounter with soldiers at the welcome celebration. His subsequent entreaties against going are rejected by Mr Ohiali who has become convinced that heeding the call of the federal army is an olive branch which would also signal his innocence and solidarity. Beyond the cordial relationship that exists between Osime and his landlord, the writer also strategically introduces a love affair between him and Ndudi,

¹¹⁰ Although the early part of the text is set in wartime Benin, the massacre it narrates bears striking resemblance to the killings that occurred in Asaba after the Nigerian troops led by Colonel Murtala Muhammed crossed the River Niger. Smarting from the enormous casualties they suffered during the badly planned crossing, they decided to vent their anger on unarmed civilians. Plans are being put in place to prosecute the killings as a war crime. By foregrounding the story of the massacre, the killings then speak to the collective experience of the victims regardless of spatial mapping, it also pits the vulnerable against the soldiers. See Michael Gould (2013); Godwin Alabi-Isama (2014); and Emefiana Ezeani (2014). See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEaX9lVVrCM.

¹¹¹ Ade, Osime's editor friend, also resents the conquering troops so much that he decides to join them, perhaps to change things from within. Joining an army that one detests presents a deep paradox which indicates the helplessness that defines the tumultuous space which civilians inhabit in the text.

Mr. Ohiali's daughter. The relationship works to create Osime as a round character who is capable of deep emotions – an attribute which comes to the fore in his graphic description of Mr. Ohiali's killing. Capturing the excitement of the 'hunters', he says:

The soldiers let him run for some time for they must have known that on that bare-naked ground, the man had not the slightest chance in the world. Then just as he reached the bank of the river, there was a sudden outburst of gunfire. It looked for a moment as if Mr Ohiali would make the river. Then he seemed to bend over backwards and crumble as the bullets hitting him first propelled him forward and then broke his back. (*Heroes* 56)

Through a powerful use of empathic imagery, we are invited to witness Mr. Ohiali's murder in the hands of soldiers who should protect him. We hear the sound of his back breaking and see his flailing hands as hot lead ravages his body. This scene has a profound effect on the readers because we know Mr. Ohiali intimately and can identify with him: we have seen him drinking beer, we know his family – we even participate in the pensive goodbyes he shares with his worried wife. Unlike the other men who were lined against a wall and shot, Mr. Ohiali wanted to live, and he took the only chance of survival he had in the hands of the murderous soldiers. His failed attempt and the pleasure it gives his predators evokes deep emotions of pain and anger for Osime. Under a hail of bullets, Mr Ohiali scampers like a quarry towards the river, his beacon of hope, but the river in this case, does not serve as a watering place of solace where long thirsts are slaked. Rather, it is a landmark that marks his death and embosses it in Osime's memory. The event establishes a stark divide between the humanity and victim status of the civilians against and the inhumanity of the troops as blood-thirsty killers.

After witnessing Mr. Ohiali's execution Osime marches into the office of the commanding officer to register his resentment, but he is presented with pictorial documentation of Biafran wickedness which rivals, or possibly trumps that of the Nigerians. The Nigerian Captain offers him a cold commentary which galls him:

‘The Biafran soldiers did that,’ the captain said quietly. ‘They took the women, raped them in front of their children and husbands and then as if that was not enough, drove those long sticks through their vaginas into their wombs. Then they cut the throats of the men and the children. Cut their throats and severed their heads from their bodies. And all these were civilians. (*Heroes* 61)

Again, the butchery of innocent civilians is narrated in a graphic manner which evokes

deep sensations of horror. Although we are offered some emotional distance from the event in this case, since it is filtered through photography and the captain's comment, the gross wickedness curated in the pictures ruptures any distance that temporal and narratorial space might have created. This episode in the grotesque performance of violence by soldiers is more gripping because the victims could not have been accused of being Biafran soldiers. Unlike Mr. Ohiali, they were women and children. The pictures, and the accompanying voice of the captain which gives even more sinister details of the killings, convince us of the wickedness of Biafran soldiers. Both passages bring the trauma of the war home to the readers. Since we are spared the gory stories of air raids as found in other literary accounts of the war, Iyayi seizes this opportunity to document some of the atrocities committed by both sides during the war¹¹².

After Osime's traumatic journey into the theatre of soldiers' brutality, he becomes convinced that the soldiers on both sides are animals who have been purged of human affect. This view feeds into the main body of narratives that cast soldiers as unthinking, unfeeling, zombified¹¹³ tools of the state. Through the troubling events, he's propelled into a third space where he becomes aware of a complex way of looking at the war, essentially leading to a deeper understanding of the dimensions of subjugation and exclusion inherent in the wartime military. While conveying his landlord's corpse to Oganza the landlord's village, he encounters several soldiers who commiserate with him, and are eager to pose for pictures after discovering he is a journalist. They also complain about the pressures mounted on them due to the grand lies sold to the media by their commanders concerning the progress of the war (*Heroes* 70); indeed, he "felt sorry for them" (*Heroes* 68). During his ride with Sergeant Audu from Oganza, Osime becomes aware of the possibility of soldiers as victims.

¹¹² Many narratives of the war from the Biafran side capture the wanton killings caused by indiscriminate bombing perpetuated in Biafra by the Egyptian mercenaries hired by the Nigerian Airforce. Iyayi refers remotely to air raids because his story is set on the Nigerian side during the war. The Nigerians had a much larger fleet of warplanes with which they mercilessly decimated the Biafran population through frequent air raids. Also, some writers have pushed the idea that Biafran air raids were more precise in targeting, which means the civilian population on the Nigerian side had little to fear from Biafran air raids. For more on this argument, see Draper I. Micheal. *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria 1967-1970* (Hikoki Publishers, 1999). Also, Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* ([1972]1991) presents some troubling stories of air raids.

¹¹³ Fela Anikulapo Kuti, a popular Nigerian musician, once referred to soldiers as zombies, to highlight their respect for command and order. He claims that "zombie no go unless you tell am to go". He reads the 'zombification' that occurs in military as dehumanization which robs soldiers of their agency and humaneness. See Fela Kuti, "Zombie" (Coconut Records, 1976).

He realises that the foot soldiers “drink the gall while the generals and politicians and businessmen compliment each other and make speeches showing them to be men of honour” (*Heroes* 90). From Sergeant Audu he hears of the cowardly escape of the captain in charge of their ambushed company. Ironically, he is informed days later by Sergeant Kesh Kesh that the captain got a promotion in “recognition of his bravery” (112).

Thus, Osime becomes inspired to ‘know’ the soldiers beyond seeing them as known ‘others’, and in the process, to understand how humans are weaponized to fight a conscienceless war on behalf of war profiteers. In this new state of awakening he asks probing questions:

[...] how can these soldiers become so cruel? Why do they kill each other and not the generals? Or the politicians? Or the businessmen? Or the religious leaders? Why do they obey the orders to kill? Surely, they must know that they are killing each other. (*Heroes* 64)

These questions signal Osime’s emergence at an intersectional threshold which employs class difference to query the linear framing of belonging. It also reflects a critical view of the war which stems from a realisation of his interstitial location betwixt the Biafrans and the Nigerians after being exposed to the similarity and the simultaneity of their violence. The questions posed by Osime concerning the blind solidarity of the soldiers is the turning point of his – and the reader’s, way of seeing the soldiers. The questions, though posed rhetorically, demand answers which provoke a closer look at the system that throws up the soldiers as both perpetrators and victims.

Solidarity is the price that is demanded in order to be mapped as an insider within the politics of belonging; in other words, one must be willing to die for the “homeland.” In a sense, solidarity, and the tacit approval that comes with it, renders the vulnerable as willing tools in the cycle of oppression. It makes them willing participants in their own subjugation and the attendant violence. This seems true in the war dynamics narrated by most accounts of the war but even more poignantly foregrounded in *Heroes*. The narrative of a common

destiny and a need to fight for the survival of Biafra/Nigeria¹¹⁴ achieves tremendous currency in the society represented in the text. This narrative becomes a potent tool for recruiting/conscripting, and weaponizing soldiers from the lower rungs of the society to fight until death. Osime ruminates on this through several interior monologues that reveal the fear of extermination which mandates them to “stand up and be counted” (*Heroes* 102) or “you either kill the enemy or you let him kill you” (*Heroes* 111). This signals the narrative that powers the conception of citizenship within the politics of belonging. Yuval-Davis explains that “[t]he ultimate citizenship duty [is] the readiness to sacrifice one’s life – and to kill others – for the sake of the political community” (“Belonging” 208). Essentially, the willingness to kill the enemy becomes a barometer for measuring membership. In this spectre of membership by one’s pugnacious capacity, the soldiers are recreated as killing machines calibrated for despoliation.

Indeed, Festus Osime creates a vision of the war and its politics by identifying the role of propaganda in the promotion and maintenance of solidarity. He ponders that “[a]t every turn, the war is accompanied by a lie, a lie used by each side to frighten its own people so they are prepared to stand up and be counted. I bought this lie” (*Heroes* 102). The “I” in the quote references both Osime’s self-reflexivity and his insertion within the community of the deceived. It also generates a sense of closeness to the ‘others’ in a transversal sense¹¹⁵. This transversal closeness to others on both sides, regardless of neat classificatory divides, allows him enough depth in understanding the dirtiness of the war. In accepting that he, an educated, well-informed journalist also bought the lie, he foregrounds the potency of such hegemonic tales which are structured around a collective destiny that requires staunch

¹¹⁴ On the Biafran side, the fear of genocide was employed by the ruling elite to sustain the war. This strategy was so potent that Biafrans kept running deeper into their shrinking enclave as the federal forces were ‘liberating’ their towns. Many studies have observed that the Biafrans that stayed back after their cities were reclaimed by the Nigerians did not suffer the kind of privation suffered by Biafrans who bought into the genocide rhetoric and kept running from the federal troops. Nnamdi Azikiwe lamented the suffering caused by this ‘false’ rhetoric of Genocide in 1969, after he had abandoned the struggle for Biafra. See Doron, Roy. “Marketing Genocide” (2013) Ntieyong Akpan (1971), Effiong, Philip (2016), and Gould Micheal (2013).

¹¹⁵ Yuval Davis describes this transversal way of knowing the other as one which transcends strict borders that are employed to map self/other boundaries. It is an acknowledgement of the fluidity of identity and belonging which nullifies simplistic reading of identity as fixed, autochthonous and immutable. In a sense, it is an intersectional way of reading the other because it considers the interconnectedness of the many axes of belonging which affect positioning. It allows for the creation of imagined communities which cross national, gender, age, and sexual borders. See Nira Yuval-Davis. “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging”. *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 40, no.3, 2006, pp. 197-214.

unquestionable solidarity.

An example of hegemonic narratives that trope on unquestionable solidarity is General Otunshi's speech to the soldiers in his new division. Otunshi, the troop commander of the federal soldiers, is described by Sergeant Kesh as an ambitious officer who finds ways to make money from the war. He is a shameless war profiteer, a bully, and tactless looter. He calls him "[a] real bastard" because "[h]e sends out his troops on the eve of pay day" (122) so he could keep their allotments if they get killed. When we meet the man and listen to his inaugural speech, it becomes quite difficult not share Sergeant Kesh's angst. His character is an embodiment of all the ills that gave rise to the war and ensured it dragged on for some agonising thirty months. The General's speech has no substance beyond a demand for solidarity that condemns soldiers to perpetual servitude, making death a form of freedom. Osime relays the speech to us this way:

To win the war, he said, was a task that must be accomplished and every soldier had a duty to fight for his country when it was threatened either by internal or external enemies. The internal enemies were the rebels, they caused the war. They were greedy and inhuman and atrocious in their treatment of people. Soldiers who did not have a stomach for the war could go home, although as everybody knew deserters were liable to be executed when caught. (*Heroes* 124)

General Otunshi is unequivocal in his charge that the soldiers have just two options, fight and fight. Like all generals, he demands unalloyed commitment from the men and expects that the enemy won't get any mercy from the soldiers. Even without the critical commentary which Osime appends to the end of the speech, one can get a sense of Otunshi's duplicitous nature. He is more of an enemy to the soldiers than the Biafrans¹¹⁶.

Otunshi abandons the men in the thick of a major offensive to attend the wedding ceremony of the head of state and returns to command the execution of forty-seven soldiers on trumped-up charges of desertion in a bid to absolve himself of blame for the crushing defeat on Niger Bridge. In all, over one thousand men die in the ill-fated attack (*Heroes*

¹¹⁶ For instance, in a drunk display of power, he is reported to have shot a soldier in the face for staring at his wife.

232)¹¹⁷. There is a searing irony embedded within the contrast presented by the death of the soldiers and the wedding of the military leader on the same night. The cries of the dying men are muffled by the sounds of partying in Lagos. The stark comparison exposes how the Generals enjoy the trappings of their position while encouraging the men to die on the battlefields.

Although we are not given a glimpse of the celebrations that herald the event, Otunshi's promise to deliver Port Harcourt as a wedding gift at all costs reveals the cost of the wedding in human lives. This promise prompts Otunshi's hurried storming of Niger Bridge which ends in disaster. Yet it is these generals that will write the history of the war, as Sergeant Audu and Osime lament. The problem with grand histories written by the generals is the erasure of the sacrifice of the soldiers, their names and faces. One gets a troubling sense of the erasure through Osime's description of the unmarked mass grave in which the soldiers executed on the orders of Otunshi are buried:

The forty-two men who had been shot for desertion were buried in a mass grave in the open field between two of the camp buildings. Osime went over to the grave as it was being filled and, looking at the bodies of the men, some of them still dirty in their clothes, still wet from their fight on the bridge [...]. The clouds were gathering there in the horizon and he knew that sometime in the night, it would rain. The rain would be heavy and then by morning the grave would be washed clean. It would cease to be a fresh grave. The rain would have washed away the memory of the new dead. (*Heroes* 232)

That the rain will erase the signs of a grave ever being present on that spot poignantly captures how the memory and history of soldiers who were used and killed by Generals have been excised from history. Cenotaphs will not be built to their names; attempts to insert them into Nigerian history so far have stopped at the level of building memorials to "unknown soldiers." It is the history of these unknown soldiers that Osime writes. Also, His description of the rain washing the grave "clean" summons an image of the bloodied hands of General Otunshi being washed clean of the cold-blooded murder he committed.

¹¹⁷ As stated before, the ill-fated offensive narrated by Iyayi here is a social realist rendering of the devastating defeat of federal forces when they attempted a river crossing into Asaba during the civil war. The crossing was supervised by Colonel Murtala Mohammed who is often described as an impatient officer motivated by his hate for the Igbo people. It is possible to aver that by narrating the events from a bottom-up point of view, Iyayi imbues the dead soldiers with personhood, as we are made to interact with them before their death. They move up from being just statistical figures to being people with faces, families, and blood. For more on the River Niger crossing see, Alabi Isama's *The Tragedy of Victory* (Spectrum Books, 2013).

And indeed, many of the generals that supervised the brutal execution of battle-weary soldiers have metamorphosed to saints and saviours of the downtrodden in contemporary Nigerian political space¹¹⁸.

Also, personhood is stripped off the soldiers on both sides by using derogatory single words which pretend to capture the whole essence of the others. Biafrans, for example, are referred to as *Nyanmiri*, a term which subsumes the identity of the individual into an inhuman box¹¹⁹. Despite spirited attempts by Osime to assert the personhood of Ndudi, his girlfriend, during their trip to Oganza, the soldiers refuse to see her as a human beyond “nyanmiri” (67). This is in stark contrast to how the dead soldiers retain their personhood even in death. Sergeant Audu, the officer in charge of the dead men’s platoon, names each of the corpses heaped into a truck. Even in death, their individuality is not in doubt. In essence, casting the other as not-human justifies the infliction of violence on that other in the name of “ethical violence” (Butler 2005) which refers to a morally sanctioned kind of violence; in other words, the soldiers can lawfully kill and maim the other because they do not recognise her, to them, the other is not “grievable” (Butler, *Frames of War* 2009).

The enemy becomes so much of a threat that even oppressive acts perpetrated by Nigerian generals are blamed on the enemy, the rebels. After witnessing the gruesome execution of Biafran prisoners of war, Osime laments that “he now knew that the indoctrination was so total, that to the men, the Biafran was the enemy, not their own officers who had abandoned them on the bridge” (227). Also, when Sergeant Kesh gets detained as a deserter despite having a genuine exit permit so he could see his family, his anger is directed at the Biafrans who have plunged the country into war. He does not see the dehumanization that lies at the heart of not being allowed some leave after working for over three years without a break. When he escapes from the “red sector” (126), the death zone to which he had been posted alongside other soldiers accused of desertion, he returns

¹¹⁸ Of course, the washing-away of the gravesite, and consequent erasure of the memory of brutality it archives, does not change the presence of the bones of those buried. One could argue that it is such bones – or skeletons, that are being unearthed within emergent narratives of the war.

¹¹⁹ Nyanmiri (Nye nmiri) is an Igbo word which means give me water. The genesis of the derogatory usage of the word is believed to lie in the anti-Igbo pogroms of 1966 in the North when some Hausa people went on a killing spree. Some Igbo people had taken refuge in the palace of an Emir in the North in the hope that they would escape the massacre; however, they were handed over to the killer crowd by the Emir. ‘Nye nmiri’ is believed to be the last cry that emanated from their throats as they were slaughtered.

to his former battalion and narrates his ordeal to his commander who remarks that the traumatic episode is a great learning experience for him. Kesh still declares to Osime that the war is against the enemy, and it must be fought and won. After the defeat on Niger Bridge, Osime eavesdrops on officers planning how to contain the anger of the troops after they were betrayed in the heat of battle. One of them declares that “we must direct their anger against the rebels” (216). Their plan works, and the soldiers who had played friendly games with the Biafran prisoners of war before the defeat decide to massacre them, killing one hundred and eighty-seven unarmed men at a go. As a result, Osime predicts an emergent species of soldiers that would have been robbed of all milk of human kindness due to an indoctrination which celebrates brutality. His prognosis is spot on as post-war events in Nigeria have shown. The breed of soldiers that emerged are brazen in their display of power and unapologetic in their use of fatal force to quell armless struggles – often seeing themselves as above the ‘bloody civilians.’¹²⁰

Narratives of belonging which arm the citizenry are often created by the hegemons to deflect from the intra-group oppression while laying the faults for all sufferings at the doorstep of the ‘known’¹²¹ other. Yuval-Davis highlights the self-serving nature of such ventures when she says that they create a kind of “Imagined community” (*Politics of Belonging* 204) which feeds on narratives of shared experiences of subjugation. The potency of such projects lies in their ability to keep the gazes of the oppressed outside the collective in their search for roots of subjugation. She puts it aptly:

The politics of belonging involves not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers [...], such political agents struggle both for the promotion of their specific projects in the construction of their collectivity and its boundaries and, at the same time, use these ideologies and projects in order to promote their own power positions within and outside the collectivity. (Ibid. 205)

¹²⁰ The military’s unbridled show of force has made it lose the support of the citizenry; in fact, one could argue that this approach contributed to the emergence of Boko Haram and militancy in the Niger-Delta region. The most recent of these acts of brutality is the crackdown on Shia Muslim group in the North of the country and the secessionist groups in the East. These encounters have led to the death of hundreds of armless youths who were mostly misled by their leaders. In September 2017, the military invaded the south-eastern part of Nigeria under the guise of arresting violent IPOB agitators.

¹²¹ ‘Known’ is used here to refer to the simplistic, linear reading of the other as known, incapable of multiple identities and solidarity. It is this framing of the other as known that propels most narratives around identity politics by putting the other into a box. Amartya Sen notes that this boxing of people into fixed categories lies at the heart of most violent politics. See Amartya Sen’s *Politics of Identity: The Illusion of Destiny*.

It is at the ideological level identified by Yuval-Davis that markers of belonging to either of the belligerent communities – Nigeria or Biafra – are constructed by the ruling class. The markers are constructed in a manner that magnifies intra-group similarities, erases inter-group similitude while exaggerating inter-group differences. The definition of belonging and solidarity to either Nigeria or Biafra reflects in Sergeant Kesh's remark that the only way to survive the war is to kill the enemy (110). However, the folly of such mapping of us versus them is what Osime decries when he notes that the Igbo man did not have any problem with his Hausa neighbours before the rulers fell out while sharing the 'national cake', but the boys are conned into seeing the war as one that must be fought for survival (111).

Ntieyong Akpan, the chief secretary to the government of Biafra, exposes the lies behind framing the civil war as one fought for survival or unity of the country. He observes that Colonel Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, wanted power by all means and that he saw the mass exodus of Igbo people from the North after the 1966 massacres as the excuse he needed to declare a secession¹²². To corroborate this, Osime laments that "this war has no idea, only greed behind it. The unity of the country was not threatened [...] until the politicians and generals allowed their lust for power and greed for profit run riot" (111). Authorial intrusion in form of moral commentaries which happen within Osime's consciousness is present in the lines above, as well as in many parts of the text. In the tradition of an intrusive narrator, the writer tells the story and gives moral footnotes to accompany his tale. But these intrusions do not rob Osime of verisimilitude. Instead, they position him in a middle space where his initial confusion and disillusionment yields a variegated vision that captures the many strands of subjugation that plague the rank and file, and the possibility of resistance within the same space. He is consequently positioned to hearken to Achille Mbembe's call in *On the Postcolony* (2001) that to understand postcolonial relations of power, it is important to go beyond binary oppositions because binary oppositions cloud our reasoning.

¹²² See Ntieyong Akpan. *Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970*.

Osime's Third Space and an Emergent Army

The third space is fraught with the complexities of knowing and not knowing; it is a liminal state where critical questions create self-reflexivity. In a sense, one enters this space without an awareness of one's 'in-betweenness', but through critical questions, one's interstitial position becomes recognised. Paying homage to this processual understanding of being and belonging that occurs in the third space, Osime realizes that he 'bought the lie' of the war by thinking that only two sides exist in the conflict. Through a series of difficult questions and several internal monologues, he charts a new sense of being and belonging by becoming aware of his fraught positioning between the two hegemonies of Nigeria and Biafra. His emergence at the threshold situates him in a dialectic mode wherein he has "slipped through the network of classifications" but "the future hasnot really taken shape" (Turner 1992: 133). He suggests the creation of a third army but is not sure of the kind of method his army would employ to fight the generals.

However, his awareness of the multiplicities of sides and solidarities enables him to complicate the simplistic binaries through which the soldiers read the war. He starts his discussion with the federal soldiers assigned by Sergeant Kesh to teach him how to shoot by asking them who the real enemies are (129). The response he gets from Patani, one of the soldiers, then gives Osime the needed platform for unsettling metanarratives of the war authored by hegemons. Patani remarks that "[...] in a war like this, those who caused it are the rebels. You heard what the Brigadier said. They are the internal enemies" (129). Ituah, who is gradually becoming aware of his victim status, helps Osime by asking a follow-up question, "who are they?" (ibid. 129), that is, who are the rebels? The question troubles the fixed manner in which the rebel epithet is applied to all Biafrans regardless of solidarity and identification. The question also presents the unknowable status of the other because, as Butler writes, the question "who" goes beyond "strict moral accountability" (*Giving an Account* 31). That is, "who" signifies beyond the summoning of the perpetrator of an act, it indicates the existence of an 'other' that is not known. Osime's explication makes this even clearer after Patani's insistence that he 'knows' the others and that "they are all rebels." Osime points out the folly of such blanket framing of belonging by remarking that the Biafrans are rebels:

just as you are all Federal soldiers. But some people give you orders. You carry out orders. You are told to move and you move. You are told to stop and you stop. [...] You were all friends and brothers and sisters until this war came. You ate together and played together. And then you wake up one morning and you are told that the Ibo man [sic] is now your enemy and a rebel. The Ibo man also wakes up and he is told that the Hausa man and the Yoruba man, the Midwesterner is his enemy. You are told to take up arms to kill each other. But who is the Ibo man?" (129)

The simile which opens Osime's response to Patani in the quote teases out the connective tissue that links soldiers on both sides, but which is erased by the propaganda that frames them as enemies. To drive home his discovery, he demands audience through a repetitive use of "you" in a brash impatient manner which signals his frustration with those who have been brainwashed. Osime's impatience here goes beyond Patani – it is with anyone who buys into any of the competing versions of hegemonic histories of the war. By historicising the cordial relationship that existed between the different ethnic groups before the war, and how the people are suddenly mobilised to see their erstwhile neighbours as enemies, he exposes the politics of naming that lies at the root of violent conflicts.

This politics of naming employs a mental barrier of difference to render the others as 'known', and that their difference is an established threat. This phenomenon of naming which feeds either/or understanding of belonging is also reminiscent of Jean-François Bayart's engagement with the politics of inter-ethnic violence when he observes that the ethnic cleavages we have in post-colonial Africa are mostly fruits of the colonial encounter which introduced a simplistic classificatory regime that pretended to 'know' the people. He continues that the contemporary elites employ these templates to achieve their inordinate ambition (Bayart 10). Ngugi wa Thiong'o also writes about the devastating scars of politics of naming in *Something Torn and New* (2009) where he notes that it robbed the colony of identity and history. Taking it a step further, Mahmood Mamdani historicises the development of this classificatory mode of knowing in his book *Define and Rule*, arguing that its root lies in the indirect rule method fashioned by colonial strategists to simplify

their adventure in Africa (Mamdani 2-4)¹²³. In tandem with Ngugi's point that the hegemonic practice of naming produces identities that are devoid of history, soldiers refuse Ndudi and Mr. Ohiali their unique names because it signals a history that is similar to theirs – as Nigerians, as erstwhile neighbours, colleagues, and brothers. Essentially, this history is disavowed within the politics of belonging so that these others are marked solely as enemies on the other side. Just as Osime is unable to gauge the impact of his rifle shots on a distant wall during his shooting training, the enemy is too far off for his scars to be seen.

To lead the group of soldiers to an awareness of the indoctrination to which they have fallen prey, Osime highlights the complexity of their position which is due to their 'sameness and difference', he explains thus:

[s]o you see, the Federal soldiers who the Ibo rebel soldiers see as their enemies are people like themselves. The Federal soldiers were workers before this war came, workers or farmers or students or traders or simply unemployed. And so were the Ibo soldiers. Now canot you see there is something wrong there? (130)

By concatenating the social realities of the rank and file across belligerent lines, Iyayi teases out the undercurrents of the ethnic hate rhetoric which casts identity and belonging in autochthonous terms that disavow other axes of belonging like class. The potency of the passage above lies in the way it addresses the sameness of the poor soldiers across spatial divides erected within hegemonic discourses of belonging. In the same vein, it unmasks the difference of the soldiers within the collective they refer to as home. Iyayi portrays the outsider-within status of ordinary soldiers by highlighting their lack of agency within the army. It is this kind of view across seemingly fixed divides that Yuval-Davis (2006) refers to as a transversal way of seeing and belonging. The view of the soldiers within a third space between the hegemonic identity categories makes them aware of their victim status and the oppressive system that has indoctrinated them on who to blame for their woes. This awareness is central to their struggle to wrestle agency from the oppressive regime which

¹²³ Mamdani skilfully charts how the practice of marking difference between settler and native eventually morphed into tribal sentiments which have continued in postcolonial African states. Also, Peter Ekeh presents a deep reading of this manoeuvring in post-colonial African society in his popular article titled *Colonialism and the Two Publics*. He argues that the autochthonous ethnic nationalities being held as primordial, and tooled for diverse ends in Africa, are colonial inventions which were also exploited as rallying ground by the emergent elite class in their fight against colonialism. It has now morphed into a potent weapon for diverting the attention of the masses from the roots of their subjugation. See Ekeh Peter. "Colonialism and the Two Publics: A Theoretical Statement". *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, vol.17, no. 1, 1975, pp. 91-112.

has held them captive. In addition, it helps them appreciate the complexity of their being beyond the monochromatic fixing of solidarity as intrinsically tied to ethnicity or nationality. In a sense, they are enabled to see that the ordinary Igbo soldier or civilian faces the same challenge as they do.

After the boys are led to a liberating awareness of their fraught position as ‘outsiders within’, Osime takes them on a journey of unlearning how they define the enemy. In a Marxist fashion, Iyayi addresses us directly when he declares that the real enemies are the generals, politicians and the professors. The gloves are off here as Iyayi’s angst-ridden account of events that led to war, the coup and counter coups, almost rob Osime of verisimilitude. His account becomes a critical commentary almost devoid of creative embellishments. It is sermonizing in the way Osime declares that he knows the “the point”, the truth of it all. Through the declaration, Iyayi represents Osime as having a thirst for the truth which other characters lack – like Ngugi’s declaration, in his preface to *Decolonising the Mind*, that writers must have a “passion for truth”, or as present in Chinua Achebe’s resplendent truth-seeking book, *The Problem with Nigeria* – which claims to locate the problems of Nigeria and propose solutions to them¹²⁴. Ultimately, it seems like only the writer knows the truth.

Firine Ni Chreachrain is quite right when he describes the text as Iyayi’s quest to unite the petty-bourgeoisie class, to which he belonged, to the proletariat class (Ní Chreachrain 46). Such attempts to identify with the ordinary people comes through below:

The Ibo workers or farmers did not cause the coups. You did not cause the coups. This is what happens. First of all, those in positions of power abuse their positions because of their greed. They are so greedy that others of their kind who are not in position to satisfy their own greed get jealous and angry and finally desperate. (131)

Iyayi’s Marxist orientation irrupts here, threatening the life of Osime as a character in the text. Festus Iyayi was an unapologetic Marxist, he joined the movement while studying for a Masters degree in Soviet Russia, and he uses his writing as a means of creating a subaltern

¹²⁴ The book identifies the trouble with Nigeria as “Igbophobia” – fear of Igbo people, and bad leadership.

community¹²⁵. Simon Gikandi describes him as “[a]n economist and unabashed Marxist, [who] is particularly sensitive to the relationship between economic relationships and social life in postcolonial Nigeria and the class war that results from the unequal distribution of wealth” (Gikandi 343). To highlight this “relationship between economic and social life”, Iyayi employs what Andrew Armstrong describes as “pedestrian realism, as a vehicle for representing the horrors of war” (Armstrong 175). Iyayi’s “pedestrian realism” reflects in words like “farmers”, “workers” and “ordinary people” in the charge above. These words signal the writer’s struggle to identify with the proletariat, and they also serve as trigger-words which enable the oppressed identify the similarity of class struggles across divides. I should also note that the impatience that comes through in the quote functions to recalibrate the soldiers being addressed to identify the real enemies – “the generals, politicians and the businessmen [...] and the traditional rulers, the church leaders who prayed for each group” (131) – and to fight them. By fighting Osime does not mean a violent outburst of revolution, at least not immediately, instead he invokes resistance in terms of a rejection of the indoctrination used by the ruling elites to keep the masses in perpetual servitude.

Since the third space is a site for motivating dissent birthed through a better understanding of the many sides, the soldiers are keen to know about Osime’s masterplan for addressing the litany of woes he has itemised. It is at this juncture that the confusion which defines being in the third space emerges in a manner invocative of Bhabha’s description of the space as a “zone of occult instability” (*The Location of Culture* 36). As I noted earlier, even Osime is at a loss as to how to fashion the future. When Obilu declares that he will drop his gun and abandon the war, he is warned of the risk of being labelled a deserter. Osime challenges them to kill the generals, politicians, and professors; but when Obilu responds that “I am going to kill me a general” (132) Osime quickly says “No it is no use killing a general, they will only appoint another in his place” (Ibid. 132), much to

¹²⁵ He was incarcerated in 1985 by the military regime due to his Marxist activities as the national president of the Academic Staff Union. His Marxian stance was ambivalent because he regarded members of the ruling elite who turn against the system as revolutionaries. In *Heroes*, he celebrates Ifeajuna, one of the majors that planned the 1966 coup that plunged Nigeria into a ceaseless spiral of coups and counter-coups. Also, he glorifies Colonel Banjo’s betrayal of Ojukwu. However, several accounts of the war have presented these two officers as equally power-hungry like their brothers in arms. See Effiong Philip. *The Caged Bird Sang No More*.

the disappointment of the men who have become aware of who the enemies are. However, despite the sense of inertia that reflects in their sad acceptance that they must continue killing their colleagues on the other side, Osime is convinced that the truth they now know will set them free¹²⁶.

The “truth” which Osime introduces to the soldiers as the only truth soon falls apart when the dilemma of mapping the enemy creeps in. Here the text calls attention to two important issues; the flux which defines life in the middle space. Nothing is fixed, and nothing is as basic as it seems. One would have thought that an awareness of the real enemies should lead the men to a liberating threshold where they can face that enemy¹²⁷, but this does not happen. They know the truth, and eventually, die with it. Secondly, the fluidity that defines being in the middle space makes it almost impossible to have a fixed reading of friend or ‘foe’ contrary to what Osime would have us believe¹²⁸. As events on the Niger bridge show, even within the class of the officers, there are potential converts for Osime’s vision of a third force.

It is important to note that the third army implies much more than another group of soldiers charging in to save the day; rather, it is an ideological space which is interstitial and transversal in nature. Essentially, it represents Osime’s engagement in “the act of willing new realities into being” (Gikandi in Ogude 1) by presenting an alternative to the status quo within an imagined space which creates some belonging for the oppressed. It is a space where the mutual exploitation of the masses, regardless of ethnicity, gender and solidarity, is made clear. Also, it is a movement for educating the oppressed regarding their in-between status by unveiling the covert systemic oppression that underlies the idea of identity and belonging which they have embraced. Describing this space, Homi Bhabha writes that, “it constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity, that even the same signs

¹²⁶ Ironically, unlike the biblical version to which this alludes, the soldiers know the truth but die with it.

¹²⁷ One of the challenges of the text is the search for a real enemy in a way that does not allow for relativity and context in determining friends and foes. In a sense, Iyayi’s homogenous reading of ruling class as the enemy is also a kind of politics of belonging which creates exclusion using class solidarity.

¹²⁸ Belonging to a collective is fraught with complications which revolve around the limitless nature of othering that occurs even within collectives formed as counter- societies. These complex senses of being and belonging are often sacrificed on the altar of fixed parameters of membership or knowing who belongs and who the enemy is. Judith Butler also highlights the complexity around “we” as in a collective belonging in her discussion of Adriana Cavarero. See Judith Butler. *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005).

can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 37). Essentially, the third army represents a movement that questions the fixed mode of ‘knowing’ which orders the actions of the soldiers. The space allows for a reading anew of the military and a recasting of the military in a nuanced manner which makes it possible to imagine the victim status of some soldiers.

The fixed us/them frame used by Osime to conceptualise the solution to oppression produces a blanket homogenous reading of the officer Corp as oppressors. However, among the officers, there are potential converts for the third army. These officers, whose oppression is not apparent because of their liminal position, are in a sense, members of the “missing middle.” Some of these converts are those abandoned with the boys on the bridge; they are consequently blamed for the defeat, and executed alongside some of the soldiers.¹²⁹ Perhaps, Osime’s confusion stems from his claim that he ‘knows’ himself. In fact, the essence of his moral standpoint revolves around this knowing, but Judith Butler critiques this closed way of knowing as not acknowledging the “excess” which defines identity. To her, acknowledging the “opacity” which engulfs the “I” is a prerequisite for understanding the other without being judgmental (Butler, *Giving an Account* 42). The “opacity” becomes useful to the soldiers in that it opens up a space where they become aware of the incompleteness of their knowledge of the other, the messiness of their own belonging and the deceptiveness of imprisoning the other within neat, linear frames of reference.

Osime’s convoluted view of the criteria for belonging to the third army is a sign of the difficulty of enunciating the beyond, or what Judith Butler has explained as the dialectic of giving an account of oneself. This contrapuntal situation arises from efforts to narrate the self without accepting that “this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the “I” seeks to give an account of its own emergence, it must as a matter of necessity become a social theorist” (*Giving an Account* 8). This implies that the “I” or the self is produced, and consequently implicated within social norms, and thus morality as a form of grandstanding removal from the collective would be pedestrian because the self is synthesised within these systems.

¹²⁹ Another example is Wole Soyinka, who was a Professor – and by Iyayi’s hitlist, would have qualified for death, but he tried to stop the conflict by mediating between the warring parties. He was eventually jailed by the Nigerian side on suspicions of espionage. See Wole Soyinka. *The man Died* (Noonday Press, 1988).

However, belonging to the “we” as a collective does not rob the ‘I’ of its unique experiences and differential located-ness. It merely signals the centrality of multiple others in defining the self – like the post-structuralist concept of binary opposition – which seems “dyadic”, but is indeed more complex due to the fluid relationship between the signifier and the signified. For instance, it is possible to read Osime as a hegemon despite his passionate identification with the oppressed. Indeed, Osime has been read by Firine Ni Chreachrain as another mode of depriving the suffering masses of their voices, as an appropriation of the narratives of the oppressed by oppressors. Chreachrain argues that although the protagonist intends to write the history of the “unknown soldiers”, what he produces is a sort of self-writing which deprives the soldiers of voice by imposing his polished petty bourgeoisie language on them¹³⁰. However, one thing that Osime undoubtedly provides us is a “critical understanding of [...] social genesis and meaning” (Butler 8) of the war, its propaganda machines and rhetoric, and the emergent looting class of elites. Although his view is certainly tainted by his positionality in the scheme of things, his positionality affords him a deep understanding of the socio-political realities of the society. This enables a trenchant critique of the status quo. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the history Osime writes is communally written – with the soldiers as co-authors.

Osime’s co-authorship of the soldiers’ history serves to deconstruct the hegemonic ownership of war history; he serves as an amanuensis to the soldiers. However, speaking through an intermediary is not the same as writing their own stories. But they cannot write because they are caught at the intersection of their low education, class, and military codes which forbids them to voice discontent. In essence, the soldiers’ low level of education immediately creates a continuum of their subjugation even within the third space despite the emancipatory status of this in-between space. The profundity of this cycle of subjugation is vividly illustrated in the lack of agency which introduces a need to have a voice through Osime, an ‘outsider.’ They recognise the importance of enunciating their own histories but lack the “linguistic capital” to write such histories. Pierre Bourdieu

¹³⁰ Chreachain Ni Firine notes that the language of the real rank and file is pidgin, a lingua franca among the proletariats. An argument could also be made in support of Iyayi’s style: that he considered an international readership, given the politics of publishing. Also, his point that the uneducated Nigerians would be able to read a pidgin version of the text might not be totally correct. There is no direct relationship between understanding pidgin in its spoken form and being able to read the written form.

explains in his book *Language and Symbolic Capital* (1991) that people who belong to the lower class often resort to silence when they realise that they lack the “habitus”, a set of dispositions with which to negotiate belonging within official “fields” or “market”. Like Sergeant Audu, they lament from the side lines while Generals dazzle the unsuspecting public with grand heroics which are often motivated by spirited efforts to respond to the unasked question of ‘what role did you play?’¹³¹ While the men find the semblance of a voice in Osime, the voice is not truly theirs – it might be, as Chidi Amuta observes, the beginning of another elite quest for power, or a “cosmetic” identification with the people¹³².

Writing about the lack of a voice with which the soldiers can articulate their traumatic presence within the history of the war, Andrew Armstrong explains that “Osime’s soldier chooses to embrace the dangerous silence that breeds a certain kind of violence. This soldier opts to ‘reach beyond words’ in manifesting the trauma of war” (Armstrong 178). Indeed, the silence experienced by the soldiers is traumatic, but it is not embraced by the soldiers. It is their social location that robs them of words and voice. They do not “opt” for violence as a way of reaching beyond words; rather, the capacity to talk is violently wrested from them. For instance, Sergeant Kolawole is demoted to a Corporal because he questions his commanding officer’s deathly attack strategy. But as it turns out, he was right. However, he is not restored to his former position in order to serve as a lesson in silence. Silence makes the ordinary soldiers susceptible to a one-sided description as brutes since they lack the capacity to write back.

The third space is essentially a site for questioning hegemonies, and this often means that this questioning almost continues to a state of aporia due to the multiple layers of being and belonging. One metaphor that paints an apt picture of the precarity and unresolved confusion of the third space is the Niger Bridge. Its profundity comes to the fore in the

¹³¹ Most memoirs written about the war are by hegemonies who supervised its prosecution. The effect of this is a profound editing of history which creates an erasure of the voices of men who sacrificed their lives for the conscienceless war. Even more painful is the crass manner in which the officers have cast the men as cowards in some accounts; see for instance Obasanjo’s war memoir, *There was a Country*.

¹³² Amuta states that the class of “colonial foster elites” contributed to the prosecution of the war because they wanted power in a new, perhaps smaller country. Their “disillusionment”, he argues, stems from their exclusion from the “cake sharing” process (Amuta 93). Amuta’s scathing critique of the elite class – especially that of the intelligentsia, would seem right when one considers the roles that these writers and academics played during the war. But there is also a sense in which one could read Amuta’s angst as stemming from the same space of exclusion within the politics of the war - after all, he is also a member of the same class.

narration of the bloody battle which takes place there in the text.¹³³ The bridge straddles both Nigerian and Biafran positions – it is a middle space where the two armies meet. However, their meeting is not to deliberate on their mutual exploitation, instead it is a site where they meet to kill each other. The most profound description of the similitude of the rank and file on both sides is in the graphic rendering of how the blood of the dead men merged and flowed together on the bridge before flowing into the River Niger. On a pessimistic note, this flowing blood could be read as indicating that it is only in death that the ethnic fissures could be really deconstructed. Also, I find the Iyayi's temporal choice here quite deliberate. The events take place at the night when the boys on both sides cannot really make out the enemy. They mostly rely on the bright flashes of rifle fire to guide their shots. This is a commentary on the simplicity of claiming to know the other as the enemy when indeed the soldiers cannot 'see' the enemy. The bridge is also a site where the futility of the horrifying blood sacrifice of the men is laid bare. It is made clear in the failed efforts to blow up the bridge that links both belligerents, lives are lost but the bridge stands.

Heroes is rich in stories from the space between, the third space, a space of 'unbelonging' where the sameness and difference of the vulnerable expose them to diverse manifestations of violence and traumatic transactions of the elite class on both sides. Thematically, the text reverberates with dirges of war suffering, but beyond that, it makes a case for reading the war as a wicked squabble among the elites for power and access to the abundant wealth of the nation while using belonging and solidarity, under the guise of ethnic identity, to ensure mass followership. It represents an alternative narrative site in the way it re-imagines other stories into existence. It is also a site where the humanity of the soldiers is regained by giving them names.

Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and the Burden of Belonging

In this section, I read Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* as a text which narrates the crushing burden of solidarity felt by Mene (Sozaboy) and other characters who inhabit the in-between space, both at communal and individual levels. My reading charts its course from

¹³³ Iyayi inserts this narrative in the middle of the story of the Niger River crossing. Although there was no war on the bridge, as it was blown off by the Biafrans, the casualty incurred during the amateurish crossing staged by the Nigerian troops makes it stand out as their lowest point in the war. By staging the massacre both on the bridge and in the river, Iyayi magnifies the bloody encounter to comment on the foolishness of the war.

Dukana, Mene's village where he emerges as *Sozaboy*, locating the politics of belonging which renames him. I also discuss the role of language in the creation of this identity, and trace his gruelling experience as a soldier. The section concludes with the painful lack of return that plagues him at the war's end. To gain veritable ingress into the text, I will focus on its language, setting, theme, and characterization to examine how they conflate to create poignant images of soldierly suffering.

Ken Saro-Wiwa's profound anti-war novel narrates the ordeals of a picaro, Mene, as he struggles to come to terms with the dehumanising experiences of soldiering during a civil war which is unarguably the Biafra/Nigeria war. The protagonist morphs into the eponymous character when his name, Mene, gets swallowed up by his sobriquet, Sozaboy – which is a rendering of soldier boy in Saro-Wiwa's unique linguistic potpourri. The novel follows the pacifist tradition for which Ken Saro-Wiwa was known before his brutal execution by the military junta of General Sani Abacha in 1995. He was executed alongside eight other Ogoni activists based on trumped-up charges of the murder of four Ogoni leaders during a protest¹³⁴. His sentence was quickly and brutally carried out by the military to the utter chagrin of Nigerians and the international community¹³⁵. According to Saro-Wiwa, the inspiration for the text came while he was the civilian administrator of Bori during the civil war (on the federal side)¹³⁶ after he observed the inanity that clouded the reasoning of young soldiers as they were being parcelled off to the warfronts. It is this

¹³⁴ The Ogoni are one of the minority ethnic groups that inhabit the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The oil industry and the Nigerian government colluded in the pollution of their land through oil exploration from which they did not gain much economic value; rather, the gift they were betrothed is a thorough degradation of their environment and health. It is this despoliation and barefaced cheating that Saro-Wiwa protested against until his death which was orchestrated by General Sanni Abacha's military junta. For more on his commitment to the Ogoni struggle, see Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (Saros, 1992); Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (Penguin, 1995); Aghoghovwia, Philip. *Ecocriticism and the Oil Encounter: Readings from the Niger Delta*. (PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2014).

¹³⁵ His hanging was gruesomely executed. There were four botched attempts before his life was snuffed out at the fifth go. There are reports that he exclaimed "what sort of a nation is this?" after the third botched hanging. See "The Making of a Legend." *Newsweek* 126: 18 December 1995.

¹³⁶ The Ogonis and several other minority ethnic groups supported the Federal side during the civil war. Their reason was tied to the strained relationship that existed between the Igbo and ethnic minorities in the East. The small ethnic groups complained severally about Igbo oppression, in fact, minority ethnic groups in all the regions of the country complained of similar fates. The minority ethnic groups in the East saw in the civil war an opportunity for their emancipation from Igbo rule. However, the government at the centre was quick to direct the gun at them at the expiration of the civil war. For more on the anti-minority ethnic group politics of Nigeria, see Ken Saro-Wiwa. *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*.

asinine solidarity that propels most of the characters in his story. Like Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Honour*, and like all great anti-war novels, *Sozaboy* inserts its private histories and 'sufferings at the bottom' right in the middle of the great, hegemonic narratives of war. His narrative is unpretentiously bottom-up to capture the fraught existence of the wretched of the earth. Perhaps his identity as a member of a minority ethnic group, the Ogoni in Nigeria's Niger Delta, helped in sharpening his insight into the experiences of subjugation as captured in his fictional works: *Basi and Company* (1987), *Four Farcical Plays* (1986), his war memoir, *On a Darkling Plain* (1989), and his autobiography written while in detention, *A Month and a Day* (1996).

Thus, to understand the dynamics of "symbolic power" (Bourdieu 1991) which propels solidarity and belonging in the text, it is imperative to get a proper sense of the systemic oppression that lies beneath diurnal relations in Dukana – and which throws up characters like Mene who are gullible tools of hegemonic interests. Dukana, a fictional village which bears striking resemblance to Gokana, Saro-Wiwa's village¹³⁷, is of tremendous import to the story of *Sozaboy*. It is the place that throws up Mene as an underprivileged, unlettered apprentice driver who is bent on eking out a decent living for himself and his mother, against all odds. It is also the place where Mene's identity is stripped off him through a process of naming which he neither has power over nor participates in. It is the community that stamps the name *Sozaboy* on him as an act of immolation, and as a sacrificial act which would allow Dukana to feature within the scheme of things during the build-up to the war in order to "hear the name of Dukana in the radio" (66).

Through a process of continued interpellation, or hailing, Mene¹³⁸ eventually accepts his name and status as a representative of the community, and as their contribution to

¹³⁷ Diri Telilanyo has explained that Dukana means "Khana market" in Ogoni's Khana language, Pitakwa is pidgin rendition of Port Harcourt, and there is a royal family called Birabee in Ogoni land (Telilanyo 194).

¹³⁸ According to Seiyifa Koroye, quoted in Michael North (2001), Mene means king in Khana language. Against this backdrop, one can then start to appreciate the destruction which Mene's loss of identity wrought on him.

appease the war monster – a monster that kills soldiers “[a]s petrol burns” (106)¹³⁹. He boasts that “[w]hen they call me ‘Sozaboy’ I will answer well well. Even I begin to tell people that my name is Sozaboy. If I go to any porson house and I knock and that porson asks who is that, I will answer ‘Sozaboy’” (65). This acceptance is tied to the violent masculinity peddled by Zaza, Bom, and Duzia in their phallic discourse on what is expected of a strong young man like Mene in the society. It is also validated by Agnes the girl with “JJC”¹⁴⁰ who declares that she will only marry a man who can protect her. After his decision to get married to Agnes, even before he makes up his mind about joining the army, he is already given a linear, zombified identity when Duzia calls him “Sozaboy! [...] Donot you hear me, you? Sozaboy, come here” (61). He looks around him, confused, but the naming ritual becomes complete when Bom echoes Duzia; “Donot look another place, [...] donot look another place because you are the person we are talking to” (Ibid. 61). The repetition “donot look another place” serves an incantatory purpose here; it charms him to listen, adhere, and fit into to the new role they give him. This ritual achieves even more poignancy when one examines the role of Duzia as the voice of Dukana. Mene describes him as the one who must speak first in the community (7), and he is also described as having a smooth captivating voice which arrests his audience. Thus, Duzia midwives the birth of Sozaboy within the naming ritual narrated. A monochromatic identity is smelted for Mene within which he becomes Sozaboy, an Arugba¹⁴¹ (ritual carrier) for the community. Although this fraught position between the community and what lies beyond gives him ownership of the communal narratives, it also creates him as an outsider within the collective, an outcast, and a ghost, as events later reveal. Also, it is Dukana that anchors

¹³⁹ Erin James rightly observes that this is the only reference to oil that can be found in the text. But I doubt that this reference bears any cryptic signification towards the oil debate as Erin would have us believe. I believe the writer’s use of the simile there is simply a function of the register of images which his socialization within the Delta has provided him. See Erin James. “Immersed in the Storyworld: Rotten English and Orality in Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*.” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 45, no.3, 2015, pp. 419-446.

¹⁴⁰ JJC, literally Johnny Just Come, is used by Saro-Wiwa to paint a vivid picture of the firm shape of Agnes’ breasts. The text employs ample sexual metaphors to signal the place of the phallus in the prosecution of the war.

¹⁴¹ An Arugba is a votary of the Osun river cult who bears a communal sacrifice annually to cleanse the land. Once a lady has been designated an Arugba, she forfeits all other axes of her identity for the period of her betrothal. She is pledged to Osun as an intermediary between the society and the goddess. It is both a position of reverence and of lack – lack in terms of human interactions despite being an important part of the community.

Mene throughout his quixotic quest as a beacon of hope which keeps him alive, and as a cartographic epicentre to which he must return to find, or not find himself.

Several sacrifices are demanded from the Dukanans due to their location at the periphery of the Nigeria-Biafra hegemonies. For the avoidance of doubt, Dukana is a minority ethnic village which gets drawn into the power squabbles between power brokers within the majority ethnic group. It is the location of Dukana in-between the warring parties renders the community susceptible to the whims of a government which they neither see nor know in any way. For a perspicacious reading of the troubles of Dukana's middle position, one needs a brief historiography of the minority groups' battle for belonging and show of solidarity. Ntieyong Akpan, the Chief Secretary to the government of Biafra, explains that the ethnic minorities from the East were killed alongside the Igbo during the 1966 massacres; however, their persecution on the basis of being seen as Igbo by the northern mobs – though they are not – does not grant them acceptance into the fold as real Biafrans.

This gets more complicated when one considers that the minority groups were supposed to demonstrate their loyalty to Biafra/Nigeria through acts such as financial contributions and motivating their young men to join the army, but many of them were not recruited because they were not seen as real Biafrans nor viewed as Nigerian enough. Ntieyong writes that on the Biafran side

[t]he behavior of the Ibos [sic] in the East soon disillusioned these people. The first evidence came when the East started to recruit young men into the army. [...] While Ibo candidates were regularly selected, scarcely any from non-Ibo areas were recruited. Even those who were already in the army and had fled to the East along with their Ibo colleagues, were not really made to feel that they belonged. (Akpan 152)

Dukana also grapples with this dilemma of not belonging enough. It is under the guise of showing solidarity with the 'government that Chief Birabee, the village head, extorts his hapless subjects.¹⁴² During the war, Dukanans are killed and eaten by cannibals after they flee their town as refugees. They become fit for the plate because their humanity is not recognized. As Zaza laments to Sozaboy, he has "seen them [fellow Biafrans] kill and eat

some Dukana people” (145)¹⁴³. Yet the Dukanans gave their all to support the war when it started. They feel the burden of proving their solidarity so as to be given a measure of belonging in the new country, and fear being seen as anti-war or anti-government. It is this fear of being seen as anti-government that drives the community to acquiesce to the demands of the government that all the young men must be sent to Port-Harcourt to join the army. However, in corroboration of Akpan’s narrative, Mene is dismissed without as much as a proper test to ascertain his fitness for the job:

Then they began to reach where we were standing. [...] When it reached my turn they did not even measure me sef. They say I am too short to be soza. Too short to be soza? Am I not taller than Zaza? Even sef, am I not taller than all these boys that they are taking to soza? Is it because I have not paid money to Okpara? (52-53)

Mene believes that his rejection is tied to not paying a bribe, but he is not sure. Be that as it may, it is the location of his village that denies him access to the needed information. He laments this lack of access by asking, rhetorically, “[w]hy am I living in that bush called Dukana where porson cannot even hear that they are paying money to Okpara” (52). On the surface, Mene’s rant seems benighted, but on a deeper level, it signals a dangerous absence which defined the lives of the marginal characters in wartime Biafra. They only became relevant whenever the government needed their service. It also questions narratives that frame wartime solidarity as driven by informed consent. The ignorance in Dukana reflects the kind of enforced blind followership that egged many innocent ‘Biafrans’ into the war.

The ignorance that defined the lives of the people reflects in Chief Birabee’s constant fear of not knowing what happens beyond. The need to know drives him to pester Mene for details whenever he returns from Pitakwa¹⁴⁴(4). He is convinced that there are ominous signs in the air, but he just cannot say what it all means – perhaps the end of the world.

¹⁴³ Although this might seem only possible within the realm of fiction, but shockingly, it seems to have happened during the war. Many accounts of the war document this worrying act, but Philip Effiong (Biafra’s second in-command) devotes ample space to narrating how it happened. He notes that refugees and even Biafran soldiers who were not from core Igbo parts of the country were killed and eaten by the locals. According to him, a Biafran village was burnt to the ground on the orders of General Ojukwu as punishment for cannibalism (*Caged Bird* 173).

¹⁴⁴ “Pitakwa” is the local name for Port Harcourt, an oil-rich city in Nigeria’s delta. It witnessed a tough struggle for control from the belligerent forces due to its importance to both parties. The Biafrans needed the port as their outlet to the world, while both parties also needed to have access to the oil for financial reasons.

Mene says:

Chief Birabee is very afraid. So he likes to call meeting of Dukana elders to ask what is happening and what he will do. However, I donot think that anybody can help him, because all those people in Dukana do not know anything. Dukana is far away from any better place on the world. (4)

Although the backwoods location of Dukana creates a platform for Chief Birabee's exploitative designs, it is difficult not to acknowledge his paranoia which stems from not being kept in the loop. In fact, it is not only access to information that Dukana lacks, it lacks access to social goods too. Mene laments that "[t]here is no good road or drinking water. Even the school is not fine and no hospital or anything" (4). This society where poverty is rife and youths have no access to good education is thus situated as a nursery for nurturing gullible youths who will continue to feed the war monster in exchange for pipe dreams of power and glory that lies beyond their impoverished enclave.¹⁴⁵

Dukana is thoroughly removed from the scheme of things to the extent that the only bus that serves as a link between the village and the outside world is actually driven by an 'outsider.' If it is possible to draw a link between the bus, 'progres'¹⁴⁶ and its driver, and how those in-between often need other people to help tell their stories, like Osime helps humanize the soldiers by telling their stories, then Mene's motivation to train as a replacement for the driver of 'progres' assumes more importance. It reflects his effort to act as a link between his community and the world by conveying their stories to a world which might not be aware of Dukana's location and status. Indeed, he eventually becomes the bearer of the community's tales and essentially, a representative of the vulnerable who were multiply subjugated during the devastating war¹⁴⁷. There is also a sense in which Dukana could be read as a third space where the chaos of being in the middle is laid bare.

¹⁴⁵ Dukana, being a fictive representation of Saro-Wiwa's Khana community, also becomes a statement of the parlous existence of the oil-bearing minority communities in Nigeria. A painful irony of inhabitants of the richest part of the country living the most impoverished lives. See Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *A Month and a Day: Prison Diary* (Saros, 1995).

¹⁴⁶ Progress is deliberately spelled to signal the futile efforts to achieve progress by the characters in the text. Tam-George (2005) explains that Mene's progress grinds to a halt when the bus, 'progres', becomes faulty.

¹⁴⁷ Saro-Wiwa played this role until his death. According to Tam-George, through the use of what he describes as "anomaly", Ken Saro-Wiwa narrates the stories of the 'others' within the Nigerian space. Essentially, by defying all the codes and modes of knowing, minority writers like Saro-Wiwa force their other stories through the tapestry of hegemonic history. See Tam-George, Austin. "Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy and the Gamble of Anomaly." *Scrutiny 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*. Vol.10, no.5, 2005, pp. 24-34.

The Dukanans just wanted to live to the fullest, “knacking tory under the moon” (1) while the belligerents slugged it out – but they are eventually conscripted into the conflict through military fiat; and being neither here nor there, they suffered even more than many others. Although the village is eventually destroyed, its history and voice erupt to be counted through Mene, their Sozaboy.

I have devoted this much space to examining the centrality of Dukana to the Sozaboy’s story because it represents the key moment in the creation of Sozaboy as a questioning character who stands in the middle to paint a new map for reading the dynamics of the civil war. It also presents a propaedeutic insight into the systemic oppression that socialised Mene into believing that his only shot at power or real ‘manhood’ is through the army. In the next movement, I examine the role of language as a site for negotiating power and belonging, and as a space where Mene emerges as a communal griot who bears the history of his community in his scars.

They Called Me Soldier: Language in the Service of Belonging in *Sozaboy*.

Perhaps the most poignant strategy used in the text, and a veritable entry point into the politics of the text, is its language of narration which the author dubbed “rotten English” in his preface to the text. His self-critique is so apt that it warrants a generous quotation here:

Sozaboy’s language is what I call ‘rotten English’, a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English. This language is disordered and disorderly. [...] To its speakers, it has the advantage of having no rules and no syntax. It thrives on lawlessness, and is part of the dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live, move and have not his being. (Author’s note)

One of the striking points in Saro-Wiwa’s explication above is how he draws attention to the syntactic manifesto he sets for the text – to create a linguistic canvas which disrupts the syntactic and semantic hegemony which excludes the vulnerable from writing history or telling their own stories due to the “limited opportunities” they have. This narratorial exclusion is a Janus-faced affair in that the only site to remedy their lack of opportunities is in telling their stories; however, they are locked out because they do not have the requisite cultural capital to access the site. Through this linguistic manoeuvre, Saro-Wiwa succeeds in smelting a community of underclass who are plunged into a conflict they know little to nothing about. From his description of the chaos that gave birth to the language, one could

deduce that the language reflects an effort at enunciating the experiences of the middle space.

The language, “rotten English” is made to bear the burden of the quotidian specificities of the vulnerable; in a sense, it is an effort to transmit a history that is uniquely subaltern in outlook. The telos is an interrogation of hagiographies that employ polished language in their creation of metahistory. In his creation of a language that does not adhere to the rules of grammar, Saro-Wiwa creates a mutant language space that can accommodate the fraught nature of peripheral belonging. The structure of the language is such that it is elastic enough to cater for the ever-expanding world of Mene as he questions, learns and struggles to comprehend his world.

There have been several critical explications around the language of *Sozaboy*; some of these scholarly readings are Oloruntoba-Oju’s (1998) structural exploration of the Saro-Wiwa’s “rotten English” and Uwasomba’s (2011) reading of the novel’s language as a form born out of language experimentation and a consideration of the “linguistic ecology” (Uwasomba 497) of the country, a consideration which has implications for English language in Nigeria. Also, writing on the *Sozaboy*’s language, Michael North remarks that through language, Saro-Wiwa proposes “an alternative model of marginal self-representation” (North 99), that is, he creates a platform for speaking from a space of exclusion to assert one’s personhood and insert one’s history into the contending binary hegemonic histories. Even closer to the focus of this chapter is North’s reading of *Sozaboy*’s language as a site for negotiating power, inclusion, and exclusion (North 103). Harry Garuba takes this a notch higher by reading the novel as one which “enacts the logic of minority discourse” (Garuba 27). Although he bemoans the obsession of critical studies with the language of the text, and he remarks that this lacks insights into the deeper engagements of the text, his analysis does not totally avoid the same line of investigation. His idea of the use of “speakerly strategies”¹⁴⁸ in the text as a means of narratorial struggle for “linguistic control” (Ibid. 29) is a product of a close reading of the text’s linguistic ecology. Of the points raised by Garuba, one which is pivotal to the flow of this chapter is

¹⁴⁸ One of these strategies is the use of direct address, or what Micheal North describes as the second person address (North 106). Through oratorical nuances, the writer invokes African storytelling tradition which creates an audience for his story, while also hailing a witness/witnesses into existence.

the idea of “narrating the “manner of it” (Ibid. 26). That is, Saro-Wiwa’s struggle to narrate the unrepresented/ ‘unrepresentable’ experiences of those at the margins. Indeed, as Garuba explains, this desire to narrate ‘other stories’ ran in the blood of Ken-Saro-Wiwa until his gruesome ‘judicial murder’ – as documented in his prison diary, *A Month and a Day*. Acknowledging the centrality of language and narratives to the performance of force, exclusion and power, one can begin to see the potency of “rotten English” as a site for enunciating other histories through narrative ownership.

Also worthy of mention is the way the author’s note foregrounds the fraught existence of *Sozaboy* through words like “dislocated”, “discordant”, and more profoundly, “have not his being.” These are words that paint vivid pictures of the location of many characters in the text in the middle of nowhere, in a space that is unrecognizable to them – but which allows them to grow and ask questions. It is a space inserted between the belligerent positions where the enemy is unknown, belonging becomes malleable, solidarity is questioned, but arrival, or a positive denouement is not achievable. In a sense, it is a space which synthesizes an endless barrage of unanswered questions concerning who the enemy is. In the words of Chinua Achebe, this space between is the “home of doubt and indecision, of suspension of disbelief, of make-believe, of playfulness, of the unpredictable, of irony” (*The Education* 11). It is also a site where the complicity of the vulnerable in the rapine visited on them is linked to what Eustace Palmer has described as “Manmuswakism” (Palmer 69)¹⁴⁹ – an apt name for the greed mantra that was inculcated into the foot soldiers during the war. Having prepared a roving propaedeutic language entrance into the text, the next movement situates language as a site for enforcing solidarity, but also as a space for enunciating “the manner of it” within the text.

Through a dexterous use of the second person address, a narrative space is invoked wherein one is both reader, audience, and witness to the cataclysmic shift that the civil war brought to Mene. Within the narrative space, Mene is given a voice with which to articulate

¹⁴⁹ Palmer coins the term from the textual description of a nameless character in *Sozaboy* who switches sides several times during the war. He reads the term as a metaphor for the destructive greed and avarice that inebriated the soldiers during the war. However, he fails to connect the greed to the ‘survival by all means’ rhetoric that was instilled in the boys. As I have noted in the first section, the rank and file lived in a world of kill or be killed, despoil or be looted.

the sufferings at the margins¹⁵⁰. He becomes a victim-narrator who presents the ‘other stories.’ But more profoundly, and for this engagement, language was a tool used in stripping Mene and Manmuswak of their identities. Mene becomes Sozaboy and “the tall man” from “Upwine Bar” becomes Manmuswak – both are generic names that are devoid of unique identity. Michael North writes that “Sozaboy is not a name at all” since it is “a title held in common with tens of thousands of other soldiers” (North 103). But this violence that is inflicted on both Mene and the tall man by stripping their personhood also creates them as signposts for reading the communal through the individual.

A major moment in Mene’s decision to join the army in search of glory is the salt sermon delivered by the “thick man” (41-42). After incessant onslaught of looting in Dukana by soldiers, the man declares that the only way the young men of Dukana can show that they “have salt in their salt” is by joining the army (42). Consequently, Mene feels multiply pressured to prove his bravery and to protect Dukana; he believes the thick man when he argues that “suppose Dukana boy is soza do you think they will beat Zaza, that old soza, as they beat am the other day?” (42). He has to prove that he belongs to the community by joining the army to fight a war he knows nothing about, and to fight an unknown enemy. It is possible to deduce the negotiations for belonging in the thick man’s sermon which demands that to prove belonging to this collective, you must show bravery by joining the army. To Anthias and Yuval-Davis, this indicates a “positing of boundaries in relation to who can and cannot belong according to certain parameters which are extremely heterogeneous, ranging from the credentials of birth to being born in the right place, conforming to cultural or other symbolic practices, language, and very centrally behaving in sexually appropriate ways” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) qtd. in Anthias, Floya and Yuval-Davis 3)

Mene constantly references his “credentials of birth” as a “free-born of Dukana” (11) as a performance of his belonging. It is his way of “prouding” when he introduces himself to Agnes, and it is in the defence of that status that he heeds the call to join the army – to fight the enemy for Dukana’s sake. His belonging to the collective functions as a

¹⁵⁰ In fact, Telilanyo Diri reads Sozaboy as “repoetry”, a marriage of journalism and fiction. Diri casts Mene as the voice of the journalist in the text through what he calls a non-judgemental rendering of the events of the war. However, it seems problematic to read Sozaboy as non-judgemental – perhaps, describing him as non-partisan in terms of choosing to support one of the bellicose sides would be more apt.

placeholder for his personhood. In a moment of profound clarity, he talks about the forces that drive him to join the army:

If Dukana man is not soza I think these sozas will continue to come here to beat our people.[...] Then I add to this what Agnes my darling was saying that she like brave man who will protect her when war comes and how she was prouiding when those sozas came the first time to Dukana. (43)

All the forces highlighted above are centrifugal forces. They are not directly linked to existentialist struggles of Mene as an individual, but they are potent forces that draw Mene into the devastating centre of the civil war because of his need to belong. For him to maintain his sense of belonging, he must preserve the home by fighting in a war he does not understand; by fighting for a country whose name he does not even know (143). He must also get married to a beautiful wife to be seen as a man within the community, but this wife would not see him as a man until he has joined the military to fight. Ultimately, all the forces are tied to strings pulled by the community.

Like the soldiers in Iyayi's *Heroes*, the enemy is unknown to Mene, but becomes real to him through the talks of his fellow travellers during his return trip to Dukana from Pitakwa (54). Although he does not know this enemy, he feels the need to fight him/her since everyone seems to be saying it is the only way to recover the lost peace. The enemy becomes the equivalent of Hitler in Zaza's false heroics on his brief stint in Burma. And like Hitler, this enemy has also made salt expensive. In connecting the two wars, the novel makes a profound statement concerning the deceptive narratives that often drive solidarity during wars. By drawing similarities between the Second World War and the civil war, one becomes informed of the recurring patterns of oppressive knowledge – based on half-truths – that was first used by the colonialists to woo their subjects into their war, and which was also used by the ruling elites to enforce solidarity.

At the warfront in Iwoama which is also somewhere between Pitakwa (Port Harcourt) and Dukana, Sozaboy gets a first-hand experience of war and the constantly mutating definition of the enemy. The men keep vigils in cold trenches while waiting for an enemy they cannot see but can hear his distant gunshots (89). They are given little provisions to make their stay in the trenches bearable while their Captain selfishly diverts a large portion of provisions to his cozy tent where he spends his nights in the warm embrace of teenage

girls. It takes a friendly visit from an enemy soldier, Manmuswak, an ambivalent and amorphous character, who shares his provision with the men, for Mene to finally realise the parochialism of seeing the soldiers on the other side as enemies and those on his side as friends (94). News of the Captain's misappropriation of rations meant for his men prompts an investigation and a covert invasion of the Captain's tent to retrieve the goods meant for the boys. This is the moment that things fall apart in the camp. Both Sozaboy and Bullet are imprisoned in a dungeon and are flogged daily after they are found passed-out (101). Their gruelling ordeal in "Kampala"¹⁵¹ climaxes when the Captain forces Bullet to drink his urine (102). Consequently, Bullet kills the captain during a patrol (108).

In the absence of the captain, the camp becomes vulnerable, so much so that when an enemy plane is seen hovering above their location, the soldiers do not think anything of it until it unloads its deadly contents on them. This is also an indication of the shabby training given to the men. They are trained to mainly receive orders and not have personal initiative. In the aftermath of the destructive air raid, war moves from the realm of romantic tales of valour to a gory episode of destruction for Sozaboy:

Oh Jesus Christ son of God, the thing wey I see my mouth no fit talk am. [...] Oh I can never forget what I saw that morning.
All our camp don broke down well well. Everywhere was full of pit and pit. And inside one pit, you will see the head of soza, and in another pit, the leg of soza and in another pit, the hand of soza. Everywhere, soso human flesh in small small pieces! Finger, nail, hair, *Prick, blokkus*. (Emphasis in original 111)

The event is so traumatic that Mene acknowledges the inability of words to convey its severity, yet he can never get the event out of his mind. Writing about this need to forget traumatic events and the converse need to talk about them, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Chris Van de Merwe advise that narratives could present a measure of cathartic panacea (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela vii). It is this narrative road to healing that Sozaboy opts for in struggling to paint a picture of what happened. In the troubling

¹⁵¹ Kampala is the name of the dungeon where Bullet and Sozaboy are imprisoned due to their roles in the invasion of the captain's tent. Generally, Kampala in Nigerian parlance refers to an old cloth that has been dyed and sometimes re-dyed. The process of producing the fabric involves intense beating, to let the colours permeate the cloth. It often has many discordant colours. It is possible to link the intense torture of the dungeon to the gruelling experience of Kampala as it gets recycled back to life. The two men emerge from the dungeon with scars that leave discordant colours on their skins.

description of decapitated body parts, two members that stand out are “*prick, blokkus*” (phallus and testicles). They are synecdoches which capture the devastating outcomes of the patriarchal framing of masculinities. Since many of the dead soldiers, like Sozaboy, must have been mobilised on the basis of a need to assert their masculinity and phallic virility, the decapitation of these members becomes a vignette on the destructive ends of violent masculinity.

After the air raid which claims the life of Bullet, all of Sozaboy’s comrades are also wiped out in the devastating attack launched by the enemy (112). He begins a gruelling pilgrimage which leads him from one forest to the other – but which also leads him to a deeper understanding of the foolery of his decision to join the army. He says “I does not know even where I am running to even, whether forward or backward. [...] And I does not know whether day have break or night come fall. Because for inside that forest, night and day na one” (113). The forest is in the middle of nowhere. He has lost all the sense of his identity through his traumatic dislocation from places and things he knows. In a nutshell, these are essential ingredients for the third space – a fraught space neither here nor there. But within this fraught space, Sozaboy grapples with his in-between-ness to realise that “night and day na one.” In other words, he realizes that there are no sides in this war. Hence, he becomes positioned as a critical “historical witness” who has achieved some “agency of empowerment” (Bhabha 8) through a clarity of vision. On a metaphorical level, the forest is a repository of knowledge; being a space that is not susceptible to the machinations of the war mongers on both sides, it presents a kiln in which Sozaboy is forged into a voice which questions the status quo. In the forest, he remembers “as Zaza was talking in Dukana that day about Hitla and no Hitla for Burma. I remember as I come take money from my mama go bribe Mr Okpara so that he will put me in the army” (Ibid. 113.). He realises the lies in the grand heroics that drove him to join the army, and he laments that “[a]ll those things they have been telling us before is just stupid lie” (114)¹⁵².

He is rescued from the forest by Manmuswak who has now metamorphosed into an

¹⁵² I should quickly add that it is not yet eureka for Sozaboy as his awareness of his status as an outsider-within is not complete. He still blames Manmuswak for stoking the imbroglio between Bullet and the captain. Instead of seeing the greed and selfishness in the captain’s misappropriation, he chooses to blame the outsider. Apparently, his lens is still not sharp enough to realise the systemic oppression that makes him vulnerable to diverse forms of violence.

army nurse (118). Manmuswak morphs several times to reveal the many phases and faces of the war. He switches sides several times, mainly based on greed; he loots the properties of his people and murders prisoners of war in cold blood. Essentially, Manmuswak is a personification of the avarice that fuel wars. He is also a symbol of the sort of soldier that will emerge from the war, a damaged selfish breed of soldiers who are thoroughly bereft of kindness. When we meet Manmuswak at the bar before the war, he is a jolly tall fellow who shares a drink with his “short friend” (15), and although his tendency for survival at the expense of others is revealed, it is in the theatre of war that he matures into a cold-blooded killer. After Sozaboy gains some trust from Manmuswak and his commander by displaying his driving skills, he is presented with an opportunity to escape from his captors. Still clinging to hopes that his wife and mother are alive, he embarks on a journey to find them. Although the journey turns out futile at the end of it all, it is a journey of shocking discovery regarding those responsible for the suffering of the people of Dukana. In one of the camps he visits he finds Zaza, the garrulous fake soldier of Dukana, who was partly responsible for luring him into the army through his grand tales. In malediction of war, Zaza takes Sozaboy’s gun and smashes it on the floor (147). This act is a profound statement on how being in-between creates a better way of seeing. Being a refugee who is neither here nor there, with home becoming a painful memory, Zaza, like Sozaboy, now knows that war is an ill-wind that blows no good.

On Sozaboy’s next stop he stumbles on the Chief Birabee and Pastor Barika whose manipulative venture is still in full swing even in a refugee camp (156). Terr Kole, the wise man, describes them as the people who have “chopped the people’s food and sold the cloth that the Red Cross people ask them to give all the people” (Ibid. 156). They are part of the people called WCC (War Can Continue) in Chinua Achebe’s “Girls at War”. Beyond their wicked misappropriation of aid meant for the people, they report Sozaboy to the military authorities because he complains about the foolishness of the war and expresses his desire to stop fighting:

Chief Birabee asked me if I am still soza. I told him that once a soza always a soza. So he asked whether I will still carry gun and fight. And I said that [...] I am not fighting useless fight. Chief Birabee and Pastor come look themselves with one kain eye. Then chief Birabee said that it is good for everybody to join in the fighting. Because it is war and we must win. (154)

They are not done with Mene yet; their plan is to bleed young men like him to ensure that the war continues to further their evil schemes. In Chief Birabee's exhortation on the need to fight and win the war and the way they (the two crooks) look at Mene lies a veiled threat regarding the consequences of not supporting the war. Certainly, they are not aware that Mene has seen through their lies, the scales have fallen off his eyes and the darkness which deceived him into a needless war has cleared. He describes his newly achieved clarity of vision in these words:

It is only when I look carefully that I see what I have not seen before. On the other side, or what am I saying, behind the hut, there are many bags of garri, rice and bundles of stockfish. [...] And I look at Barika and Birabee well well. The two of them are very fat like pig". (158)

He can see-through their lies because his vision has been sharpened in the darkness of the forest. The excruciating time he spends in limbo – in the belly of the forest has given him lucid vision. Both Birabee and Barika have lost their titles in this new space of awareness that Sozaboy inhabits; essentially, they do not have any authority over him anymore. Although he suffers another brutal incarceration for opening-up to the old crooks, things are finally clear enough for him to never be a pun in their bloody chess anymore.

Also, at the end of the war, Sozaboy realizes that there is no home for him to return to, no wife or mother, and even Dukana, his dear Dukana does not want him. His mother's house has disappeared (172), and all attempts to reconnect with his people also fail because he has been mapped outside the collective due to his lack of solidarity. Consequently, he is recreated as a ghost to the community (175). Essentially, the same kind of propaganda that goaded him into the war has now been turned against him in a most virulent manner. Chief Birabee and his fellow looter, Pastor Barika, succeed in brainwashing the Dukanans that Mene died at the warfront, and that the Sozaboy that has returned is an apparition, a ghost that has returned to plague them (175-176). Even in death, this band of looters still pin the suffering of the people on Mene. All the deaths from an outbreak of diarrhoea are blamed on Sozaboy's spirit. Duzia, the cripple, sums up the lies neatly:

Now you have put very bad disease in the town to kill everybody. Sozaboy, this disease that you have put, we cannot understand it. It is not smallpox which used to make small small pit in man face. This new juju disease will just make porson go laterine plenty times and then the porson will die. Plenty people are just dying like fly. (180)

Based on this fantastic tale, Chief Birabee and his cohort secure another scheme under which they further exploit the already impoverished members of the community. Duzia narrates the measures they have taken regarding Sozaboy's attack on the community – the measures reveal how illiteracy renders the community pliable to the antics of the looters. Duzia says “so we have gone to see juju man about this thing. And the juju have told us that unless we kill your ghost, everybody in Dukana must die. So we looked for money and seven white goats and seven white monkey *blokkus* and seven alligator pepper and seven bundles of plantain and seven young young girls that we will give to the juju to make sacrifice” (180). All these items are procured by the people in a post-war society tottering under the weight of deprivation. While it is clear to discerning eyes that the people have fallen victim to another scam from their leaders and that, undoubtedly, the medicine man is in cahoots with the cabal, the people are gullible enough to fall for the tricks. The new exploitation visited on the post-war Dukana by their leaders is even more nefarious than the pre-war version because it now involves “young young girls” whose virginity would most certainly be stolen by the old cheats. To save Mene from the community's murderous plans, Duzia advises him to leave Dukana. In what follows Duzia's well thought-out advice, Sozaboy asks a sorrowful rhetorical question that indicates the centrality of Dukana to the very essence of his being: “And if I go away, where can I go that they will take someone who have been driven away from his own town?” Yet he must leave the place if he desires to remain alive as a custodian of other stories, as a bearer of the many tales from the third space.

At the point of returning to Dukana, Sozaboy is well aware that the enemy is not on the other side as they were made to believe at the beginning of the war, but he is not reintegrated into the society to be able to show them the complicity of the enemies-within in exacerbating the people's war suffering. In a sense, he experiences a lack of return like a soldier suffering from PTSD. He is shut out; “nobody opens the door of their house” to him (176), he has become an outcast. His war continues even after the guns are silent because he has been mapped out of the very place he fought to defend. The painful ramification of Mene's lack of return is lucidly portrayed in how he struggles to convince Duzia that he is alive. He needs to reclaim his belonging because he needs the connection

to home, to Dukana and its people, to be able to anchor his personhood. To echo Wamuwi Mbao, Mene's essential need to reconnect to home is tied to a "fixation with establishing oneself as belonging to the land" (Mbao 69). His question above, "where can I go" signals the ineluctable bind that exists between his self, belonging, and the land. To achieve belonging he addresses Duzia "Duzia, voice of Dukana, I am your son, Sozaboy. I have returned from the war" (177). By invoking a genealogy which is concatenated to that of Duzia, the voice of Dukana, Mene frantically grabs at the only opportunity he has to re-enter the community. Like two African griots meeting at a performance venue, he pays obeisance to Duzia as the old voice of the community. Voice is important here. As earlier stated, it is Duzia, working in concert with Zaza and Bom that rename Mene as Sozaboy. Thus, it is appropriate that Mene does not regard Duzia as just a co-bearer of communal stories, he regards him as his father, the creator of "Sozaboy". But even this appeal to Duzia's paternalistic sense does not grant him the much-needed belonging. Duzia is an ordinary Dukanan and as such, he does not have enough agency in determining who belongs or not, particularly after the leaders of the society have declared Mene *persona non-grata*. Thus, Sozaboy ends the story stuck in a perpetual limbo, in a third space where identity and home have become unanswered questions. But in all its flux, the third space gives Mene clarity of vision. Sozaboy loses the war on all sides, but his in-between location awakes him to the foolishness of fighting for any of the sides since both sides are the same. Lack of return (as seen in Mene's loss of home) and the permanent nature of war scars are some of the motifs that link this part of the dissertation to the next text.

Bodies at War in *Toads of War*

This section writes the wounded bodies of soldiers into discourses of belonging and Biafranness in wartime Biafra. This is important due to the disturbing absence of narratives of amputee soldiers in the corpus of civil war history despite ample documentary evidence that suggests the presence of many amputees in Biafra¹⁵³. Following on from Sozaboy's lack of return from the warfront at the war's end, this section reads how the bodies of wounded soldiers also create a lack of return for them after their discharge from war duties

¹⁵³ Several accounts of the war narrate the salience of amputation on both belligerent sides. For instance, Diliorah Chukwurah affixes a disturbing image of three amputee boy soldiers and a blind comrade to his memoir (Chukwurah 82).

due to their wounds. I pay attention to the ways in which the mangled bodies of wounded soldiers map them outside the boundaries of narration and belonging, and consequently erases their experiences of violence from the civil war historiography. In a sense, I am asking: what other stories of Biafra come forth when one returns to the embattled enclave through the intersectional point of view of wounded, disabled soldiers?

Karl Maier calls attention to the exclusion of amputee soldiers in wartime Biafra and in post-war Nigeria. He writes about his visit to the Disabled Veterans Camp:

After receiving hospital treatment for their wounds at the war's end, hundreds of Biafra's disfigured soldiers were driven to the Oji River and deposited in a village called the War Disabled Veterans Camp. Promised instruction and work, they were literally put out to pasture." (Maier 270)

Maier's account reveals the interstitial status of these wounded soldiers, as well as the danger inherent in being present yet absent in the history of a war in which they were active participants. That they are packed in a camp, away from the community, even after the war has ended speaks to the sense of disavowal that plagues their existence due to the way their bodies threaten grand heroics of war¹⁵⁴. Thus, reinserting these bodies that have been eternally marked by history into the narrative landscape of Nigeria-Biafra civil war then becomes an insurgent reclamation of presence. Veit-Wild and Naguschewski (2005) also observe that there is a lack of adequate engagement with the male body as a site of power negotiation in African literature. They argue that the male body is present yet absent (Veit-Wild and Naguschewski xv). Hence, to contribute to this need to read the palimpsestic narratives multiply inscribed on these wounded bodies, I re-imagine the lived experience of disabled Biafrans through the intersectional gazes of wounded soldiers in Eddie Iroh's *Toads of War* (1979).

Eddie Iroh's *Toads of War* narrates the corruption and profligacy of Biafra ruling class, particularly that of the generals, against the backdrop of a thorough lack of food for the masses. More importantly, the text poignantly captures the ordeals of a wounded soldier in Biafra. Employing a deft admixture of a first-person voice of a wounded soldier and an omniscient third person intrusive point of view, the text midwives a profound narrative of

¹⁵⁴ In a poignant statement which nods in the direction my aim in this section, Maier notes that the disabled are camped in-between Enugu and Lagos – two spaces that signify the wartime conflict positions. In this sense, they are rendered in-between even cartographically.

lived experiences of mutilated/wounded bodies in Biafra. A body-centric approach allows for exceptional closeness to the experiences of wounded soldiers in Biafra. In a manner beholden to Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*: I think therefore I am, it is possible to argue for the centrality of the 'I/eye' to existence and reality. And this 'I' can only perceive through her/his bodily experience. Merleau-Ponty argues in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962 [2005]) that the body is central to our experiential reality. Essentially, the corporeality of our existence is ineluctably tied to how we feel¹⁵⁵. Monica Casper and Lisa-Jean Moore indicate the centrality of bodies to discourses of belonging, citizenship, and power when they note that:

Bodies are omnipresent; as Butler argues, the materialization of bodies is part and parcel of the creation of social and political life. All discourses and practices rely on the actions, regulations, interactions, and positioning of human bodies and the agents inhabiting them. But because society is stratified along lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, disability status, citizenship, geography, and other cleavages, some bodies are public and visually dissected while others are vulnerable to erasure and marginalization. (Casper and Moore 9)

Essentially, Casper and Moore signal the way several axes intersect to map bodies as desirable or not, erased or showcased. The body is positioned as a junction where several axes of being intersect to create belonging/unbelonging. This complicity of the body in projects of belonging is perceivable in narratives of Biafra.

Indeed, bodies were important sites in the struggle for the soul of Biafra¹⁵⁶. From the shocking pictures of kwashiorkor-stricken children to gory images of mangled bodies of Nigerian air-raid victims, Biafra made exceptional use of bodies. Beyond the uses to which bodies and bodily harm were employed by Biafra to win the world to her side, bodies have

¹⁵⁵ It is impossible to write about the body without paying homage to Michel Foucault's work in positioning bodies as sites of power negotiations and contestations. His canonical book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995) is a huge contribution in this regard. It is also crucial to mention the contributions of feminist scholars in identifying the body as pivotal to the idea of gendering and control. For instance, Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993) situates the body as a canvas for performing gender – and by implication – as a site for negotiating power. Susan Brownmiller problematizes the female body in her book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975). She reads rape as a crime of power which seeks to perpetuate patriarchal orthodoxy by disciplining the female body.

¹⁵⁶ My reading takes the body as a whole. However, Sarah Nuttall argues that this kind of totalised view of the body might not allow for a reading of how body parts feature in diurnal experiences. She pushes for a reading which focuses on the anatomical dimensions of the body (Nuttall 187). While Nuttall's point is pivotal to having a dissected relationship with the body, my thinking is that these anatomical parts are essentially a part of a whole. They synecdochally signify the whole. Thus, I favour a reading of the body as a whole – but shaped by "tissues and bones" (Nuttall 188).

also continued to function as historical archives of the civil war suffering. For instance, Akresh et al. (2012) examined the connection between the war and adult stature of ‘Biafran babies.’ The researchers found that the adult height and body size of Biafran babies who experienced the war bear signs of the deprivation that they experienced during the conflict. They report stunted height in their respondents. In a sense, the bodies of the children have become eternal archives for the history of the war in their adulthood. History is embossed on their bodies. Thus, by reading how bodies interact in the text, one acknowledges “that our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of meaning” (Merleau-Ponty 1962). As a result, we might gain an ingress into lived experiences of wounded soldiers through their bodily experiences of Biafra by reading the textuality of the body.

Bodies are sites where belonging is negotiated. Within the politics of belonging, phenotype is an essential feature that is deployed in mapping insider/outsider. Yuval-Davis highlights the centrality of phenotype to the politics of belonging when she writes that “[c]entral to these projects is the construction and reproduction of boundaries of belonging according to some specific principles which can be of many different kinds, from phenotypical to the social” (Yuval-Davis, “Theorizing Identity” 8). As a form of addendum, both the “phenotypical” and the social are one and the same, since the phenotypical is reliant on the social for construction. That is, bodies, like gender, are socially constructed. For instance, racist ideologies employ physical features like the hue of skin, the shape of nose, and hair texture as tools for measuring belonging. Essentially, these features become central to the amount of social good bodies can access as well as how they will be treated in public spaces. In a sense, belonging is embodied, it is engraved in the deep recesses of the body¹⁵⁷.

Bodies are phenomenological spaces imbued with the capacity to speak in many ways. Indeed, “Bodies have a history” as Csordas (2000) reminds us, and this history renders them as archives of power relations in particular epochal moments. Commenting on the

¹⁵⁷ Trevor Noah, a South African comedian and show host, introduces a shocking dimension to this embodied belonging in his popular autobiography, *Born a Crime* (2016). He mocks the way apartheid anchored its discriminatory system on phenotype by discussing the Japanese/Chinese conundrum. The Chinese were mapped as black while the Japanese were mapped as white by the apartheid system. However, it was difficult to enforce this divide due to the phenotypical similarities between Chinese and Japanese people – thus highlighting the folly of such classificatory systems. Although Noah writes about this disturbing policy in light-hearted humour, it is a profound statement on the centrality of the body in discourses of belonging and power.

pivotal role of mutilated bodies as spaces for reading quotidian power relations, Lindsay French writes that the “specific cultural meanings of these bodies [disabled bodies] is not distinct from but deeply embedded in the relations of domination and production” (French 72) that define insider/outsider status within the politics of belonging. It is the “production” of bodies as belonging or not, desirable or not, and the centrality of power to this process that I mine in *Toads of War*. Through these bodies caught in the twilight of belonging during and after the war, I aim to mine forms of violence and exclusion experienced by disabled people during the war, but also the ways in which the violence of war also produces disability. Besides providing a space for listening to other stories of Biafra beyond the hagiographical narratives which dominate the air/ear waves, in a sense, this section also calls attention to the parlous lived experiences of disabled people in Nigeria.

Toads of War is the story of an amputee former Biafra soldier, Kalu Udim, who was abandoned by the government to fend for himself. At the beginning of the war, Kalu is exempted from active service because he suffers from epilepsy. As an epileptic, and so certified by a medical report he carries with him, he should have been excused from conscription into the military. However, due to a disagreement, his power-drunk boss, Bassey the Duke, bribes some soldiers to conscript him notwithstanding his medical condition. Sadly, he gets an epileptic attack right in the heat of battle at the front and consequently loses his right arm to a bomb. As a result, he is discharged from the army, disabled, and without any means of survival. In essence, he is pushed to the precarious margins of society since he has fallen outside the cartography of heterosexist masculinity. In this state of being in-between the warfront and the home, and with his mangled body bearing constant witness to his lack of return and the precarity it breeds, he seeks revenge against his former boss as a murderous but cathartic mode of healing. In his search for his corrupt former boss, he meets the beautiful Kechi Ugboma who falls helplessly in love with him.

Kechi’s love repairs Kalu Udim’s badly damaged masculine sense and gives him a sense of belonging within the society. However, Kechi also serves as the Kalu’s tragic link to Bassey the Duke. In fact, it is in Kechi’s room that he eventually executes Bassey. Kalu Udim’s quest for survival and revenge on his corrupt former boss reveals a dirty underbelly of the dynamics of belonging and power within Biafra and how the ruling class constantly

engage in an orgiastic celebration of excess in the midst of starvation. Although his amputated arm absolves him of the need to be at the front, it also denies him reintegration into the society. In a sense, he does not truly return home. Indeed, there is no home to return to. He has become othered in a space he calls home.

The othering of bodies is exceptionally tangible for disabled people in many African societies, but it is felt in even deeper ways by war veterans whose mutilated bodies represent triggers of unpleasant remembrance for the elites. In *Toads of War*, the presence of maimed soldiers represents an unpleasant sight for hegemony who would rather archive grand remembrance of war. Soldiers' mangled bodies trouble the heroic ideas of war by showcasing the unavowable dimension of war suffering. They speak the unspeakable. Meg Samuelson writes about how the body of the character David, a maimed freedom fighter in the war against apartheid in Zoe Wicomb's *David Story* (2004), articulates the unspeakable: "Although David remains resolutely silent about his experience in Quatro, his disfigured body speaks what he as a disciplined cadre cannot and will not utter" (Samuelson 844). When these mutilated bodies speak, sometimes against the wishes of their owners, they disrupt the carefully conceived war heroics.

Consequently, these bodies are mapped as different and erased from sight and site because of the history they speak of, and about. This comes through in Kalu Udim's encounter with two other disabled soldiers during his trek to Emekuku:

Ahead of me, two soldiers on crutches were resting what was left of their limbs in some shade under the umbrella of a vast tree. I joined them, exchanged weary greetings, and wiped my face with my sleeve. A fateful breeze began to blow and I gave thanks to God. One of the soldiers was smoking the butt of a cigarette, 'khaki head' soldiers call it in the front line. His shirt was as tattered as his comrade's. There was little to choose between the two of them. Each had had his left leg amputated from above the knee. They seemed like twin brothers in misery.

[...] I did not notice the girl join us in the shade. I doubt that my companions did, either. But feeling that touch of the invisible hand that tells you when someone has been staring at you without your knowing it, I turned to see our latest companion. She quickly removed her eyes, but not quickly enough for me not to notice that she had been feeding her eyes on my bad arm, probably after having stared for an equal length of time at the missing legs of my companions. A macabre congregation, she must have concluded. She was attractive and looked well-fed. (61)

In the passage above, there are two kinds of bodies that have been represented. The

wounded, disabled bodies of soldiers, and the well-groomed, well-fed body of a lady. The soldiers appear unkempt because they have lost all sense of bodily integrity. By contrasting these bodies, the different experiences and stories of Biafra are brought to the fore. There is a link between the soldiers' tattered appearances and amputated limbs: it is their mutilated bodies and their bodily difference that has mapped them outside the community where they could have had access to collective good. On another level, the gathering of amputees represents an uncomfortable sight for the well-groomed body of the lady. She averts her gaze quickly because the bodies gathered there are undesirable and they bear the tales and marks of an on-going war whose horrors she and other well-fed members of the elite do not want to acknowledge. Lindsay French writes about about a similar context that, "amputation alters the integrity of the body in a particularly powerful way that affects not only the amputees themselves but also, in a different way, anyone who comes in contact with them" (French 71). The horrors their bodies avow render them undesirable to both the soldiers and the community. This exacerbates the suffering of these soldiers who are pushed to the margins, to the in-between state due to their injuries.

The exceptional suffering of the wounded soldiers becomes even clearer in the next movement in Kalu Udim's tale of woes. While waiting for a ride to Emekuku with other disabled soldiers after the 'abled' lady had moved from their macabre gathering, a clean Peugeot car appears on the horizon. Emboldened by the driver's decision to slow down, the men wave frantically. "I waved so frantically my sling slid off my bad arm, but I continued waving. By the time the car was fifty yards from where we stood, my companions on crutches had joined me. One raised one of his crutches in the air to dramatize his and our desperation" (62). The car stopped close to the lady, she got in, but the wounded soldiers had a different reception waiting for them when they approached the car:

We hobbled hopefully towards the car. My friends, being on crutches, were much slower and I was reluctant to appear to be taking advantage of them by running towards our potential benefactor. So with painful patience, I trotted behind them. [...] One of my companions leaned on the window of the car for support and began to beg for a lift for all of us as soon as the man turned his face after settling in his female beneficiary.

'Please sir, can you ...?'

The scowl on the man's face must have cut the words from my companion's lips.

'What's that?' The man fired without waiting. 'Do you know where I am going to?'

The face that was beaming broadly to the girl a few seconds ago now looked as friendly as a hangman's. I was still contemplating the hostility on the chameleonic face when the engine suddenly revved and, without warning, the car shot forward. My companion, who had gone lax on his crutches while reposing all his weight, and hope, on the car, was thrown with the sudden surge. He fell violently sideways on the hard, hot tarmac, his crutches flung aside. There was blood on his face. His comrade was also, though less violently, thrown for I had just enough presence of mind to grab his arm with my good one and steady him. (62-63)

I have quoted so copiously here to capture the inhumane treatment meted out to the wounded men by the car owner, who is certainly a member of the elite. In the man's sudden switch from "beaming broadly" at the lady and scowling at the amputees, he draws an obvious boundary of belonging which excludes the men. Through his gaze, he performs a politics of belonging by mapping who belongs or not¹⁵⁸. Essentially, the unsightly appearance of the men riles the driver so much that he cannot accord them an iota of empathy. They have lost their Biafranness because they no longer serve the needs of the elites. Their bodies, which were currencies for agency during their time of war service, have now become emblematic of their outsider status. This group, the disabled/wounded soldiers, are neither Biafran nor Nigerian in terms of belonging. Also, they are neither fully men, nor women¹⁵⁹. They are aberrations to the commune.

Another aspect that is noticeable in the scenario above is that bodies are socially constructed within the gazes of the outsider; in this case, the men are constructed in the driver's gazes. Adhering to this pattern of construction, the owner of the body then accepts the undesirable status of her/his body. In the text, after Kalu Udim and his band of amputees have been put in this space of otherness, Kalu Udim vows not to stop any other vehicle. On the body of his fallen comrade, he confirms their outsider status: "The fallen one would not move out or be moved out of the heat back to the shade. Nor would he be consoled; he sat there, shaking his head slowly from side to side, tears burning tracks down his cheeks" (65). Consequently, Kalu decides to embrace his turbulent positioning in the third space. In his decision not to sit on the floor to mourn his outsider status like his comrade, he rejects the

¹⁵⁸ Gazes are central to the way bodies are constructed. I return to this question of gazes and attendant power play in a later part of this section.

¹⁵⁹ Although it is possible to argue that the driver did not feel the need to help the men due to their gender, it is also important to note that it is an intersection of their gender and their disability that maps them out of the man's caring gaze. If they were still active soldiers with complete limbs, it would have been considered unpatriotic to leave them stranded.

stereotype of disabled bodies as eternally needful of charity. He is aware that he is an outsider, but he resists being negatively constructed.

Kalu foregrounds his awareness of this in-between status in the opening to the story with his visit to Brigadier Mere's house. He opens with the words: "I HAD GONE to Major Mere's house at 7 p.m" (30). But quickly cautions himself: "Let me amend that presumptuous statement: I had gone to Major Mere's *boys' quarters* at 7 p.m. (Who am I, a disabled army lieutenant, to go to an able-bodied major's house at dinner time?)" (Italics in original, 30). The thought of a wounded disabled soldier visiting a Major's house is presented as presumptuous. This is both an indication of his awareness of his status as an outsider and a telling narrative regarding how ableism and disability mapped one inside or outside. By asking "who am I, a disabled army lieutenant" he signposts the idea that the inappropriateness of his visit is tied to his disability. However, he rejects being othered when he meets Major Ukatta, a former colleague outside Brigadier Mere's house. He asserts his personhood by returning the Major's gaze, and even venturing to admire his female companion:

Now, as he walked up the path, his right forefinger locked around his woman's as if it were a rifle trigger, he threw me the most casual of glances, took his face away in a hurry and took it back to his woman. I could have sworn U.K. Charlie recognized me. But donot blame him for not acknowledging it. He's now a major, remember? And I'm still a lieutenant, a one-armed one, and a nuisance around these exclusive preserves. But in a second, Major Ukatta was constrained to look at me again. For when he turned his face back to his woman her eyes werenot there. They were fixed on me, intent and penetrating, I felt. I met her stare and gave her a wink, just to make mischief, and because I felt she might be taking pity on me for my amputated arm. I loathe people pitying me ... makes me self-conscious, which makes me bitter. (34)

When the major tries to discountenance his presence and the materiality of his being by looking away, he asserts his presence by staring boldly at the Major. He is aware of the importance of the moment; he is not oblivious of his outsider status either. But from the

margins which he inhabits, he asserts his personhood by rejecting any feeling of pity.¹⁶⁰ However, it is pertinent to note the profound way he rejects being constructed in the gaze of Major Chilaka. He is aware that gazes are sites for the performance of power as I have indicated earlier. Tom Shakespeare discusses the centrality of gazes to power in his seminal article, “Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?” He writes that “the gaze is a power relationship” (Shakespeare 288) because the gaze is an invasion of the disabled body. In a profound sense, “everyday interaction involving disabled people involves an invasion, by normal people, of disabled people” (Ibid. 288). Thus, when Kalu Udim chooses not to care about Major Ukatta’s condescending look while acknowledging Kechi Ugboma’s gaze with a wink, he resists “an invasion” of his body. He reclaims personhood and agency by refusing to remain in “a dustbin for disavowal” (Shakespeare 1994)¹⁶¹. Within these gazes, he stages his contestation.

He does not stop at the level of gazing at Major Ukatta’s woman’s body. He claims her as a trophy¹⁶², much to the surprise of Ukatta who labels him a “one armed bandit.” He is quite explicit about why he chooses to date her: it’s because she affirms his personhood. Because he sees her as having low morals, he claims a measure of righteousness against the backdrop of her immorality. In a messianic tone, he declares: “I was not quite sure that Kechi’s explanation was entirely in self-justification. However, I felt I could afford to spare her some gesture of sympathy, if rather a silent one, as I continued to pat her back to the

¹⁶⁰ By comparing the way the Major held his woman to how a rifle is held at the front, “as if it were a rifle trigger”, Kalu highlights the importance of the lady’s presence to the Major’s definition of masculinity. Hence, he chooses to challenge him on those grounds. But also, in the same statement lies a crass objectification of Ukechi, Major Ukatta’s companion. In fact, the text is disturbingly rife with the objectification of women as well as a stereotypical representation of women as passive members of the Biafran society. Meg Samuelson argues that war stories depend on this binary: “[n]ot only does the iconography of war present such bifurcated gendered figures, but it also appears to depend on them” (Samuelson 839).

¹⁶¹ Shakespeare argues that able-bodied people seek an assertion of normality by casting all negativity on the disabled body. In a poststructuralist sense of binary opposition, they become normal when the other is rendered as abnormal. In the same sense, when the presence of this othered body is disavowed, it presents a space for an avowal of a homogenous presence of able bodies.

¹⁶² I do not believe that a female body can be owned or won like a trophy. However, my choice of this term is to signal the manner in which the events in the text are narrated. Essentially, it is to indicate how the female body is rendered as a space for phallic contestations and adventures.

rhythm of her quiet sobbing” (103)¹⁶³. The idea that someone, an able-bodied human being, could look to him for acceptance is an exciting feeling for Kalu. When the smitten lady, Ukechi, professes the depth of her love for him, he can only think of how his sexual relationship with her validates his masculinity, his personhood. He says “[s]he accepts me as a man. A *complete* man. Not a pitiable amputee. Toss him a coin and look the other way” (Italics in original, 107). Although he is not oblivious of the lady’s victim status just like him, he exploits her body to stage a performance of agency. To nod in the direction of Frantz Fanon, this negotiation of agency at Ukechi’s expense is because “every effort at security, is based on relations of dependence, with the diminution of the other. It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility” (Fanon 164)¹⁶⁴. Thus, in a disturbing sense, his victim status does not stop him from perpetuating the same systemic oppression that is responsible for his suffering; it is the only way he can assert his “virility”. His complicity in this system of oppression is also tied to his “habitus” and “gnoseological order” (Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* 165), that is, the way he comprehends the world. Thus, while resisting the invasion of his body, he participates in the invasion of another body as a means of asserting his personhood. This paradoxical status as both victim and oppressor is linked to the workings of “symbolic power” (Ibid.165). In this case, Kalu Udim sees a phallic assertion of masculinity as a means of negotiating presence and belonging. The female body is consequently presented as a troubled site for virulent masculine contestations.

As I stated in the introduction, Kalu Udim’s in-betweenness affords him clarity of vision. Being an ‘outsider-within’ situates him in a third space where he gets a prismatic

¹⁶³ His gentle patting of Kechi’s back is a form of caress that also affirms his ownership of her body. In the words of Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, “the caress is an appropriation of the Other’s body” because the caressed body is molded under the soft strokes of the touching hand: “In caressing the Other I cause [his/her] flesh to be born beneath my caress, under my fingers”(456). And if we agree with Carrie Noland’s convincing argument on the interpellative potency of touch (Noland 213), it becomes quite clear that the Major’s touch is an attempt to publicly create Kechi’s body as an agentless receptacle for his heterosexual desires.

¹⁶⁴ Paolo Freire explains this complicity of the oppressed in systems of oppression this way: “[...] the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors.” The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity” (Freire 45). In essence, the oppressed’s idea of humanity is framed around oppression. Hence, personhood is believed to be ineluctably bound to one’s emergence as a “sub-oppressor.”

view of the deceptive manoeuvres of the ruling class within Biafra. Reading Victor Turner, Tom Shakespeare also appreciates the fecundity of meaning which this space between allows. He writes that people in-between “have a licence to criticise or to strip the pretensions of society and power-holders” (Shakespeare 296). And Kalu explores this “licence” to the fullest. He first asserts his membership of the comity of the oppressed: “We, the victims, suffering under the different weights of different exploiters, not knowing the other man or woman's burdens and strains, ran the risk of standing on a white sheet and pointing accusing fingers, not at our exploiters, but at our fellow victims” (104). This is both an assertion of Kalu’s victimhood and an insertion of Kechi in the comity of vulnerable. The feminisation of his disabled body has produced an understanding of the similitude that exists between his quotidian experiences of systemic oppression to that of women.

Also, within this sad statement, Kalu identifies what Bourdieu calls “misrecognition” which, as he argues, is the bane of symbolic power; it is the main tool used to discourage ordinary people from recognising the similarity of their oppression across divides. In the third space which Kalu Udim inhabits, he has become aware of the tricks and lies of the elite: “We saw a new ruling class, a new elite, emerge. It was a wicked, heartless, despicably squalid cabal that was ruled by the power of money and scarce commodities. Even our leader had a powerful girl-friend who was nicknamed *Her Excellency* the Head of State” (Italics in original, 47). In this space, Kalu spares no one in his scathing criticism; he has achieved clarity and this clarity of vision breeds anger in him. In his anger, he is unforgiving of the soldiers who remain susceptible to the deception of the elites. Thus, in this state of lucid awareness, he has nothing but harsh words for soldiers who remain under the deceptive spells of greedy commanders: “Many foolish, wretched, barefooted ones are busy obeying orders and pumping hot lead into the enemy” (106). His anger is no doubt misdirected because he was under the same spell as the gullible soldiers before his disabling injury at the war front – and perhaps, would have maintained a convivial relationship with the hegemonic status quo if not for his injury and its consequent exclusion. But when we take an aggregated view of the elites’ culture of profligacy and malfeasance which becomes palpable from his marginal position, he could be forgiven for going off like a loose cannon on the soldiers.

For instance, he remarks that while the soldiers are busy dying at the war front, the generals are busy making love and making merry¹⁶⁵. To drive home this anomaly, Kalu counterpoints laughter and the sound of artillery: “[a] burst of laughter from Mere's house, which was itself drowned by a distant, but distinct artillery boom from the not-too-distant battle-front” (36). By informing us that the battlefield is not too distant, he ruptures the distance between home and battlefield. The home is the battlefield and the battlefield is home to the soldiers. When the laughter that erupted from the Major’s home is contrasted to the cries of dying soldiers at the front, it becomes impossible not to imagine the laughing officers as crassly iniquitous. It is almost as if it is the death of the men that amuses them.

A sinister dimension to the politics of food and scarce commodities is revealed after Kalu’s fruitless nine-mile trek to Emekuku in search of food (*Toads* 61-64). He arrives at the relief centre (food distribution centre) managed by Reverend Father Nwobi who is not so Christian in his ways. He describes the sorry sight thus:

The relief centre was awake. Wide awake and bustling. The cries and screams of scores of hungry little children tied to their mothers' backs resounded like a universal boiling kettle, filling the humid air, my ears and, I believe, the ears of the Reverend Father in charge of the centre. Mothers jostled one another, mindless of the tiny tots strapped to their backs. Amputees and other disabled soldiers littered the front lawns like withered, unsold vegetables returned from the market. (*Toads* 64)

The grim scenario painted above reveals the horrible fate of the vulnerable in wartime Biafra. In what would aptly pass as a case of the “falcon not hearing the falconer”¹⁶⁶ after things fell apart, mothers can neither hear the cries of their children nor appease them because they are locked in the existential struggle for food. Even the mothers are not heard by the Reverend father in-charge of the relief centre. The Reverend father’s refusal to respond to the cries of starving Biafrans at his relief station – even with a brimming store of relief materials – reveals another strand of violence. Against the backdrop of starving people who litter the relief centre “like withered unsold vegetables”, a simile which

¹⁶⁵ Such malediction of the wartime elite is present in a lot of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war texts. See Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* (Ike 2014), Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* (1994), Akachi-Ezeigbo’s *Roses and Bullets* (2014), among several others. Even Chinua Achebe, a passionate member of the wartime elite in Biafra, captures his class’s anti-people acts in his collection of short stories, *Girls at War* (1991).

¹⁶⁶ W.B Yeats “The Second Coming” (1919). See David Holdeman. *Cambridge Introduction to W.B. Yeats* (Cambridge UP, 2006).

poignantly captures both their rejected status and the inhumane treatment they receive, Kalu reveals that there were “Cartons, sacks, cans, and crates of assorted foodstuffs were piled ceiling-high and spilling on to the floor” (*Toads* 66). The priest refuses to feed the starving lot because he plans to feed the likes of Major Ukatta and his girlfriend, Kechi (*Toads* 65)¹⁶⁷, and to seduce beautiful young girls.

At the end of the story, Kalu is eternally caught in the third space – in prison where his neither-here-nor-there status is cemented. He had met his former boss, Chima the Duke, in Ukechi’s hostel and summarily executed him in revenge for his forceful conscription which was orchestrated by the man – and which led to the death of his mother. Although Biafra is falling apart under Nigeria army’s final push, he is not perturbed by the news because the story of Biafra is not his story. As Ogaga Okuyade writes, “the end of the war is almost meaningless to the inner lives of the [Biafrans]” (Okuyade 84). The war’s end does not resonate with Kalu because his war continues unabated.

On the whole, the three texts read in this chapter poignantly reveal that the narrative of belonging and solidarity in the army do not account for those whose class, ethnicity, ability/disability intersect to map as outsiders. The other narratives which they archive call attention to the excess which plagues linear accounts of the civil war.

¹⁶⁷ Father Nwobi is not Major Ukatta’s only source of relief food. As, a commander of Biafran troops, he diverts food meant for his boys at the front in a bid to satisfy his licentious adventures.

Chapter Four

Queering Womanhood in Biafra: Reading Female Survival Struggles/Strategies in Biafra

I've longed to find the queer body in Nigerian literature documented with dignity, with respect. To find the queer body portrayed as being wronged, as deserving justice. For to search for one's self in literature and not find it or to find it perpetually twisted and shunned and vilified is also violence, a different kind of violence¹⁶⁸ (Obi 2017).

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the centrality of bodies and erotic desire to the mapping of belonging and their importance as sites of contestations around power and masculinity in Biafra. Central to this is the conception of erotic desire as heterosexual and gender performance as fixed according to the doxa of heteronormativity. In this chapter, I seek to open up the narrow conception of normative femininity – gendered and sexed – that dominates narratives of how women belonged and suffered during the civil war by queering the idea of Biafra womanhood. Through this unsettling of the homogeneous woman, one is afforded a malleable conception of gender and sexuality that, in a sense, writes other modes of being a Biafran woman into existence by highlighting the sameness but also the difference of some women in Biafra, and how this fraught in-between space creates a form of exclusion. Thus, is it possible to speak of a homogenous Biafra woman experience? In a sense, this question also links to the concern of the previous chapter which reads the diverse modes of masculine suffering and othering to vex the linear conception of manhood in Biafra.

It should be noted that I am in no way suggesting that queer women in Biafra are different from other women due to their sexual orientation; rather, I read the violence they suffer as a strand of gender-based violence deployed by patriarchy, especially Christian heteropatriarchy to police sexuality and to map the borders of belonging. Thus, by tracing

¹⁶⁸The silencing of queer presence within Nigerian literature and history also forms a part of the motivation for this chapter. And as a testament to this violent othering and silencing, the writer, Chibuihe, has consistently received death threats since he published the article, "We are Queer We are Here" in *Brittle*. See the article here: www.brittlepaper.com/2017/05/queer-chibuihe-obi-essay.

the unique experiences of women who inhabit the troubled margins of Biafra in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015) and Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976), the chapter comments on how hetero-patriarchal politics of belonging produce violent quotidian realities for queer people in Biafra and Nigeria¹⁶⁹. Queerness is mostly shackled to sexuality, which partly satisfies the focus of this chapter, but it is capable of doing much more in the way it rejects ideas of fixity or essentialism in both heteronormative and homonormative thinking. I find this inherent resistance to normativity, especially normative-heteropatriarchy, valuable in mining the experiences of women whose stories do not fit neatly into the frames of popular narratives. In this mode of thinking, I am echoing Tamsin Spargo who writes that "[q]ueer can function as a noun, an adjective or a verb, but in each case is defined against the normal or normalising" (Spargo 8–9).

For Judith Butler, the very essence of "queer" as a term lies in its malleability in serving myriad articulations of exclusion. Once the term becomes fixed and stable, it loses its cogency: "If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, [...] it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage" ("Critically Queer" 21)¹⁷⁰. Rosemary Hennessy also highlights the potency of queer thinking in unsettling and opening up homogeneous identities that depend on normativity. She explains that it "sees any identity as internally divided and therefore not an apt or effective rallying point for change" (Hennessy 135). Queer thinking presents this space for rallying change by unveiling "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or cannot be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 8). Taiwo Osinubi demonstrates this capacity of queer thinking to trouble heterosexist positions in his queer reading of Chinua Achebe's fiction by capturing "[...] situational nonconformity and improvisation variously

¹⁶⁹ Since I argue that the selected texts archive alternative 'herstory', my reading focuses mainly on the experiences of queer women as a "situated intersectional" position (Yuval-Davis 2015). But since queer people share similar experiences of violence, my reading speaks to broader issues of violence perpetrated on queer bodies in the name of policing belonging. For instance, *Under the Udala Trees* makes passing reference to the brutal killing of two gay men (205).

¹⁷⁰ Butler explores the capacity of queering to deconstruct fixity; she maps a history of the derogatory usage of "queer" and how queering has managed to reinvent the same term through a process of "repetition" (Butler 20) - which indicates its aptness in critiquing the heterosexist frames that created the term in the first place. To retain this deconstructive force, it can not remain fixed to solely homonormative politics. She also critiques the extant exclusions that plague some deployment of the term.

incarnated in fluctuating psychosocial fields of sexual desire or performances” (163). The fluctuation of sexual desire and “situational improvisation” invoked by Osinubi gestures towards the fluidity of sexual desires in a way that cannot be pinned to a normative idea of sex-gender performance¹⁷¹. In a sense, this troubles the settled conception of sexuality. Essentially, the queering of any monolithic identity unsettles it to reveal nonconformities which then become productive in charting silent narratives that lie buried under the palimpsests of hegemonic stories authored for and anchored to normativity. Thus, queering the idea of womanhood in Biafra will unmask the internal differences that plague the positioning of womanhood as a rallying point in Biafra and in contemporary secessionist discourse by focussing on desire and its “disruptive” capacity (Hennessy 145)¹⁷².

Several scholars have examined the dimension of violence experienced by women and decried the absence of women-authored narratives of the war (Bryce 1991; Adams 2001; Pape 2005; Pape 2011; Adimora-Ezeigbo 2005; Machiko 2008)¹⁷³. These studies constitute a remarkable body of work that comments on the traumatic experiences of women in Biafra and how their stories have been excluded from hegemonic accounts of the war. But coterminous with this effort to reclaim voice and presence for women in Biafra is an

¹⁷¹ He argues further that Achebe creates sexually non-conforming characters to echo the communal politics of the place being depicted. It is indeed possible to draw links between the politics of place and the politics of belonging. Read in that sense, one could say that Achebe reveals the relationship between politics of belonging and sexuality in Igboland.

¹⁷² Adrienne Rich localises this disruptive capacity of queerness to lesbian relationships. She says that “[l]esbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, and on male right of access to women” (Rich 649). Framed in this way, lesbian narratives can be read as staging a counter-discourse to patriarchy’s hegemonic posturing in a manner which encompasses all women, even those in voluntary heterosexual relationships. And to tie this to my declaration earlier regarding not reading queer Biafran women as different from other women, I am of a firm belief that thinking from this marginal – and interstitial space – is exceptionally productive in charting heterosexism’s violent oppression of women.

¹⁷³ Efforts at challenging this absence by writing women into the war’s historiography have also been identified. Adimora-Ezeigbo notes that women writers inscribe their presence into the civil war’s historiography by “creat[ing] a literature that validates women’s age-old preoccupations with mothering, nurturing, gathering, cleansing, mending, and restoring” And that they claim their presence by writing narratives that do not focus on the details of the warfront, but on familial experiences during the carnage.” It becomes apparent that even this protest against silence and absence is staged on the terms of heteropatriarchy, hence, there is no space created for other ways of being woman. It also limits the economy of sex to only heterosexual relations. Okonjo-Ogunyemi also decries the absence or simplistic portrayal of women in many male authored Biafran war narratives. She writes that “[s]ince the war novel is written by men, for men, and to influence men, women characters tend to be few and stereotypically drawn” (Okonjo-Ogunyemi 211).

underlying homogenization of womanhood and how women experienced the war. Melanie Judge observes that such homogeneous framing of gender experiences is largely due to modes of reading that focus solely on gender as an axis of analysis without accounting for how other axes of identity could intersect to produce a radically different experience for some women. She observes that “this accounts for how an exclusive focus on gender might overlook the multiple permutations of multiple othering that women face” (Judge 7). Essentially, this renders some women invisible, making it impossible to represent these othered women who face deep forms of oppression. Such framing seems oblivious of the unnerving truth that “[a]lthough it is true that heterosexual oppression affects everyone, living as a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual individual (whether closeted or out) presents unique challenges” (Rothblum and Bond xiii). As Adrienne Rich has passionately argued, this silence, this exclusion of lesbian presence from society’s history, is essentially a tool of compulsory heteropatriarchy (640). In essence, when women-centred narratives disavow the existence of queer people, they advance the interests of heteropatriarchy, which interestingly, they have set out to question.

For instance, Gloria Chukwu sets out to salvage the voices of Biafran women from “the archives of silence” (Chukwu 330) but falls into an unconscious process of othering which reveals the internal contradictions that plague “Biafran woman” as a homogenous category, particularly when erotic desire is added to the mix. She remarks that:

As a coping mechanism, some married women entered into new relationships with Biafran men. Other Biafran women of different ethnicities established various kinds of relationships with both federal and Biafran soldiers. While some of them married federal soldiers, others dated the officers. (Chukwu 338)

The difference between the categories of Biafran women identified here is marked by their choice of sexual partners. It is possible to infer that the married Igbo-Biafran women stayed within the fold (Biafra) when they strayed sexually, but the “other” Biafran women from other ethnic groups dated and married federal soldiers. Essentially, it is deducible that, although both groups of women employed sex as a tool of survival and agency, “other” women were more morally “loose” – since they had sexual relations with both Biafran and Nigerian soldiers. In a sense, in this quest for voice and historical presence by Biafran women, transgressive women – in terms of sex-gender performance and ethnicity fall through the cracks.

Yuval-Davis unmasks a sinister objective behind this homogenization of gender which pervades hegemonic narratives of society. She reveals that “[s]uch narratives often reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category and construct an homogenized ‘right way’ to be its member” (Yuval-Davis 195). Through a concatenation of the construction of gender normativity – through a rigid framing of the ‘right way’ – with the notion of membership, the quote reveals the ineluctable bind that exists between power, gendering as a process, and the framing of belonging. In this process of creating the right way to belong through “[...] a version of the politics of respectability at odds with ideas of queerness” (Hoad 6)¹⁷⁴, “something is left unsaid. It is something which is unnameable, lurking at the border of intelligibility and representability, and threatening the story from within with its inherent absence” (Machiko 69). While mapping the border of belonging and “respectability”, an excess is created which cannot be enfolded into the neat idea of belonging. It is this excess that remains unnameable, unsayable, unavowed, and silenced.

It is some of these “unsaid”, “unnameable” things – and the attendant absences that they synthesise – that I tease out by reading how the selected literary texts position some female characters in a fraught liminal space which defies Christian-heteronormative-patriarchal framing of gender and sexuality. I chart the otherness of female characters mapped out of the community of belonging on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity – and how these axes intersect – to get a sense of how they create zones of exclusion for some female characters, and consequently, rob them of belonging. I trace how this in-between location exacerbates their experience of Biafra and how this marginal positioning germinates a form of agentic ethos in the characters. Here, I invoke the capacity of literature to “reflect and reflect on extant perspectives” (Adebanwi 407) as well as its

¹⁷⁴ Drawing connections between agitations against the criminalisation of interracial sex in the United States and the notorious Immorality Act in South Africa, Neville Hoad teases out the centrality of sexuality to systemic power/oppression (Hoad, “Queer Customs against the Law” 6). This linkage between interracial heterosexual relations and homosexuality reveals how compulsory heteronormativity functions. It reveals that heteronormativity does not only punish homosexuality but also heterosexual relationships that are regarded as non-normative. This framing of heteronormativity is present in the queer heterosexual activities between a married woman and a disabled man – who is not her husband in Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*. The taboo nature of the sexual act forces the cuckolded husband to commit suicide while the transgressive woman becomes susceptible to communally sanctioned violence.

“socially productive nature” (Montrose 9) to position both texts as serviceable archives of other histories/herstories of Biafra in the way they raise the curtains shrouding sexuality in discourses of Biafranness. Ngugi captures this role of the novelistic mode aptly:

The novel, like the myth and the parable, gives a view of society from its contemplation of social life, reflecting it, mirror-like, but also reflecting upon it, simultaneously. The novelistic is akin to the scientific outlook in method. The scientist collects data in the lab or in the field. He observes it, tries out different combinations, and comes up with a theory. (Ngũgĩ 16)

Thinking in line with Ngugi, it is possible to say that the selected literary texts archive intimate data of diurnal realities of Biafra, complete with deep reflections on same, in a way that enlivens the war’s historiography with diverse possibilities. They achieve this by creating spaces where voice is given to deeply private – and sometimes salacious – stories of suffering. Within these private encounters with suffering, a profound portico into the dynamics of power, citizenship, and belonging is constructed. Such narratives allow for a troubling of the desexualized framing of being and belonging that shapes nationalists’ conception of citizenship and belonging.

Essentially, I am interested in how the fixed mapping of the borders of belonging along compulsory heteronormativity, powered by religious/moralist credo, pushed some women outside the boundaries of belonging in a place they called home. At the heart of this project are two mutually constituting framing of sexuality as heteronormative and sex as only permissible within the confines of marriage. Thus, anything outside this neat framing is considered an aberration to be warred against and crushed by crusaders of moralism. I am interested in how women were mapped as good/bad within social discourse of belonging and the dangers of being outside the community – and outside the collective good. But as has become apparent in the course of this study, being at the margins of society – in a third space – also engenders a level of agency, a locution capacity, and lucid vision. Thus, I am also interested in how the women caught in-between hegemonic positions negotiate survival and voice.

I read Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* to map the struggles of a lesbian woman to belong in wartime Biafra and the continuity of her struggles even in the post-war society. She is caught in a space between belligerents where she is susceptible to a ferocious kind of violence in a place she calls home. Her gender, sexuality and ethnic

identity as an Igbo intersect to produce a continuous form of violence even in the post-war society. In a sense, like the rank and file seen in the last chapter, her war never really ends. Although *Under the Udala Trees* is the focus text for this chapter, I further strengthen my argument regarding the alienating force of heteropatriarchy on female sexuality, beyond same-sex relations, to include women in heterosexual marriages that transgress heteronormativity, with readings from Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. The text reveals the dimensions of alienation and exploitation that plagues the life of a 'Biafran woman' (Aku) and her child as a fallout of her gender which also intersects with her ethnic identity, social class, and sexual choices to position her as an outsider-within. She is vulnerable to sexual exploitation because she is pushed outside the borders of society and belonging and forced to negotiate her survival and that of her child by yielding to the phallic domination of a powerful member of the society. But in this middle space, she asserts sexual agency when she chooses to satisfy her erotic desires, in the absence of her incarcerated husband, through queer sexual relations with a disabled man.

At the end of the novel, she is rejected by her husband, who does not recognise the similitude of his victim status and that of his wife as casualties of politics of belonging. She loses her home to her husband's angst-motivated arson. Thus, like other characters encountered in this thesis, there is no home to return to and the silencing of guns does not herald an end to her war. Without a doubt, the texts "[...] openly invite a 'queer' reading of female sexuality by setting their heroines' desires against and also outside the heterosexual norm: this invitation is not embedded in codes" (Newell 199). They help 'queer' the idea of belonging in Biafra through intimate depictions of female characters with erotic desires outside the confines of heteropatriarchal norms. And to cycle back to the opening quote to this chapter, the selected texts write queer bodies and desires into the war literature – and into its history.

Sex and sexuality inhabit ambivalent spheres in Africa, especially in Nigeria. They are private affairs discussed in hushed tones, but public enough to be legislated upon. Nigeria has the notorious honour of being one of 38 African countries where same-sex relations have been criminalized. Although no known cases of homosexuality have been prosecuted, the law seeks to disavow the existence – and right to life – of LGBTQTI people in the country. This governmental victimization of gay people goes back many years to the

advent of colonialism¹⁷⁵. But an event which is central to the focus of this study and the concern of this chapter is Kaduna Nzeogwu's January 15, 1966 speech given after he led Nigeria's first military coup – popularly known as the “Igbo coup.” He proclaimed that “[y]ou are hereby warned that looting, arson, *homosexuality*, rape, embezzlement, bribery or corruption, obstruction of the revolution, sabotage, subversion, false alarms and assistance to foreign invaders, are all offences punishable by death sentence” (Emphasis added, Nzeogwu 1966).¹⁷⁶ It is important to note that in the declaration, homosexuality is punishable by death and it is classed with heinous crimes like rape and arson. Inherent in the speech is clear scapegoating of homosexuality as one of the reasons for the country's woes.

Louis George Tin, in his introduction to *The Dictionary of Homophobia*, historicizes this disturbing trend of blaming homosexuals for social upheavals¹⁷⁷. Also, it is quite interesting to note how the speech signals the centrality of sexuality to ideas of power and control; it is apparent from Nzeogwu's list of offences that the aim is to police bodies and

¹⁷⁵ Under colonial administration, same-sex relations were classed as sodomy and criminalized. This was very much the case in all African colonies (Murray and Roscoe 1998; Arnfred 2004; Tamale 2011; Msibi 2011). Msibi writes that the contemporary draconian laws that hound same-sex desiring persons in Africa bear the vestiges of their colonial forebears. He says “[t]he punishments used to discriminate against those who engage in same-sex relations in Africa largely arise from antisodomy laws left over from the colonial era, when colonial authorities were keen on regulating sexuality” (Msibi 57). Melanie Judge also links the genealogy of this kind of violence to the process of “othering” which was the force behind colonialism. “The violent ordering of sexualities, integral to colonial and apartheid ideologies, produced a set of historical conditions in which contemporary formations of homophobia-related violence are to be located” (Judge 51). Following this troubling colonial trajectory, on January 7, 2014, a bill was passed by the Nigerian National Assembly which broadened the definition of sodomy to include a wide range of sexual relations. It also introduced 14 years jail time for offenders. This introduced a much stiffer sentence than the colonial penal code which prescribed 7 years jail term (Obidimma and Obidimma 2013).

¹⁷⁶ Read more at www.vanguardngr.com/2010/09/radio-broadcast-by-major-chukwuma-kaduna-nzeogwu-%E2%80%93-announcing-nigeria%E2%80%99s-first-military-coup-on-radio-nigeria-kaduna-on-january-15-1966/. See also John De St Jorre 1977.

¹⁷⁷ It might be possible to explain this surge in heterosexism during periods of social upheaval as a struggle for “field position.” Pierre Bourdieu explains, in *Logic of Practice*, that moments of social crises allow for a recalibration of “fields”, but also creates a resultant need for the hegemon to re-stake their claims to hegemonic field positions. Seen in this light, it becomes deducible that the increased violence experienced by homosexuals during chaotic periods is mainly heteropatriarchy reasserting its hegemonic position. In his book, *African Intimacies* (2007), Neville Hoad also draws a fascinating connection between heteronormativity and nationalist politics of mapping belonging. He argues that; “[i]t might not be going too far to assert that, in certain historical moments, homosexuality may function as a crucially defining other of nationalism” (Hoad 10). Essentially, in these moments when hegemon struggles to weave a strong community on the basis of linear ideals of being, those deemed sexually transgressive become the ‘others’ – the foils against which their utopian visions could be staged as an existential struggle.

voice within the country. It should be added that Nzeogwu's declaration is important to understanding the Biafran position on same-sex relations. Beyond his Igbo ethnic identity, he played a pivotal role in Biafra's secession, and died fighting on the Biafran side. He is still celebrated as a hero of the Igbo and Biafrans. Also, contemporary agitators for Biafra have continued to use sexuality as a basis for demonising dissent. For instance, the Hausa in the northern part of Nigeria (who are often regarded as enemies by pro-Biafra agitators) are labelled homosexuals; and more recently, a non-cooperative governor of a state in the East was accused of homosexuality¹⁷⁸. Also, a popular movie actress, Cynthia Amadi, who is also Igbo, was called names like harlot and prostitute when she spoke out against secessionist agitations¹⁷⁹. This brings to mind how the Second Reich labelled homosexuals as communists to make them victims of Nazi violence. The potency of such labels in depriving the accused person of belonging explains why the Biafran secessionists have a predilection for the label. This violent othering of queer people within discourses of Biafra weaves heterosexism into the political discourse of the war; it also creates an impetus for teasing out the experiences of queer 'Biafran' women.

In this chapter, I will employ the term heterosexism to capture the hate and violence that are used to punish non-normativity. I favour this term over the popular one, homophobia, which represents the hate or fear of non-normative performance of gender and sexuality as a pathological condition that cannot be helped by perpetrators; thus framing it as a mental health challenge¹⁸⁰. Heterosexism, on the other hand, implicates

¹⁷⁸ See www.dailypost.ng/2017/09/01/biafra-okorocha-homosexual-circle-ibb-ty-danjuma-nnamdi-kanu-audio

¹⁷⁹ Rather than engage with the issues raised by the actress, the agitators and their supporters quickly resort to sex and gender stereotyping to other her and to deprive her of belonging and the right to speak about the Igbo people. This demonstrates the role that sexual imaginaries play in mapping the contours of belonging. For the lady's post and resultant reactions, see: www.maymaynwablog.com/biafra-agitation-selfish-useless-course-nollywood-actress-cynthia-amadi-blows-hot-video.

¹⁸⁰ Celia Kitzinger writes that homophobia plays into psychology's society-bound politics of mapping sanity/insanity. Even closer to my fears concerning the term, she observes that it provides the homophobe an excuse for hating homosexuality. "[I]f homophobes are sick, the implication is that they should be treated with compassion. There has already been one court case in which the defence argued that a man who murdered a gay man should be treated leniently because he was suffering from "homosexual panic"" (emphasis in original Kitzinger 10). It is also this line of thinking that a judge in Durban, South Africa, followed in delivering a judgement that amounts to a slap on the wrist for a man who murdered a gay man. The killer argued that he acted in fear, and as a result, his punishment was community service and anger management classes. See; www.mambaonline.com/2019/03/04/an-excuse-to-murder-durban-man-avoids-jail-for-killing-gay-man-who-came-on-to-him. Framed in this manner, homophobia thus becomes ambivalent as the name of the crime and as a leeway to escape its punishment.

society, socialization and hegemonic positioning in the manufacture of this oppressive hate-fuelled position. Also, the term situates the policing of bodies and erotic desires in the domain of power in a way that includes ‘non-normative’ – polyamorous – heterosexual relations. It also reveals the link that exists between the oppression of women and the punishment of homosexuality – as a basic etymology of the word indicates. Also, I have avoided the common ritual of staging a queer genealogy to debunk claims of a “sodomite-free Africa” (Msibi 56) because it is a well-worn line of theorising queerness in Africa. This is to avoid a form of “salvage anthropology” which “scavenges through the archives” (Macharia 142) to prove pre-colonial existence of same-sex desires. My thinking is that to remain perpetually focused on declaring the precolonial presence of queer people leaves little space for robust engagements with the diurnal systemic violence that haunts them – since, to paraphrase Wole Soyinka, a tiger does not need to always defend its tigritude.

The Violence of Queer Biafran Womanhood

Under the Udala Trees is a coming of age story of Ijeoma¹⁸¹, a lesbian who gets a deeper understanding of love and of her sexual orientation through her relationship with Amina, a Hausa girl, and Ndidi, an Igbo lady. The text narrates the protagonist’s struggle for survival and belonging in wartime and post-war Biafra, and her ordeal in a forced marriage to Chibundu. Divided into two temporal movements; wartime, and post-war Biafra, and subdivided into six chapters, the novel connects the two moments through a continued performance of violence which is linked to compulsory heteronormativity and “anxious masculinity” (Ducat 2004; Msibi 2011). The story itself is trapped in a space between the civil war and a supposed post-war period where the performance of violence is an unabating cycle – in the post-war moment, Ijeoma narrowly escapes a lynching and comes close to committing suicide. To appeal to a societal conception of normativity which is poignantly represented in her mother’s constant hassling homilies, Ijeoma agrees to marry Chibundu, a

¹⁸¹ Coming of age stories make extensive use of internal monologues which, according to Jean Piaget, signals a need to speak but an inability to speak out due to the presence of an oppressive structure. This constant need to question hegemonic positions runs through the text. See Jean Piaget. *The Child’s Conception of the World*, Translated by Joan Tomlinson et al. (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

former school mate¹⁸² and the couple have a daughter, Chidinma. Ijeoma's marriage is marred by her inability to connect with Chibundu sexually. She is subjected to corrective marital rape by Chibundu who believes he has an inalienable right to his wife's body. In the end, Ijeoma musters enough courage to leave the abusive marriage in pursuit of love with her partner, Ndidi. The story is narrated from a first-person point of view – and in a manner which draws the readers close to the persistent violence that continues to plague the lives of queer people due to the way society maps them outside normative sex-gender binaries of man/woman due to their non-adherence to a heteronormative performance of sexuality. Christianity is situated firmly as the guardian of this compulsory heteronormativity and the violence it births. In the text, the civil war is positioned as a catalyst for the characters' odyssey. Ijeoma's story is a tale of love and of hate, of giddy desire and of unreciprocated ones. Although the story ends in a turbulent third space, it ends on a hopeful note in a dreamed-up mutant version of Nigeria where everyone could be homed.

The title reveals a close intertextual link to Monica Arac De Nyeko's short story, "Jambula Tree" (2008). But beyond the tree metaphor that connects the two stories and the tangy tastes of both Udala and Jambula fruits, which speaks to the bitter-sweet lives of queer people, the policing of same-sex desires they narrate positions both stories as creating a form of advocacy against violent heterosexism. The Udala tree seems to have an umbilical connection to Okparanta's muse; it is also present in "America" (2013), one of Okparanta's short stories. In the story, Udara tree (a linguistic variant of Udala tree) replaces the beanstalk in the transmuted version of the popular story *Jack and the Beanstalk*. In her version of the story, Udala/Udara tree assumes a folkloric signification as a link between heaven and earth; as a bridge from poverty to wealth.

¹⁸² Although she's aware of her sexual/intimate identity as a lesbian, the marriage forces her into bisexuality. This contradicts Cheryl Stobie's (2016) position that the prevalence of bisexuality in Africa is not a product of strict heterosexist policing of same-sex relations. Ijeoma's forced marriage reveals causative links between the prevalence of bisexuality in Africa, particularly in West Africa, and the stiff demands of heteropatriarchy which is powerfully championed by her mother. When one factors in the 'don't ask don't tell' attitude to same-sex relations that is obtainable in most parts of West Africa, bisexuality as a fallout of closeted same-sex desires becomes clearer. For Stobie's argument, see: Stobie Cheryl. "'She who Creates Havoc is Here': A Queer Bisexual Reading of Sexuality, Dance, and Social Critique in *Karmen Gei*." *Research in African Literatures* 47.2 (2016):84-103.

Under the Udala Trees provides a dais for imagining gender identities and relations beyond heteropatriarchal conception of Biafranness¹⁸³. It presents a story that helps highlight the excess that is mostly unacknowledged in the stories of belonging within Biafra. In a sense, the text unveils a “[...] haunting memorial of what has been excluded, excised, evicted, and for that very reason [it] becomes the unheimlich space for the negotiation of identity and history” (Bhabha 198). Through the text’s unhomeliness, or unfamiliarity, it calls up stories of un-belonging that are uncanny presences within hegemonic historiography as a way of negotiating historical presence for minority narratives. Arguing along these lines, Gibson Ncube remarks that queer texts reveal other dimensions of exclusion and subjugation beyond those suffered by sexual minorities. He writes that “[the] social function of queer literature has to be viewed in the wider emancipatory movement of giving social and cultural importance and visibility to hitherto side-lined discourses and experiences, not just of sexual minorities, but of other marginalised groups” (Ncube 477).

In weaving the precarity of belonging of a lesbian character around a traumatic war, the writer reveals that same-sex desiring people are in a perpetual state of war in Africa – even in peaceful or post-war moments, but beyond that, she comments on the manifestations of heteropatriarchy and the disciplinary violence used to maintain it, and she invokes the presence of several other stories often buried under hegemonic histories. In a sense, she seizes the affective potential of the war’s harrowing tale to “make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer

¹⁸³ Chinelo Okparanta is not the first to imagine the presence of same-sex desire in Biafra; as noted in the second chapter of this thesis, Adimora-Ezeigbo writes about queer desires in her *Roses and Bullets* (2011). Although Adimora-Ezeigbo treats the theme as a vignette and Okparanta positions it as the central force of her story, both narratives reveal the potency of fiction in voicing the unspeakable by highlighting history’s unavowed excess. The unspeakable nature of same-sex relations is also a theme in Okparanta’s “America” – a short story in her collection, *Happiness Like Water* (2012). Elechi Amadi also writes about his encounter with same-sex desires in his civil war/prison memoir, *Sunset in Biafra*. See *Sunset in Biafra* (African Writers Series, 1973), pp. 127.

representation in where it must be smuggled” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 4)¹⁸⁴.

Chinelo Okparanta declares in the “Author’s note” that her story seeks to give voice to those who have been silenced in Nigeria’s history: “this novel attempts to give Nigeria’s marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation’s history” (Author’s note). Thus, in her novel, she creates a space of locution for those caught in the margins of society. In the story of in-betweenness that she tells, there is a reinvention of history in a way that allows a discovery of voice for those marked as outsiders on account of their erotic desires. Her story acknowledges their presence and exposes the recurring violence to which they are subjected both in wartime and in the time of peace. She calls attention to the advocate muse behind the story:

When the novel (in its present reincarnation) was born in my mind, this war period was its natural beginning. At its inception this was the story of a young girl, sent away during the war, after having lost her father. This aspect of the character having lost her father in the war was inspired by my mother’s life. In addition to hearing about the death of her father, I grew up hearing stories of the young men she knew who went to fight for Biafra and never returned. [...] Nigerians donot like so much to talk about the war, especially not these days, with the “Africa Rising” narrative. Many people seem intent on erasing the not-so-glamorous aspects of our history. But there are many of us Nigerians still living with the memories of the war. (Ramakrishnan 2015).

In the interview above, Okparanta, like other writers of the war, invokes her authority as a witness by staking her claim to the story of Biafra as a story she grew up with. Thus, the war story is her history and “our history.” She owns the story but also seeks to create a communal remembrance. Although the stories were narrated to her by her mother, she owned them by weaving her contemporary experiences – and identity – into the Biafran

¹⁸⁴ This is also along the feminist tradition of using chaotic moments and events to push for change. For instance, the American revolution (1775-1783); the French revolution (1789-1799); and in recent times, the Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall protests, have been productive platforms for calling attention to the oppression of women. But increasingly, even within these feminist projects, cracks which reveal the otherness of queer women have begun to appear. A group called the Trans Collective has called attention to the exclusionary politics of the Rhodes Must Fall movement. In a recent performance of their outrage, they shut down the launch of Rhodes Must Fall Museum. See: www.ewn.co.za/2016/03/10/UCT-Trans-Collective-storms-Rhodes-Must-Fall-gallery-launch for a video of the protest. Nadia Davids and Zethu Matebeni provide deep insights into the emergence of queer politics within the Rhodes Must Fall Movement. See Nadia Davids and Zethu Matebeni. “Queer Politics and Intersectionality in South Africa. *Safundi*, 18:2, (2017):161-167. Also noting the importance of stories of minority suffering to a robust remembrance of the Holocaust, Jay Winter writes that “homosexuals—have asserted their own right to speak, and through their prise de la parole they have helped ensure that their stories and their lives were not erased by their persecutors” (Winter 281). In essence, historical remembrance is often used as a platform from which marginal characters question their absence within hegemonic historiography by creating their own stories.

experience. In so doing, she becomes what Tavia Nyong'o describes as a "fabulist" because of the fine tapestry she spins between fiction and history. And in the way she resists "[...] the demand that a representation be either true or false, either history or fiction" (Nyong'o 77)¹⁸⁵. It is from the in-between space, in the fluid zone between the strictures of fact and fiction that she narrates a third space story of belonging to neither here nor there.

She also claims both her Nigerianness and Biafranness in a way that allows her to have a poignant view from the middle of these two conflicting positions. It is in the interaction between these two identities – as well as the rubbing together of her remembrance of war and contemporary experience as a Nigerian – that she finds the story of a character that is neither here nor there. In this ineluctable bind that she establishes between the past and the present, she lends credence to a reading of history as a continuum that is ever morphing. As Maurice Halbwachs (1980) reminds us, the past is invented and re-invented in the now, in the present. Thus, her present awareness of the challenges of queer people in Nigeria feeds into the past that she depicts in her novel. This remarkable continuity of the past in the present is aptly represented in the lives of Ijeoma and Ndudi who had no home in Biafra and continue to experience a lack of belonging in post-war Nigeria of the now. Indeed, like they proclaim at the end of the story, home is neither Biafra nor Nigeria. It is a country whose name keeps mutating, the boundary ever morphing to depict the tenuous search for homely spaces by outsiders-within; outsiders like LGBTQI persons.

Ijeoma's story takes off in the peaceful village Ojoto in Nigeria's east. The community is a pristine rustic village where the cosmopolitan demands of city life have not intruded. She captures the tranquillity of the community and of her family by situating their "yellow painted two-story" house in the middle of a bucolic greenery:

Ours was a gated compound, guarded at the front by the thickets of rose and hibiscus bushes. Leading up to the bushes, a pair of parallel green hedges grew, dotted heavily in pink by tiny, star-like *Ixora* flowers. Vendors lined the road adjacent to the hedges,

¹⁸⁵ Theorising what he calls "Afro-fabulation", Nyong'o highlights the inherent crisis in representation and its attendant politics to argue for a representational mode that defies or upsets the strict demands of representational mimesis. Although writing in another context, the role he ascribes to the fabulist as an inventor of narratives that trouble hegemonic accounts is useful to my reading of literature as a part of the civil war historiography. Indeed, as Daniel Schacter (2001) demonstrates in his magisterial study of the inaccuracy of remembrance in his book *The Seven Sins of Memory*, it is contentious to map the boundaries of fact and fiction. He observes that memory is prone to distortions, bias and transience among many other frailties. Thus, when we remember, the past that comes forth is a past coloured by the now, by the present. See; Schacter Daniel. *The Seven Sins of Memory* (Houghton Miffling, 2001).

as did trees thick with fruit: orange, guava, cashew, and mango trees. In the recesses of the roadsides, where the bushes rose high like a forest, even more trees stood: tall irokos, whistling, and a scattering of oil and coconut palms. We had to turn our eyes up towards the sky to see the tops of the trees. [...] [t]he rainy season followed by the dry season, and the harmattan folding itself within the dry. All the while, goats bleated. Dogs barked. Hens and roosters scuttled up and down the roads, staying close to the compounds to which they belonged. (*Under* 1-2)¹⁸⁶

This evocation of an environmentally pristine space is designed to stimulate some affective attachment to Ojoto through the deployment of tactile images to construct a bucolic *mise en scene*. The description functions on several levels. By inviting the readers into the pre-war realities of the town, it becomes possible to stimulate a profound sense of loss when the destructive realities of war hit. Also, through temporal indicators embedded in the novel's invocation of seasonal change, one gets a sense of "the normal cycle of things" (*Under* 1) which gets ruptured with the advent of the war. Even domestic animals are made to bear witness to this tranquil ecospheric relation that existed before the war. The peace is encoded in their various peaceful sounds which is replaced by the rumble of armament in the second movement:

It was 1967 when the war barged in and installed itself all over the place. By 1968, the whole of Ojoto had begun pulsing with the ruckus of armoured cars and shelling machines, bomber planes and their loud engines sending shockwaves through our ears. (*Under* 2).

When this description of the village is contrasted with its peacetime depiction, a poignant representation of the disruptions of war comes to the fore. In the aural nature of the passage, one gets a clear idea of what it means for war to "barge in", unannounced and unsolicited. The lazy peace of Ojota is ruined. The soothing sound of hens has been replaced by the harassing sound of shelling machines. In the Ojota depicted in this second movement, people no longer look up to savour the welcoming sights of ripe fruits. When they do look up, it is for a reconnaissance of warplanes. In this vivid description of Ojoto, a Biafran village, the writer situates the text firmly as a Biafran war novel. Through her insertion of key dates which signify key moments of the war in a realist mode, she curries

¹⁸⁶ Subsequently referred to as *Under*.

a measure of authenticity for her story¹⁸⁷. This appeal to verisimilitude does not stifle or constrict her imaginative engagement with Biafra. Rather, it anchors Ijeoma's story tightly to the war's story – because “[t]here's no way to tell the story of what happened with Amina without first telling the story of mama's sending me off” (*Under* 4). And this story of being sent off is connected to the story of her father's death during an air raid (*Under* 8-10).

Our first encounter with manifestations of grief and destruction in the text is in the death of Ijeoma's father during an air raid. He had refused to follow the women into the bunker when they heard the sound of bomber planes. This death moves the story forward in that it creates the needed momentum for Ijeoma's journey into self-discovery. It also provides some minutiae of the sort of gender discourse that pervades the text. The manifestations of patriarchy within the text is foregrounded in the way she juxtaposed her name, Ijeoma, with that of her father, Uzoma. She says “PAPA'S NAME, UZO, meant “door” or “the way”. It was a solid kind of name, strong-like and self-reliant, unlike mine, Ijeoma (which was just a wish: “safe journey”), or Mama's, Adaora (which was just saying that she was the daughter of the community, which was really what all daughters were, when you thought about it)” (*Under* 21). Although framed as the benign thoughts of an ingenue, this thinking hints at the ownership of girls which often reflects in the way they are named in Africa. The importance of this part of the text is graphologically foregrounded through the capitalisation of “PAPA'S NAME, UZO.” The man's name invokes the image of a leader, a pathfinder as demonstrated in Ijeoma's translation. However, he abandons his family in the thick of wartime suffering, leaving them to travel alone. In the end, it is the women who must negotiate a safe journey through the abyss of a gruelling war as Ijeoma's name implies. In here lies a profound critique of patriarchy. Uzo, whose name is described as strong and self-reliant, commits a kind of self-immolation by refusing to run into the bomb bunker with the women after listening to the disturbing news on the radio.

It is the mother, whose name implies the communal ownership of her body and person, which also indicates her vulnerability as a woman to be protected, who finds the strength to go on where her husband fails. Although the two women are able to go on, they both felt

¹⁸⁷ Also, her deployment of proverbs, folktales and an occasional sprinkling of Igbo language connects the story to the Achebean storytelling mode, which has fecund disciples like Ngozi Adichie, and which is undoubtedly Igbo.

lost after Uzo's death because Uzo who was supposed to be "like a torchlight to show [them] the way" was lost. Both Uzo's suffering and the one occasioned by his untimely death can be blamed on heteropatriarchy. On the one hand, Uzo's despondency led to suicide because he felt emasculated in the face of the war since he could not guarantee the safety of his wife and daughter. While on the other, the women are initially clueless as to the way forward after his death because they had been socialised to depend on the man for survival according to the dictates of patriarchy. But importantly, through Papa's death, the writer creates space for an agentic maturation of both women through the traumatic ordeal of his loss. Like gold, they emerge bolder and stronger at the end of the novel. It might be safe to aver that Papa is written out of the story to make the narrative woman-centred.

After her father's death, Ijeoma is sent off to Nnewi, still in Biafra, to work as a house girl in a family friend's house. She is housed in a "hovel" (*Under* 56), made to perform all household chores and run errands like Ugwu in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It is on one of those errands that she meets Amina. In a scene which pays intertextual obeisance to the meeting of two lovers in Monica Arac de Nyeko's *Jambula tree*, Ijeoma describes their first meeting under the eponymous Udala tree. In the text, the appearance of an Udala tree signals a significant event; it heralds the entrance of Amina into the story, her final departure for marriage in the North (171); and it is present in the dream that prompts Ijeoma's decision to embrace her queerness by abandoning her toxic marriage to Chibundu (309,310). Amina, a homeless Hausa girl had been following Ijeoma like a shadow for some kilometres before Ijeoma decided to stop for "the shadow to pass":

I stopped in order to allow the shadow to pass me. I found a large rock near where an Udala tree stood and sat down there. I waited on the rock, hoping that the shadow would continue along, but it did not. Instead, it sat across from me, on another rock, eyes bright, like a pair of light bulbs. She was no longer a shadow. She had skin as light as mine. Yellow, like pawpaw. She wore tattered green pinafore that was bare at the sides. Her hair hung in long clumps around her face, like those images of mami wata, hair writhing like serpents. But there were no serpents on her. (*Under* 104)

By referring to Amina as a shadow, she gives a sense of foreboding of the kind of dark turbulence that their meeting would herald for her. Amina is represented as a siren whose presence holds Ijeoma spellbound. Concatenating the figure of Mami Wata and that of the Medusa, aptly represented by Amina's serpentine hair, the text foregrounds her sexual non-

conformity. Mami Wata is depicted in African pantheon as a beautiful and seductive marine being capable of seducing both men and women. In the same vein, Greek mythology, especially Ovid's version of the story of the Medusa, renders her as a highly desired alluring lady who falls for the charms of Poseidon, the sea god. After having sex in the temple of Athena, Medusa is punished by Athena with a killer gaze and serpentine hair. Woven together, these two mythical women speak of a non-normative sexuality that has kept both men and women enamoured for centuries.

Writing about the semiotic capacity of the myth of Mami Wata, Taiwo Osinubi notes that "Mami Wata indexes a cluster of meanings and practices associated with water deities. Among other things, it indexes non-normative configurations of sexual desire [...]" (Osinubi 163). Henry Drewal also confirms the potency of Mami Wata as an icon of non-normativity when he describes this mythical figure as "a "free," unencumbered spirit of nature detached from any social bonds" (Drewal 161)¹⁸⁸. The enchanting sensuality of both mythical figures is often described as enthralling – and it is this spell that Ijeoma falls under when she meets Amina. Judging from the shy silence that immobilises them under the Udala tree, it is deducible that both teenagers share a deep mutual attraction. This meeting sets in motion Ijeoma's bitter-sweet voyage into the world of erotic desires and the caprices of self-discovery outside the norms of society.

The grammar school teacher and his wife accept Amina without much qualms when she follows Ijeoma home; since it meant more child labour for them to exploit. Her fair complexion also contributes to their willingness to accept her since it will make it easy for her to be married off, and to pass for an Igbo girl (*Under* 109). Ijeoma also got the same comments on her first meeting with the teacher and his wife: "Yellow skin, the colour of a ripe pawpaw. That's very lucky for a girl. It should be easy for her mother to marry her off"

¹⁸⁸ Drewal's essay later takes a polemical turn when he argues that Mami Wata is alien to African cosmology. He explains that the Mami Wata myth emanated in the encounter of Africans with the Europeans through the transatlantic trade. His argument hinges largely on the pidgin name given to the spirit without deeply engaging with traditional epistemic systems which reveal the presence of the water goddess prior to European incursions into Africa. It is this line of thought that stands out in Sabine Jell-Bahlsen's (1995) essay; she links the traditional conception of Mami wata to its contemporary mutant renditions to establish the precolonial existence of Mami Wata in Africa. She also identifies Uhammiri, the Igbo version of Mami wata, as a leitmotif in Flora Nwapa's oeuvre. See Sabine Jell-Bahlsen. "The Concept of Mammy Water in Flora Nwapa's Novels." *Research in African Literatures* vol.26, no.2, 1995, pp.30-41. See also, Wellington Wotogbe-Weneka (2003) "Religio-cultural Significance of *Owumini* (Aquatic Spirits) Songs Among the Ikwerre of Upper Niger-Delta."

(*Under* 54). This heteropatriarchal gaze reduces the essence of the girls to the colours of their skin while also reinforcing the patriarchal notion that the only way women can achieve any sense of worth is within heterosexual marriages.¹⁸⁹ Following Amina's acceptance by the grammar school teacher and his wife, Ijeoma performs her nightly ritual of bathing outside with her and welcomes her into her "hovel" – "where [she] offered half of [her] mattress to her" (*Under* 107). What follows this welcoming into a shared "hovel" and bed, is a bitter-sweet journey of love, heartbreak and violence.

On the night that heralds Ijeoma's traumatic odyssey into the abyss of the persistent violence which plagues queer people in Biafra and in Nigeria, the two lovebirds, Amina and Ijeoma, are in the middle of an exciting moment of erotic self-discovery in their hovel (*Under* 123-124) when the grammar school teacher walks in on the girls after a few inaudible knocks on the hovel's door:

The sight of us must have startled him, because he gasped like a dying man taking his final breath. He went immediately for the lantern on the table, lifted it in our direction, leaned closer, his eyes peering, as if to make sure that what he was seeing was indeed what was before his eyes. The sight of us startled him all over again, and he gasped once more. The whole incident was startling to me too, and must have been startling to Amina as well, not only for our having to endure the discomfort of his looking at us in this way, but also for our having to endure the misfortune of being forced to see ourselves through his eyes. He walked over, pulled us off the mattress one at a time, slapped us on our cheeks. Over a year with him, sometimes the threat of a beating, but never an actual beating until then. He must have noticed the Bible on the table when he grabbed the lantern, because he turned back to the table, set the lantern back down, and grabbed the bible. Pointing to it, he cried, "*An abomination!*" (italics added 124-125 Emphasis added)

The repeated gasps that escape the grammar school teacher's throat are indicative of his shock at seeing the girls in a coital position. The gasps also call attention to the threat that

¹⁸⁹ Okparanta's depiction of the two girls as fair-skinned is a continuation of the body politics that runs through her collection of short stories, *Happiness Like Water* (2012). For instance, in a short story titled "Fairness", she represents the societal celebration of fairness which pushes women into using bleaching creams in Nigeria. In the innocent quest of one of her teenage characters to help their house help get a fairer skin tone, she soaked the maid's face in bleach. Ijeoma speaks back to this celebration of being fair skinned when she compares her skin to the cocoa-dark skin of two girls walking past her house. She says people think her fair skin is beautiful "because they didn't know, the way I did, that there was nothing beautiful about having marks like chicken pox scars all over your body. But the girls, their skin would hardly have shown any marks, not with the way it was nice and brown and smooth in its brownness" (34-35). Ijeoma's celebration of blackness (or brownness?) chimes with what Ifemelu does with her blog in Adichie's *Americana* (2013). I think this body-politics that connects the two writers is a fruit of their geographical location in the United States – and its politics of race and colorism.

same-sex erotic desires pose to heteropatriarchy; he could not fit the scene into his heterosexist worldview which posits that sex cannot happen in the absence of a heterosexual man. His cry of abomination is a speech act which marks the lovers as outsiders. He interpellates the lovers as deviants who should be violently punished to reclaim normalcy. Writing about the generative force of interpellation, Judith Butler argues that “[t]o be hailed or addressed by a social interpellation is to be constituted discursively and socially at once. Being called a “girl” from the inception of existence is a way in which the girl becomes transitively “girded” over time” (Butler, “Performativity’s Social Magic” 120). Hence, when the teacher “calls” the act abominable, he creates a new identity for the ladies as deviants – and over time, they start seeing themselves through his eyes. This scream of abomination echoes throughout the strands of violence experienced by queer people in the text. I have italicised “abomination” in the quote above to call attention to its notorious presence in the text as a word whose shadow darkens the stories and the lives of queer characters. The taboo nature of acts that are labelled abominable is a powerful tool for rallying communities in the pursuit of acts of violent exclusion. An instance of the power of this label is present in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958 [1994])¹⁹⁰.

Also, at that moment, the girls are othered in the grammar school’s gaze. The teacher’s discomfiting gaze performs a violent invasion of the naked bodies of the young lovers. Citing Tronto (2005), Yuval-Davis calls attention to the power of gazes when she says “[...] situated gazes can delineate boundaries of recognition and care” (“Politics of Belonging” Yuval-Davis” 8). Thus, the teacher’s gaze maps the ladies outside the boundary of belonging, renders them unworthy of “care”, and as a result, exposes them to violence. Also, he forces them to adopt their images as reflected in his judgemental-heterosexist gaze; this leaves an indelible scar on the lovers’ sense of self. Their dignity as humans is stripped off under this peering gaze supported with a lantern¹⁹¹. The irony of othering the girls on the strength of

¹⁹⁰ It is the piquant force behind an abominable act that forces Okonkwo into exile. Although he is a respected member of Umuofia community, he is excommunicated because of his abominable act of accidentally killing a boy. He is not only declared a *persona non-grata*; his property is torched in what could be described as a case of communal arson. In essence, declaring an act abominable is mostly a call to violence against that which has been so declared.

¹⁹¹ In his attack on the girls, he invokes the Bible as the imprimatur for his violent assault. Herein lies a vivid indictment of Christianity in heterosexist violence, particularly in Africa. In fact, Christianity is represented as the bulwark of compulsory heterosexism; and Ijeoma’s mother is positioned as its most vicious apostle. I return to this depiction of Ijeoma’s mother later in this chapter.

the dim illumination provided by the lantern is a profound critique of labelling queer sexuality as abominable. Also writing about the centrality of gazes to the vilification of people othered through a process of ascription, Amartya Sen argues that “[...] quite often ascription goes with denigration, which is used to incite violence against the vilified person. “The Jew is a man,” Jean-Paul Sartre argued in *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, “whom other men look upon as a Jew; . . . it is the anti- Semite who makes the Jew” (Sen 18).

Similarly, Aku in *The Last Duty* is othered in the gaze of Private Okumagba, a soldier designated by the military commander of Urukpe to watch over her and her child. He remarks: “A rebel is worse enough, but a whoring rebel.” The woman is mapped outside as a rebel, but even much worse than a rebel because she is considered a whoring rebel. In essence, her sexually transgressive act of having sex with a disabled man makes her more dangerous to heteropatriarchy than a rebel with a gun. This shows that it is not only the sight of lesbian erotic desire that shocks and threatens heteropatriarchy, it is all forms of ‘non-normative’ erotic desires that cannot be fitted into its frame of reference. Okumagba provides a chilling commentary on the anger which Aku’s non-normative sexual escapades evokes in the community:

One of these days I’ll find I can no longer contain this anger. Perhaps something will give me a good chance. Like a rebel guerrilla raid at night while I’m still on guard. If they donot get me and we succeed in beating back the raid, I’ll take the opportunity to empty a few rounds into that god-forsaken house, and save myself once and for all from this hateful detail. A rebel is bad enough. But a whoring rebel! Hm... (*Last Duty* 133)

In Okumagba’s interior monologue above, he speaks as a custodian of communal mores, and as judge and executioner in the case at hand. In the opening part of his thought, he declares that it is the severe consequences of summarily executing the woman and her child that deterred him from the act. And to be clear, the deterrence is not in any way from the community (it is from his military commander). Also, he strips Aku and Oghenevo of personhood and presence in his description of how he plans to execute his dastardly act. It is only the house that he acknowledges – “I’ll empty a few rounds into the [...] house”, he muses. This erasure of the presence of two or more humans in the house helps desensitise him of any empathic affect that the gory nature of his plans might evoke. To him, it will be like shooting into an empty house, just like during a drill. To ensure clarity concerning the

root of his anger, he declares in the last sentence of his murderous thought that a rebel is more preferable to a “whoring rebel” (Ibid. 133). And to make matters even worse, the woman is not only having amorous visits, the visitor is a crippled man whom, according to the hierarchy of anxious masculinity, is feminised, or considered asexual (Sait et al. 2011). As I have discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, the mangled bodies of a man (or soldier) immediately removes him from the cult of masculinity since he is deemed to have lost the virility which is emblematic of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, the queer sexual interaction between Aku and Odibo (the cripple) is a taboo in the eyes of Okumagba, and of course, the community¹⁹².

In *Under the Udala Trees*, the teacher, not satisfied with the trenchantly traumatic blows he has inflicted, transmutes into a horror storyteller who deploys stories to scare the impressionable lovers into complying with the demands of normativity:

He paced back and forth as he spoke, made frantic gestures with his hands as he told us that we would be held accountable for our actions. He had heard of such cases, in which the accused were stoned all the way to the river. Stoned even as they drowned in the waters of the river. Of course, it was rare that such cases were spoken of. So taboo the whole thing was, anathema, unmentionable, not even deserving a name. (125)

With his tale of woes and destruction, he succeeds in breaking the ladies emotionally. In his restive back and forth pacing like a psychologist’s pendulum, he creates a potently affective space for his narrative which gives the lovers a bloodcurdling insight into the communally sanctioned violence that awaits them for daring to be different. This chilling image of a community that executes its non-normative members instils rabid fear in the girls. It has a much more damaging impact on the girls because, as Celia Kitzinger writes,

[i]n an oppressive society, it is not necessary, most of the time, to beat us up or to murder or torture us to ensure our silence and invisibility. This is because a climate of terror has been created instead in which most gay people voluntarily and of our own free will choose to stay silent and invisible. (Kitzinger 11)

¹⁹² And this othering presents a reasonable excuse for murdering the woman – like the same-sex lovers stoned to death in the story that the grammar school teacher narrates to the scared lovers below in *Under the Udala Trees*. Like the lovers, Aku has transgressed the strict borders of heteropatriarchy, and consequently courts the violence with which it responds.

What the teacher creates is a climate of fear, a “female fear factory” (Gqola 78)¹⁹³ which disciplines the lesbian couple into silence, invisibility, and grief through storytelling. Although he tells the story to frame same-sex relations as taboo, what the story truly reveals is the wickedness of the community¹⁹⁴. That a community collectively murders people based on their difference is not only scary; it is a sad spectacle that demonstrates the murderous extent to which the borders of normative belonging is policed. The violent killings are “unspoken”, “unmentionable”; in a sense, impermissible into mainstream narratives because “they form an archive of disposability” (Macharia 140)¹⁹⁵ since the very existence of its victims is disavowed. But on some level, killing the errant persons in the communal river weaves this murderous act into the daily lives of members of the community who make daily use of the river – for their baths, for drinking, and for their laundry needs.

The logic that the land is cleansed through these killings is ironic since the murders not only pollute the psyche of the members of the society, it pollutes the river which is made an unwilling tomb. Essentially, the river becomes a monument to the slain queer people, an archive of some sort, and a constant proof and reminder of the community’s blood-soaked boundary of belonging. In some ways also, this story of stoning, taken together with the imposing presence of the Bible in the background, alludes to the biblical story of the woman that was to be stoned but saved by Jesus Christ. In a sense, this highlights the polyvalent capacity of the Bible for cultivating love – and hate when deployed by heterosexists. It is this polyvalence that Ijeoma continually appeals to in the text.

News of what transpired at the grammar school teacher’s house reaches Ijeoma’s mother, prompting her to go take Ijeoma from there so she could be cured of her “sick desires.” On returning with mama, Ijeoma is subjected to six months of gruelling Bible reading sessions to exorcise what mama sees as demons inside her. She declares that “[n]o child of mine will carry those sick, sick desires. The mere existence of them is a terrible

¹⁹³ Gqola argues that one of patriarchy’s most effective tools is the threat of violence against the female body. Although her theorisation concerns rape, it could be used to explain the threats of violence against queer bodies since both acts seek to maintain masculine hegemony.

¹⁹⁴ That a teacher supports the gruesome murder of queer people is an indication of the herculean task that anti-heterosexism campaigns often face in Nigeria. When teachers who are supposed to disabuse the minds of young impressionable members of the society also join in the celebration of murderous heteronormative acts, it becomes almost impossible to achieve change swiftly.

¹⁹⁵ Macharia further argues that these narratives of brutality are excluded from hegemonic archives because they threaten the essence of archives as ampoules of grand narratives.

disrespect to God and to me!” (*Under* 86). This declaration reveals the motive behind Mama’s unabating battle to discipline Ijeoma for heteronormativity. Her fear is that her daughter’s non-normative erotic desire affects her belonging and standing in the community. Thus, Mama’s guardianship of Christian-heteropatriarchy could be read as being more connected to her own identity and belonging than to her hatred of lesbian desires. On another level, Mama weaves Ijeoma’s story into hers in order to take ownership of her story in a manner that deprives Ijeoma of voice. This could be read as speaking to the broader discourse of how voices of women othered are swallowed up in feminist advocacy, mostly due to a need to present a homogenous narrative of victimhood. It also echoes the popular pathological framing of queer people as sick and depraved¹⁹⁶.

Celia Kitzinger argues that this view emanated from the field of psychology and travelled to other disciplines. She notes that psychopathology functions as a tool of power by pathologising non-conformity:

Very often, in the history of psychology and psychiatry, the thoughts and behaviors so labeled [as deviant] are those that are socially and politically deviant. This has been seen as the deliberate use of diagnosis as a tool of oppression to punish and control those who fail to conform to the dominant group's expectations of them (Kitzinger 3)¹⁹⁷.

Moving from the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis (*Under* 68; 90-92) – as icons of the sanctity of heterosexuality – to Revelations, mama harangues Ijeoma with popular Bible passages. Reading through the story of Lot and his visitor, Mama says “Lot was a good man” because he

“Was willing to protect his guests from sin.”

“But he offered up his own daughters to be done with as the sodomites wished,” I replied. “How did that make him a good man?”

“The point is that Lot protected his guests from being handled in that terrible way that

¹⁹⁶ Mama is convinced that Ijeoma’s same-sex desire is connected to the trauma of losing her father’s death and the resultant separation from her mother (88). However, the text pre-empts this line of pathological interpretation and provides a useful defence in the kiss shared between Chibundu and Ijeoma as children. Chibundu is excited about the kiss but Ijeoma is not. She merely played along so as not to embarrass the boy (46). Also, her sensual description of the bodies of two Biafran girls walking to a relief centre (35-36) might be instructive in determining where her attraction lies.

¹⁹⁷ Kitzinger cites the examples of “drapetomania” and “dystesia aethiopsis” – diagnosed by Cartwright (1981) – as manifestations of how psychopathology functioned – and continues to function – as a tool of oppression in service of slave masters (and hegemony). Drapetomania was described as a disease which pushes slaves to flee from plantations while dysthesia was explained as a disease that breeds indolence in slaves, and of course, the prescribed cure was flogging. In essence, psychology has served ‘power’ in the demonising difference.

the Bible warns against.”

“What terrible way?” I asked.

“Man lying with man,” she said, sighing with irritation.

“And *that* is the lesson we are to take from the story?” I asked. [...] It could simply have been a lesson in hospitality” I said. “It isn’t” Mama said. “Everybody knows what lesson we should take from that story. Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed. Which is why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.” (Emphasis in original 74)

This question and answer session signals Ijeoma’s growing impatience with her mother’s heterosexist interpretations of the Bible. When Mama makes an apriori declaration that the story has a fixed and apparent interpretation, Ijeoma counters by asking “[i]t couldn’t have been because they were selfish and inhospitable and violent?” (*Under* 74)¹⁹⁸. Ijeoma’s question challenges Mama’s closed reading of the story by presenting the endless strings of signification that the story could produce – depending on the lens of the reader.

In another Bible session, Mama reads the story of a Levite who offered up his wife to escape being raped. The man butchers his wife after the gruesome rape and sends her body parts to the twelve tribes of Israel (*Under* 78-80). To mama, the Levite’s refusal to offer himself to the rapist is a powerful testament to the need to preserve heterosexuality at all costs. But Ijeoma is appalled by this fanatical reading:

A headache was rising in my temples. My heart was racing from bewilderment at what Mama was saying, it was the same thing she said with the story of Lot. It was as if she were obsessed with this issue of abomination. How could she really believe that *that* was the lesson to be taken out of this horrible story? What about all the violence and all the rape? (80)

Her protest calls attention to the troubling logic of presenting heterosexual rape as preferable to same-sex desire. In a sense, it signals the ways in which queerness is criminalized, and how queer people are classed as more depraved than rapists. It also echoes Kaduna Nzeogwu’s coup speech, cited earlier in this chapter, which grouped rape and homosexuality together on his list of crimes punishable by death.

¹⁹⁸ Her frustration is with the uncritical acceptance of interpretations given to bible stories by pastors. She asks: “[w]hy was it that people never asked any questions at church? Instead, everyone nodded, and cried “Amen” after everything Father Godfrey said, and clapped, no one asking him to explain anything” (81).

Ijeoma anchors her contestation of Christian heteronormativity to the same scriptures that are employed to threaten her with violence. For instance, she complicates the heterosexist uses to which the story of Adam and Eve is often put by calling attention to the excess that might lie unaccounted for in the story:

The thought occurred to me: Yes, it had been Adam and Eve. But *so what* if it was only the story of Adam and Eve that we got in the Bible? Why did *that* have to exclude the possibility of a certain Adam and Adam or a certain Eve and Eve? Just because the story happened to focus on a certain Adam and Eve did not mean that all other possibilities were forbidden. (82)

Here is a reading against the grain that opens up this story that is often invoked in persecuting same-sex desires. The queer historiography of the Bible which Ijeoma presents as a liberating alternative is broad enough to accommodate diverse narratives which evidence multiple modes of belonging. It questions the facticity of bible stories by identifying the role of the writer/historian's "focus" in ordering historical narratives¹⁹⁹.

Ijeoma's queering of the Genesis story illustrates that the Bible can be a site within which queer people fight heterosexism and negotiate their belonging. Citing the example of the Bible's multiple positions on the issue of slavery as a sign of its applicability to contemporary issues in a malleable manner, Gerald et al (2016), advocate that an LGBTQI focussed theology would be effective against the scourge of heterosexism. They write that "queer Christians must be thoroughly theologically equipped to re-encounter the very tradition that has tormented and traumatised them" (Gerald et al. 3). Ijeoma's rout of Mama's puritanical crusade is firmly tethered to her deep knowledge of the Bible. She "re-encounters" the Christian narrative to stage a counter-discourse against heteronormative

¹⁹⁹ The narrator in the eponymous piece, "She Called me Woman" (2018), gives a very limpid metaphoric description of the dangers of adopting biblical narratives willy-nilly. She explains: "I tell people the Bible is like a pharmacy. In it you find expired goods and recent [useful] stuff"(Mohammed et al. 32). She then advocates that queer people study and understand its precepts to be able to employ the useful stuff to counter the expired ideas. This is exactly what Ijeoma – and Okparanta – pursue throughout the text. Also, Steve McKenzie advises some caution in reading the stories as histories as well. He notes that most of the stories archived in the Old Testament have been invalidated through documentary evidence (McKenzie 24).

narratives²⁰⁰. In a way, this reveals that the violence meted out to queer people at the behest of Christianity might be more connected to a heteropatriarchal reading of the Bible than it is to Christian morality.

In an interesting case of dramatic irony, mama encourages Ijeoma to befriend Ndidi – who unbeknownst to her is a lesbian. And through Ndidi, Ijeoma is introduced to the alternative space of belonging created by queer people. Interestingly, it is a church that provides the needed cover for this third space²⁰¹. In a sense, this choice of sanctuary plays on the ambivalent potentials of Christianity on the one hand and on the other hand, it maximizes the notion of hiding in plain sight because, as a Czech proverb goes, the darkest spot is right under the light. The rendezvous spot is described as a “small, dimly lit church-like structure at the end of a dirt road” (*Under 190*) which boldly advertised its role as lovers’ nest in capital letters: FRIEND IN JESUS CHURCH OF GOD, and by the door “announced in deep purple print, FOUNTAIN OF LOVE” (190). The purple coloured letters of love at the entrance of the nest alludes to the same-sex relations between Shuga and Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*, and memory of the recurring violence and attendant silencing that plagues both characters²⁰². The sign on the side of the church could also be read as a reaffirmation of love that Jesus preached to the extent of standing up for a prostitute who was about to be stoned. In the dimly lit, alcohol-scented space of the church, Ijeoma finds belonging because home has become a warzone. But even this closet, this space at the

²⁰⁰ To make a strong point about her disagreement with reading all bible stories as facts, she compares them to folktales that her father used to tell her about “talking animals” (78), thus highlighting the allegorical qualities of some of the stories. Steven Mackenzie also argues along this line with the tripartite mode of reading the Bible which he suggests: as history, as prophecy, and as literature. And since the historiography of the Bible is largely theological – that is, they were mostly written in support of religious dogma – it can not be valued for its facticity. He berates those who read the Bible as “law” because they “fail to see how dangerous this move is, since there are plenty of stories in which the actions of characters—even “good” ones—are not meant to be emulated” (McKenzie 21).

²⁰¹ This brings to mind the story of House of Rainbow – the first Gay church in Lagos, Nigeria – which was attacked after its Pastor, Jide Macaulay, granted an interview to CNN. After the attack, he fled to the United Kingdom where he was made a Deacon. One thing that comes out of these violent invasions of a supposed sacred space by adherents of the same faith is the demonization of queer bodies. In a sense, any space the queer body inhabits is transformed into battlefronts where violence becomes ethical.

²⁰² There are many interesting intertextual connections between the stories of Ijeoma and Celie. For instance, both characters suffer marital rape and physical assault, have lesbian desire, and articulate their desires through letter writing and through their sewing machines. Also, Patti Bellantoni gives a rich insight into the semiotic value of the colour purple, describing it as a colour of death, of omen, and spirituality (191). She also notes that the appearance of the colour often heralds a radical transformation²⁰². From this semiotic clue, readers are given a form of spoiler alert regarding the keeling violence that is about to devastate this safe space.

margins, is not deep enough to hide the lesbian community from the wrath of murderous crusaders of morality.

With loud bangs on the door of the dimly lit church, crusaders of Christian heteropatriarchy have come for their pound of flesh from the women for daring to be different. Being aware of the violent implications of the bangs, the girls keep silent; “[a] heavy hush fell over the place, and for a moment Fela Kuti’s music was the only audible sound” (*Under* 206). Fear of the impending onslaught silences the girls, leaving only Fela to speak for them. This alludes to Fela’s counter-hegemonic oeuvre and the anti-establishment life that he lived. Like the women, he also created an alternative space, Kalakuta Republic, which was constantly invaded by policemen and the military based on allegations of criminality²⁰³. It also speaks to one of the main tools of sexual violence – silence. During and after acts of sexual violence, the voice of the victim is silenced (Gqola 2016)²⁰⁴. The women escape through the back of the church into a bunker, just like they did when Nigerian planes pounded Biafra with their destructive loads:

Ndidi held my hand as we ran. The palm fronds were not quite covering the wooden slab at the entrance of the pit. We recognised the bunker that way. [...] we packed the bunker tightly like stacked-up tubers of yam. Chichi pulled the slab over the entrance of the pit. We stood quietly, our breaths hushed, the way we used to do those days during the war. (207)

This passage reveals that their war continues. Like their attackers, they are also Biafrans just emerging from the shadows of a dark episode. But unlike their assailants, they do not dare savour this incipient peace because they lack belonging due to the intersection of their gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. In fact, this troubling scene is so similar to Ijeoma’s description of her family’s wartime bunker and how they ran from the Nigerian air raid that claimed her father’s life: “[t]he bunker was in the back of our house, a few yards beyond where our fence separated the compound from the bush lot. We ran out the backdoor without him, stepping over the palm fronds that months before he [Ijeoma’s father] had spread around the house for camouflage” (10). The similarity of both scenes of violence, poignantly

²⁰³ In the text, Fela’s presence punctuates spaces of silence, perhaps to help articulate the unspeakable. For instance, he acts as a cheerleader urging Ijeoma to speak of her erotic craving for Ndidi (199).

²⁰⁴ Also, in Kagiso Molope’s *This Book Betrays my Brother* (2012), the beautiful Moipone is forcefully silenced by the community after she is raped; Celie, in *The Color Purple* is also threatened to silence in the face of constant rape by her ‘father.’

represented in the use of palm fronds for camouflage and their escape through back doors chased by bloodthirsty enemies, makes it possible to trace Ijeoma's enemies (and those of her queer comrades) across national borders.

The continuous need to hide – from Nigerians during the war and from fellow Igbo kin after the war – indicates the ever-elusive search for belonging for queers. In a sense, the women are aware of this, as signified in the presence of the bunker and palm fronds even in a time of peace. They know that their days of scampering for safety are not over. There is also a consumerist dimension that is introduced by the simile “like yams.” Yam is regarded as the king of crops within Igbo ontology; it is the sole preserve of men to cultivate the crop while women plant cassava. Seen from this angle, it is possible to deduce that the simile speaks to the ownership of women by men – and consequently, like yams, they should not resist being eaten by men.

Even in the pits where they hide, they are still ruled by silence as evident in their hushed breaths. This reveals the ever-shrinking space inhabited by queer people in Nigeria even in the face of advances in human rights protection globally. Also, within the passage, a clear mapping of ‘we’ and ‘they’ becomes apparent. The ‘we’ in the pit, profoundly oppressed, and ‘they’ above the pit – the oppressors. This violent invasion claims the life of one of the women, Adanna, who sacrifices herself for the collective; she stayed back so the others could get away. Thankfully, we are spared a graphic account of her murder, but we do hear murderous sounds and the voices of the killers: “Other sounds above us – of screams and cries and a man’s thundering voice, as if reciting a prayer” (*Under* 208). In this disturbing account, the thundering voice of the man helps focalise our angst at heteropatriarchy; while sadistic, the prayers he recites narrate the complicity of Christianity in this violence – and the heterosexist violence that is endemic in Nigeria. Although the concatenation of prayer and murder might seem paradoxical, it poignantly captures the ambivalence of Christianity concerning violence when it is deployed in its defence. Such paradoxical moments exist in accounts of survivors of the Rwandan genocide where priests supported the hacking to death of Tutsis. Also, it seems that the anger of the murderous man is connected to the unavailability of the women – represented by Adanna – to heterosexual consumption and ownership (Gqola 9). Although Gqola focuses on the use of corrective/curative rape to discipline this sexual transgression while the man/men here use murder, both speak to a

violent breaking of queer bodies. Thus, the man is above the woman, killing Adanna and violating her body along with the bodies of women hidden in the pit under him.

When they emerge from the bunker, the sight of Adanna's burnt body stuns their views like the rays of winter sun:

We had hardly walked two yards when we saw, in the backyard of the church, a flame of orange and blue. A stack of burning logs. Ndidi began to cry, and then all of us were crying too, because we had all seen what remained of the face, and we had all recognised her: Adanna in the midst of the logs, burning and burning and turning to ashes right before our eyes. (*Under* 208-209)

Even in death, Adanna's face is recognised by the women as a member of their *communitas*. The repetition of "burning" invokes a spectacle of continuous suffering, a never abating burning. A trenchant critique of why heterosexism continues to secrete virulent doses of violence on queer people lies in the communal endorsement that follows the murderous campaign on the women. In Aba, a town in Igbo heartland, people praise the 'unknown'²⁰⁵ assailants (*Under* 210). The tacit support of the community is anchored to the workings of a murderous "God" whom they invoke to support their inhuman glee at the news of the attack. Even the law enforcement agents also endorse heterosexist violence (205).

It is important to note that heteropatriarchy recruits its crusaders across gender divides – and Mama, Ijeoma's mother, is a quintessential example of how women also strengthen patriarchy²⁰⁶. Working in support of heteropatriarchy's ownership of female bodies, Mama hectors Ijeoma into marrying Chibundu, because to her, a woman is like a bicycle which needs two wheels – and a man is this second wheel. The marriage is also to make her "look like the daughter [she] always envisioned [Ijeoma] could be. Just perfect" (*Under* 217). The idea of being the daughter she has always known her to be is a manifestation of symbolic power. Pierre Bourdieu writes that symbolic power operates by telling people what they are; it canonizes the hegemonic identities bestowed on persons. Through the marriage, Mama exerts a kind of symbolic power on Ijeoma in a bid to fulfil her heterosexist dream. But even

²⁰⁵ Nigeria has a long history of using 'unknown' persons to police dissent. For instance, on February 18 1977, over one thousand soldiers invaded Fela's alternative community, Kalakuta Republic, leaving death and devastation in their wake – most notably, the death Fela's mother. The government blamed the attacks on unknown soldiers. To forever burnish this sad event into Nigerian history, Fela released a song titled "Unknown Soldier" in 1979.

²⁰⁶ Although she later sees the light of enlightenment by the end of the story, she had wrecked tremendous havoc on Ijeoma's life before her Damascus encounter.

in her declaration, there is a faint indication that she is aware that forcing her daughter into the marriage would not change who she is, it is mainly to make her “look” a certain way. The crushing burden of this effort to fit into what daughters should look like is apparent in the couple’s first coital attempt in the ritual of marriage²⁰⁷. An excited Chibundu unzips his trouser to start a process of breaking in his bride into heterosexuality, but the sound of the zipper is a sound of violence to Ijeoma’s ears: “[...] I watched as he began tugging at the front of his trousers. Then came that dreaded sound: just the sound of a man undoing his zipper, but it was as if a sharp object had somehow been jabbed into my ears” (*Under* 235). Her fear is aptly captured here in aural images. The zipper has transformed into a custodian of violence that is about to be unleashed on her body. For the avoidance of doubt, Ijeoma is not frigid, and this is not the first time that she would hear the sound of a zipper coming undone; the main difference is that on the other occasions, the zippers have opened to reveal a world of erotic pleasure – her kind of erotic pleasure. Through this scene, the text reiterates Ijeoma’s attraction to only women, but she is forced to “look” and act as expected from a daughter when she realises that her belonging to the community is tied to heterosexual availability. She captures her helplessness using images of lost places and inaccessible terrains (*Under* 235).

In the end, she gives up her struggle: “I knew in my mind that I might never feel ready. There was no sense prolonging my resistance. [...] That night, he moved closer to me, unzipped his pants. That night, I allowed him to make love to me” (*Under* 238). That this “lovemaking” is a kind of oppressive invasion of Ijeoma’s body is captured in her statement that she allows him to make love to her – in essence, the sex is perfunctory. On the other hand, Ijeoma’s lesbian sex is a fulfilling erotic affair. By juxtaposing these two types of sex, the text deconstructs the hegemony of heterosexual intimacy as the only fulfilling kind of sex. But Chibundu, secure in the knowledge that his narcissistic sexual invasions would be condoned, continues in his one-way sexual relations without a care as to whether his wife is pleased or not. In fact, he gets angry when his sexual advances are rejected by Ijeoma and

²⁰⁷ Pierre Bourdieu identifies marriage as a ritual of institution in the way it consecrates and defines the sexes (*Language and Symbolic Power* 117–19). That is, a man is declared a man against the presence of a woman; his masculinity is “made known and recognised”. In this case, the ritual makes Ijeoma a heterosexual woman. But in the end, this ritual is a failed one. She remains perpetually in limen, in a dangerous liminal state.

rapes her on several occasions.

As should be expected, this forced marriage does not wean Ijeoma off her unabating desire for Ndidi. She writes letters expressing her love while also revealing her trapped state. Thus, the letters become a space of locution for her. But the nourishment of a dialogic exchange between the two lovers is disrupted by Chibundu who makes it a point of duty to intercept Ndidi's letters to Ijeoma. In a sense, this speaks to the way queer people are denied voice under heteropatriarchy's control. But the letters still succeed in staging an epistolary narrative that gives voice to Ijeoma's most intimate emotions. In that sense, it could be said that Chibundu's effort at muffling her story fails. It is the awareness of this failure that is evident in the shock he expresses when he stumbles on Ijeoma's cache of letters to Ndidi. "He cried out, "you have finished me! You have finished me completely! How could you? How could you?" Chibundu's lamentation is because he feels emasculated for losing his wife to a woman; he is "finished" since his masculinity has been emptied.

This description of Chibundu's frantic reaction is similar to the grammar school teacher's reaction when he saw Amina and Ijeoma together. It is also similar to the suicidal response of Oshevire (Aku's husband in *The Last Duty*) to the salacious details of his wife's life during his incarceration. He bemoans the "stain" of it:

If there are any honest men left in this town, they should know that the dishonour brought upon my wife – on my household – was totally unjust. But then the stain remains! The smear is there, clear in the air as a hangman's rope, the noose through which the head must pass. And what kind of a life will I be living in this town with my family, when we know that our days are haunted by an indelible shame? (*Last Duty* 236)

Above, we encounter a version of Oshevire that has caved in to the demands of anxious masculinity which gives breath to heteropatriarchy. His anguish is connected to the lurid story of two men (one of them crippled) almost hacking themselves to death over ownership of his wife. On the surface, the lament seems to mourn the experience of Oshevire's wife, Aku, who was sexually exploited in the absence of her husband; but a closer look reveals otherwise. The lament is essentially to mourn the loss of Oshevire's sense of belonging to the cult of masculinity. Note that at the beginning of his apostrophic speech, he appeals to "honest men" to be empathetic to his plight and the plight of his woman. But being aware of the non-negotiable parameters of belonging required by

hegemonic patriarchy, he descends to nihilistic lows where he compares the choking squeeze of the ‘stain’ (his wife’s sexual relations with two men) to “a hangman’s noose through which the head must pass” (236). Sadly, the hangman’s noose snuffs life out of him. But he is both the hangman and the hangman’s victim; this might seem a harsh criticism of his decision to commit suicide. However, it is important to note that it is narcissism which propels him to yield to the demands of his “manhood” at the expense of his wife and child. This makes it difficult to cast Oshevire as the innocent victim here. At best, he is a victim of the toxic demands of “manhood” in his patriarchal environment. His suicide has only buoyed plans to ostracise his wife and family from the community. By choosing death, he squanders all the empathy he had stirred in readers due to his stoic composure while imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. But the weight of lack of return to the community, to his family, to his wife, which he encounters at the end of his traumatic incarceration is a burden too heavy for him to bear.

These three men, the teacher, Chibundu, and Oshevire, are plagued by anxious masculinity which lies at the heart of heterosexism. But, unlike Oshevire who opts out of the struggle, Chibundu doubles down by reasserting his ownership of Ijeoma:

Suddenly he regrouped himself, regained his composure. His voice took back its steadiness. He said, you can do whatever you will with those letters. You can even continue to write to her. But donot you forget for one moment – not for one tiny moment – that you’re *my* wife. You are *my* wife, for God’s sake. I can do things to make your life miserable. Do you hear me? *You are my wife.* (*Under 283 italics in original*)

The repetitive declaration of “you’re my wife” is a restaging of the marriage ritual, which I discussed earlier in this chapter, and an invocation of the symbolic power which consecrates such rituals. It is to remind her of her place in the order of things. The threats that follow the declarations are indicators of how Ijeoma’s identity has been subsumed under Chibundu’s. He can make her life miserable by reporting her queerness, which will then deny her of belonging, and subsequently, render her vulnerable to even more violence. Although Ijeoma believes that Chibundu’s decision not to report his discovery flows from his magnanimity, a close understanding of the workings of heteropatriarchy unveils a different interpretation. It is more likely that Chibundu chose not to talk about his wife’s queerness because his belonging to the heteropatriarchal hegemony would also be

threatened. Since, as Siya Khumalo has observed, [h]eterosexism is a prerequisite for male privilege; patriarchy privileges men not just for having penises, but penises that enter *Vaginas*".²⁰⁸ And this possession of a "penis" will become questioned if word gets out that he lost his wife to another woman. It is this same fear of emasculation that leads Oshevire to opt for suicide in *The Last Duty*. Essentially, heterosexism is a prison that incarcerates both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Since the "the state of emergency is also always a state of emergence" as Homi Bhabha states in his introduction to Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* ("Framing Fanon" xxiv), Ijeoma emerges from the ashes of her traumatic marriage with a prismatic vision of her 'self' which leads to a total embrace of her erotic desires. Expanding Mama's bicycle analogy to include same-sex relations, she finds peace in the arms of Ndidi. Although they cannot be legally married since same-sex relations are still criminalized, the lovers, through Ndidi's imagination, create their own patch of earth in a dream world in a quest for belonging. Ijeoma says that:

Some of those nights when we are together and in bed, Ndidi wraps her arms around me. She molds her body around mine and whispers in my ear about a town where love is allowed to be love, between men and women, and men and men, and women and women, just as Yoruba and Igbo and Hausa and Fulani. Ndidi describes the town, all its trees and all the colors of its sand. She tells me in great detail about the roads, the directions in which they run, from where and to where they lead.

"What is the name of this town?" I ask.

Sleep threatens to overtake her, and sometimes she forgets that she does not want to say a name. One night, she mumbles that it is Aba. The next night it is Umahia. With each passing night she names more towns: Ojoto and Nnewi, Onitsha and Nsukka, Port Harcourt and Lagos, Uyo and Oba, Kaduna and Sokoto. She names and names, so that eventually I have to laugh and say, "How is it that this town can be so many places at once?"

[...] she says, "All of them are here in Nigeria. You see, this place will be all of Nigeria." (321)

As noted earlier in this thesis, being neither here nor there allows a prismatic view of things; thus, Ndidi's detailed description of a truly post-war Nigeria emanates from her location at the margins. Her view from in-between positions her as a kind of seer who is imbued with

²⁰⁸ Khumalo also writes, in close relation to Bourdieu's theorisation about marriage rituals, that men are socialized to depend on the subjugation of women to feed their masculinity (Khumalo 2018). See www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2018-07-19-the-politics-of-spaces-gay-clubs-and-bachelorette-parties/

the ability to envision a wholesome Nigeria of the future²⁰⁹. In this poignant scene, the vision of a Nigeria where everyone has a sense of belonging is concatenated with erotic love and a demise of compulsory heterosexuality. Although this new Nigeria keeps morphing from geographical zone to zone, in the end, it keeps its name and homes everyone. It does not adhere to any fixed border of belonging at the level of identity and cartography.

Ndidi's investment in imagining alternative spaces of belonging is also evident in the mosaic of postcards that she affixes to the walls of her apartment. Ijeoma speaks about the beguiling "postcard of Venice with its canals and gondolas. She stood by my side, "imagine, a city that is entirely car-free!" she said. [...] I moved on to the next postcard. "That's Turkey", I said. "Istanbul." "Yes", she said. "A very special city. The only city in the world on two continents" (*Under* 185). In the image of Turkey bestriding two continents, Ndidi hints at the possibility of third space positioning as a productive site for idyllic belonging. It is the city's unusual location on two continents simultaneously – a challenge to the neat delimitation of boundaries as either here or there – that makes it "a special city." Thus, the images of Turkey and Venice captured in the postcards bear close resemblances to the queer Nigeria that she dreams. It is possible to call this country of the future a queer one since its identity is so fluid that it transcends the binary boundaries of us/them regarding all the violent lines of division plaguing the country.

While Ndidi dreams of the geographic space of this country of the future where belonging can be achieved, Ijeoma's dream invites us into the country to witness its beauty; its people and how its ethnic diversity is a strength rather than a weakness:

I am up north to visit Amina. Up there the sand is grey and fine, not reddish and heavy like the sand down south. The plains are grassy and stretch for miles on end, and on them cattle graze, their tails swinging in the sun, under the watch of Hausa and Fulani herdsmen.

In addition to the herdsmen are Hausa and Fulani vendors, dressed in traditional caftans and headscarves and shawls, carrying trays of bananas, of bread, and of nuts on their heads. There are Igbo and Yoruba vendors too: women in lace blouses or bubas, matching wrappers on the bottom; men in agbadas. (316)

The view here is an alternative imagining of the North beyond its popular framing as a place

²⁰⁹ It is also useful to my discussion of third space as a site of lucid vision to note that Ndidi is half-asleep/half-awake when she dreams up this utopian space. In a literal sense, her vision is clearer in this state of neither here nor there. But, on the other hand, it also invites a worrying signification – that this Nigeria that cares for all is only possible in a dreamy state.

of lack and violence; it is a departure from the blood-soaked history that haunts that part of Nigeria – from the pre-war killings of 1966 to the unending insurgency by Boko Haram, and random sparks of religious violence. In the idyllic picture created in the first part of the quote, Ijeoma cycles back to the bucolic state of the country pre-war, before the war “barged in” (*Under 2*).²¹⁰

In this new country, the North/South divide is no longer evident. The beauty of both regions is woven together into the fabric of a country. Also, fashion, which is often used as a marker of difference in Nigeria becomes a metaphor for beauty in diversity. But even against the background of this bucolic space, Amina is still out of place because of the crushing demands of heteropatriarchy: “She [Amina] is young, shamefaced, guilt-ridden, and there is fear trailing after her, tacked onto the soles of her feet (317). Amina is married to a Muslim husband who keeps her veiled. In a sense, the text indicates that just like Christianity, Islam is complicit in aiding heteropatriarchy and the heterosexist violence it deploys to stay in control²¹¹. Although she is desexualised under her flowing gown, Ijeoma sees through it since she has seen and felt the undeniable erotic joys concealed under the *Hijab*. The gown also functions as a mark of ownership since only married women are mandated to wear it. But, since all signifiers are capable of limitless significations, the *Hijab* is capable of being read beyond its signification as a symbol of oppression. For instance, it has been read as a site where women assert ownership of their bodies by denying men visual access. But it must be added that not all men are denied this access²¹². And in the case at

²¹⁰ It is also important to note the presence of Fulani herdsmen living peacefully with other ethnic groups in this Nigeria of the future. Due to sporadic attacks on farming communities in parts of Nigeria by suspected Fulani herdsmen, there are debates on how to restrict the movement of the Fulani across the country to graze their cattle. The Fulani people have argued that such restrictions threaten their belonging in the country while the farming communities are of the opinion that the president, being a Fulani man, is unfairly sympathetic to their plight.

²¹¹ The northern part of Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, and Sharia law, which operates in most of the northern states, is exceptionally hostile to same-sex relations. According to the dictates of sharia law, offenders are to be stoned to death. Sharia law also protects heteropatriarchy by demonizing women’s sexual agency. For instance, a woman could be stoned to death for extra-marital sex. This might explain why Amina lives in constant fear, fear that her sexual orientation might come to light.

²¹² Monica Germanà introduces an interesting dimension to the semiotic ambivalence of the *Hijab*. She writes that it functions as a site where sartorial and spatial politics mesh to reveal a map of belonging. She reads Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* to tease out the ways in which characters employ the *Hijab* and the *Sari* to articulate and negotiate belonging. See Monica Germanà. “From hijab to sweatshops: Segregated bodies and contested space in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*.” *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture*, eds. Teverson, Andrew and Sara Upstone (Palmgrave Macmillan, 2011).

hand, the context informs an oppressive interpretation of the *Hijab* because of the way in which it erases Amina's sexuality. Ijeoma tries to console her that all will be fine in the new country where there will not be stories of stoning anymore, but her gospel is drowned in the din of passing trucks. The description of Amina's fear-ridden life indicates that queer lives are precariously lived even when they conform to the demands of heterosexism.

In the end, it is also from this violent third space that Ijeoma imagines the demands of healing and charts a roadmap for building a new nation. She advises that we "remember the war and its atrocities and remember the speech [Gowon's reconciliation speech], and remember that aspect of national reconciliation, and of building of a new nation" (316). But also "[f]orgive Gowon, forgive Ojukwu. And the war" (316). By mentioning the main protagonists of the war, who are men, Ijeoma hints at the masculine battle of egos that has been blamed for the war. Her admonition invokes the importance of remembering the war not as a perpetual sore point as it is at the moment, but as an opportunity to articulating the "manner of it". Remembrance should stimulate a return to that traumatic moment to facilitate abreaction – and possibly healing. This is a profound approach to healing because there cannot be forgiveness without remembrance. As South Africa's TRC has revealed, to forgive, to heal, one needs to return to the past to create a space of narrative engagement where blames are apportioned and accepted, and tears of collective suffering shed. Then, the healing begins. Remembrance is also pivotal to preventing a repetition of acts of violence as Jelin (2010) articulated. Being in-between has allowed Ijeoma and Ndidi to recognise that the problem of violence is not about individuals, rather, it is systemic. It lies in heterosexist ways in which society is socialized.

On the whole, my reading has highlighted how heterosexism produced, and continues to produce, a never-ending cycle of violence in wartime and post-war periods on queer bodies. I have also called attention to some of the excesses that are unaccounted for in popular histories and discourses of how women belonged in Biafra, and the ways in which a woman's sexuality intersects with her ethnicity to map her as an outsider.

In the next chapter, I shift my situated intersectional gaze to the category of Biafra children to map the excess that is unaccounted for in the sensational pictures of starving children which have become emblematic of the civil war.

Chapter 5

Beyond 'Biafra Babies': Mapping Representations of Child Soldiering in Nigeria-Biafra Civil War Literature

While at Ekwulobia, I saw a familiar face among the newly recruited soldiers as they paraded through the town centre. His name was Obi and he was from Nnewi. [...] He was older than me, but I did not think he was old enough to be enlisted into the Biafran army. He couldn't have been more than 14 [years]. I was a little jealous to see Obi as a boy soldier, but my consolation was that one day I too would be eligible to fight. (Chukwurah 80-81)²¹³

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I teased out some of the dimensions of violence that are silenced within the fixed binary framing of gender and belonging in Biafra by unsettling the category of 'Biafra woman' as a homogenous group. To further develop this line of argument that reading wartime experiences through the lens of Biafra/Nigeria silences several strands of violence and ways in which people belonged or not within Biafra, I situate my intersectional gaze within the category of Biafra children to examine how axes such as age, gender and military/combatant status intersect in Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2006) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) to create complex modes of un/belonging. My aim is to pay attention to the ways in which stories from this intersectional position unsettle the popular idea of Biafran childhood. My argument here is that the popular starvation-based trope of Biafran childhood does not capture the complex ways in which children belonged to and experienced Biafra²¹⁴.

Thus, I seek to grapple with the question: what other stories of Biafran childhood become visible when we look beyond the spectacular narratives and images of starving children? This question is important in that the linear narrative of starvation has been

²¹³ On the flip side of the page where this quotation comes from, Chukwurah appends a picture of wounded boy soldiers which, in a sense, calls our attention to the perils that underlie his wish to be a child soldier. But on another level, it is important to note that the desire to join the army to fight might not be unconnected to the potent propaganda deployed by Biafra during the conflict.

²¹⁴ These images of starving, kwashiorkor plagued Biafran children are spread all over the internet and even in academic journals. For instance, see Claude Cookman (2008), E.C. Ejiogu (2013), Chinua Achebe (2012), Herbert Ekwe Ekwe (2012) among numerous others. Many pro-Biafra groups also showcase such pictures. For instance, *Igbo News UK*, exhibited such pictures in what it describes as "Genocide Exhibition": www.igbonews.co.uk/Biafra-Genocide-Exhibition--Th/biafra-genocide-exhibition--the-picture-of-starving-biafran-child.html. Curiously, the collection includes the popular picture of a starving Sudanese child taken by Kevin Carter in 1993.

exceptionally effective in validating claims of genocide which continue to power agitations for Biafra. In seeking to answer this question, I acknowledge that the intersectional position of some children might have created an erasure of their voices and stories within popular narratives of the war. Hence, by teasing out ‘other’ stories of belonging archived in the selected literary accounts which gesture towards an agentic resistance of erasure, I also call attention to the importance of children as speaking subjects and bearers of memory. To achieve the stated aim, the selected literary narratives are instrumentalised as discursive sites where silenced voices from the margins are mined. This also builds on the multiplicity of stories which came to light in reading *The Last Train to Biafra* in the second chapter of this thesis. However, unlike Chukwurah’s attempt to imbue his remembrance of Biafra with as much historical facticity as possible, the literary texts that I read in this chapter are not shackled to such demands. In fact, the use of child focalizers is a literary device which unsettles believability. However, adopting this narrative position represents a deliberate attempt to see Biafra through a child’s colourful eye.

To delimit the scope of an otherwise broad debate on the multiplex nature of children’s wartime experiences, I have chosen to enter the debate through experiences of child soldiers within selected literary texts. This is not to suggest that this category represents the sole intersectional position observable within the corpus of literary works on Biafran childhood, but because it couples together two seemingly conflicting positions – of vulnerability and perpetratorhood. It represents a fraught intersectional position which mostly falls through the cracks²¹⁵.

Within the fixed parameters of Biafran childhood employed in popular narratives and discourses of Biafra, child soldiers are mostly absent because they are neither here nor there; they’re caught in-between the frames of Biafran children represented as too infantile and starved to wield any form of weapon or agency, and a concomitant depiction of Biafran

²¹⁵ For instance, Maureen Moynagh calls attention to some of the ways in which a child’s status as a child soldier produces modes of exclusion when she describes the airlifts of 3,600 ‘lost boys’ of Sudan organised by the United States in 2001. She writes that “The United States, in extending refugee status to 3,600 of the so-called Lost Boys from Sudan in 2001, screened potential refugees living in camps in Kenya, turning away any that US authorities believed had served as child soldiers.”(Moynagh 41). In essence, these boys, regardless of the fact that they qualified on the basis of their age, are excluded on the basis of their military experience. Yet, they are regarded as victims in humanitarian discourse.

Army as solely comprised of battle-hardened well-educated ‘men’²¹⁶. No space exists within these binary narratives for those caught at the intersection of being children and soldiers simultaneously; consequently, their presence, and narratives fall through the cracks. However, since this in-between space (read as third space) functions as a site which produces a deep view of belonging in a manner that complicates singular narratives of Biafranness, I position the characters in the selected texts as third space inhabitants whose views from the middle reveal other narratives of violence, belonging/unbelonging within Biafra. I read Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* and Abani’s *Song of Night* as envisioning some of the unavowed dimensions of suffering and agency that might have characterised the lives of some children in Biafra.

To be sure, I am interested in the ways in which the sameness and difference of some children create some excess which trouble linear narratives of Biafran childhood. By sameness and difference, I mean to signal the ways in which some children, although seen as children as a result of their age, are different by virtue of their roles and lived experience during the war. And since these children are neither children, in the conventional sense of the word, nor adults or soldiers according to convention, their stories are lost in-between. In a literal sense, their intersectional identity has produced them as absent – yet present – entities within the corpus of civil war writing. David Rosen observes that the enigmatic status of such children is well signposted in the oxymoronic coupling inherent in the term ‘child soldier’ – as indicative of the neither here nor there status of these children (Rosen xi). It is against this backdrop of absence and silence that I read the selected texts to pay attention to some of the intersectional stories which they archive in order to produce a nuanced encounter with Biafran childhood.

²¹⁶This view of the Biafran army as battle-hardened and better educated than their Nigerian counterparts is prevalent in secessionist discourse, see “The Oguta Confrontation: Heroes Fight Like Biafrans” by Chibuike John Nebeokike (May 30, 2019) at www.ipob.org/2019/05/uknc-o-history-lesson-oguta.html. It is also present in Achebe’s memoir, *There was a Country* and in Emefiena’s *In Biafra Africa Died*. My deployment of this heterosexist idea of the soldier as male is in reference to what obtains in most accounts of the war. In fact, I have not happened on any historical account of the civil war – save one – that makes reference to the use of women in combatant roles. The sole instance is in Alabi-Isama (2013), wherein he documented the presence of women in the Third Marine Commando Division of Nigeria Army (3MCD). But it should be noted that Isama’s picture-backed writing-in of female soldiers is not exactly altruistic; it is aimed at refuting General Obasanjo’s acerbic attack on the state of discipline within the 3MCD. Obasanjo, in his civil war memoir, *My Command* (1980), had described the presence of women (whom he framed as ‘comfort women’) in 3MCD as an indication of the abysmal level of discipline he encountered when he took charge of the division.

This absence is a product of a fixed, homogenous, unnuanced representation of belonging within Biafra. Yuval Davis advises against the seduction of adopting such homogeneous narratives of “collective experience” which erases the unique experiences produced within certain axes of belonging – like the one adopted in constricting the lived experiences of Biafran children to starvation. Drawing connections between linear narratives and identity politics, she cautions that “one can easily fall into the trap of identity politics, which assumes the positioning and identifications for all members of the group and, thus, understands each member, in principle, as a ‘representative’ of the grouping and an equal contributor to the collective narrative” (271). To which she quickly adds that “this is never the case” (Ibid. 271). The most interesting understanding that Yuval-Davis’s explanation brings on board is that within this homogenization of the collective experience of the group, certain stories become disavowed in the mainstream narrative pushed by ‘representatives’ of the group. In this case, the representatives are the kwashiorkor-stricken Biafra babies who, through their starvation-racked bodies, are made to speak for the collective in a spectacular manner that silences other narratives. Achebe’s memoir, *There was a Country*, which I read in the second chapter of this thesis, also depicts children in this manner; making sure to emphasise that children formed the bulk of those killed by starvation during the war. Interestingly, the memoir makes no mention of the participation of children in the war in any other light.

However, these silenced stories of belonging are beginning to emerge within the Biafran landscape present in literary texts and in some autobiographical accounts written by these children (see *Last Train*). Given the way in which both *Song for Night* and *Beasts of No Nation* narrate interstitial stories that construct “space[s] of enunciation” which trouble fixed meanings (Bhabha 50), the texts could be read as archives of other stories of Biafran childhood. Both novellas are child soldier narratives, and are put in conversation to imagine other stories of Biafra that might threaten linear, hagiographical accounts of the war.

In this chapter, I define a child soldier as a child under the age of 18 years who decides, or is coerced, or lured into playing military roles during a conflict. While I am aware that the definition of a child soldier is contentious and varies from country to country, my definition echoes the one obtainable in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of

the Child, which declared the use of children below the age of 18 years for military functions during conflicts as illegal. This is also the age adopted in UNICEF's 1997 Cape Town Principles²¹⁷. And due to the continental annexure of my research to Africa, I believe this definition, although polemical, serves the purpose of the present chapter. Some studies have preferred the use of boy soldiers; but in this chapter, I have favoured the term child soldier due to its gender neutrality, particularly, given that research has revealed that more than 40% of child soldiers globally are females (UN 2015)²¹⁸. According to the UNICEF Cape Town Principles, a child soldier is

any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed-force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. (Cape Town Principles 1997)²¹⁹

This definition works for the focus of this chapter due to the broad strokes in which it paints the manifestations of child soldiering. It goes beyond the popular image of a rifle-lugging boy that often accompanies narratives of child soldiering to also account for the presence of girls in the desolate landscape of war.

My reading focuses on the use of children as combatants during the war as an entry into some of the other ways in which children belonged within Biafra. This kind of thematic focus is important in two ways: on the one hand, it questions the silence and disavowal that presently plagues stories of child soldiers within Biafra; on the other hand, it positions children as both victims and perpetrators. Hegemonic accounts of children's suffering within Biafra often trope on the theme of starvation and the ravages of kwashiorkor which consequently present children as helpless victims in all cases. This narrative of starvation

²¹⁷ The Paris Commitment of 2007 also adopted this age; it is also the age adopted by Rosen (2008), although he argues passionately against its aptness in capturing the spectrum of developmental stages present between childhood and adulthood.

²¹⁸ See www.un.org/youthenvoy/2015/02/4-10-child-soldiers-girls.

²¹⁹ See; www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principles%281%29.pdf. The definition adopted in the 2007 Paris Principles is also similar to the Cape Town version; the main difference being that child soldier was replaced with "child associated with an armed force or armed group." It is apparent that this name change is connected to the humanitarian attempt to divert attention away from children's militaristic roles in some conflicts. Leonie Steinel argues that the definition erases cases of sexual assault against male children because it speaks only of "girls recruited for sexual purposes" (21). However, this was remedied in the Paris Principles.

is mostly deployed in a bid to highlight the atrocious nature of Nigeria's blockade during the war and to win global sympathy using troubling Polaroid images of dying Biafran children²²⁰. Within this linear image burnished on photographic film, which circulated during the conflict – and continues to troll the internet from time to time, other narrative strands which render these children as complex characters are silenced.

Indeed, starvation was a major violence suffered by children during the war, no thanks to the Nigerian blockade and the intransigence of the Biafran elite; however, there were other forms of violence perpetrated on/by children during the war. For instance, they were used for child labour, used as combatants, as spies, raped in some cases, and they also provided for families. Chukwurah's account of the war captures some of the multiple ways in which children participated in the war. His friends and cousins fought as child soldiers under terrible conditions in the trenches (48, 80, 96), and in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a text sympathetic to the ordeals of Biafrans, one encounters an ambivalent representation of children as victims and perpetrators in Hi-Tech, a thirteen-year-old, who is conscripted as a child soldier. He is depicted as a vulnerable child who participates in the rape of a bar girl – and enjoys it (Adichie 365)²²¹.

Adopting the linear narrative of starving Biafran children has produced a deafening silence regarding the use of child soldiers within Biafra historiography; in fact, in some

²²⁰ The use of photos of starving Biafran children by secessionists is a continuation of how the Biafran elite deployed the images during the war. Patrick Edomi, Biafra's director of propaganda, agrees that when they (Biafra Directorate of Propaganda) noticed the capacity of those pictures to shock the world, they doubled down on that angle in a bid to get funds and support from an appalled global audience; See Michael Stewart. *Biafra: Fighting a War Without Guns* (Produced by BBC, 1995). Several scholars like De St. Jorre (1977), Doron (2013) and Gould (2012) have argued that these funds helped prolong the conflict. General Ojukwu, Biafra's wartime leader, also agrees that levies (landing fees) imposed on humanitarian organizations working in Biafra helped prosecute the war (*Biafra: Fighting a war without Guns*). Also, offers of a land corridor (mercy corridor) into Biafra from Nigeria to deliver crucial needs to children were turned down by the Biafran Government.

²²¹ Ben Okri also depicts the use of child soldiers and the shadow which their military service casts on their post-war lives through Okoro in his text, *Dangerous Love* (1996):

Okoro had fought in the war, first as a boy cub attached to an officer. He survived three bombings, without the help of bunkers. He saw his village destroyed by air raids. He carried the wounded across minefields. He went on regular reconnaissance at night, deep in the forests, through fetid swamps, scouting out the whereabouts of troops. On one such reconnaissance he saw three of his friends killed by boobytraps. He was given a crash course in soldiery and conscripted into the main army. He wasn't yet seventeen. (*Dangerous Love* 107).

In Okoro's traumatic memory of his military service as first a "boy cub" and later as a commissioned soldier, the similitude of the experience of child soldiers and their adult counterparts is made glaring. Okoro starts experiencing death, suffering, and destruction right from his time as child soldier. Also, Both Godwin Alabi-Isama (2013) and Michael Gould (2012) confirm the use of children for reconnaissance in their accounts of the war.

quarters, there have been firm rejections of any suggestion that child soldiers were used by Biafrans to bolster their military during the war. On another plane, this silence and denials are understandable since it would seem to reduce the morality of the Biafran cause – and could also provide grounds for prosecution as a war crime under the “Genocidal Forcible Transfers” section of the 1998 Rome Statutes of the International Criminal Court²²². However, some autobiographical and docufilm evidence suggest that child soldiers were indeed deployed during the war. For instance, Mark Chijioke Uchendu, who survived the caprice of life within Biafra, remarks during an interview that “you know at a point everybody that was from 14 and above was already in the army. In fact, 12 years, *sef*²²³, because you were either in The Boys Company or you are in the army” (*Biafran War Memories* 2017)²²⁴. There is also the story of Ben Okafor’s service in Biafra Boys’ Company which was created to serve behind enemy lines during the war²²⁵. He has produced a play titled *Child of Biafra* which is based on his Biafra experience, and other countless stories of those that served as child soldiers like the story of Emeka Oliwe, a disabled war veteran. In an interview with James Ojo for *Caracal Report*, Oliwe stated, quite proudly, that he joined the Biafran Army at the age of fourteen and got injured while fighting for what he believed, and still believes, to be the right of Biafra to secede²²⁶. Of all extant evidence, the interview of a fully kitted ten-year old Biafran child soldier captured in a 1969 documentary²²⁷ is probably the most convincing.

²²² For instance, Charles Taylor, former Liberian Warlord and president, is currently (2019) standing trial at The Hague for the use of child soldiers and other war crimes.

²²³ “*Sef*” is an intensifier often used in Nigerian Pidgin. In this case, it indicates that some children joined up from when they were 12 years old.

²²⁴ Find the interview at www.biafranwarmemories.com/2017/06/15/every-young-man-was-eager-to-fight/.

²²⁵ Both Michael Gould and Diliorah Chukwurah, among many others, document the violence to which children in the Boys’ Company were subjected when discovered by Nigerian troops. They either had their eyes gouged out, tongues chopped-off, or limbs severed. Both writers provide proof of their claims with the same picture – which contains a boy with an eye gouged and two boys with severed limbs (Chukwurah 82; Gould N.P). Gould states that “cross-border infiltration to the Federal camps by young Biafrans was also commonplace. Ojukwu [the leader of Biafra] had instigated the setting up of the Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters (BOFF). Within this organisation young boys were encouraged to take part in military training and form an effective boys’ guerrilla movement” (N.P). In footnotes 228 and 230, he documents interviews he had with Ben Okarfor, Dr. James Eneje, and Fr. Nambi Nwankwo, all of whom had participated as child soldiers during the civil war. See, Gould, Michael. *Struggle for Modern Nigeria: The Biafran War 1967-1970* (I.B.Tauris, 2012. Kindle Edition).

²²⁶ See more of the interesting interview see James Ojo. “The Ghost of Biafra: 51 Years After, the Flames Still Burns” [sic]. (June 6, 2018) at www.caracalreports.com/the-ghost-of-biafra-51-years-after-the-flames-still-burns.

²²⁷ See Nigeria-Biafra civil war documentary at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kvqygrqcfsg (3.01 Min).

I should note here that my invocation of autobiographical narratives as well as pictographic and docufilm texts is not to argue that the selected novels contain some historical proof or autobiographical value regarding the use of child soldiers in the civil war. However, I aim to indicate that the texts do not wholly operate in a phantasmal realm removed from historical realities of Biafra. That, in the words of Adebani, the texts “present modes of transcend[ing] existing possibilities and ways of apprehending those possibilities” (Adebani 407); they function as sites of “identity contestation” and as spaces for “organising fragments of history” (Ogude 249). To co-opt the words of Wamuwi Mbao in a similar context, the goal of these texts “lies not in attempting a factual recovery of lost existences, but in paying close attention to those ceaselessly overlapping points of friction where loss has been covered over” (83). By fictionalising the lives of child soldiers during the civil war, the texts open up the war’s historiography by demanding that we imagine the presence and diurnal experiences of children in Biafra beyond that of starvation. Within this nuanced encounter with Biafran childhood it then becomes possible to recover some silenced narratives of how children belonged.

It is interesting to note that despite the production of some child soldier narratives based on the Nigeria-Biafra war, although few and far between, there has not been enough critical engagements which situate these narratives within the specificities of the war. Their connection to the conflict has been mostly disavowed in critical readings which riff on their global relevance. For instance, Alexander Schultheis (2008) argues that texts like *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night* are globalised depictions of the child soldier phenomenon; Sändig (2019) makes a much bolder claim by arguing that *Beasts of No Nation* should be read as an apt historical representation of Sierra Leone’s traumatic civil war. Coundouriotis (2010) observes that the setting of Abani’s *Song for Night* is wartime Igbo heartland and that protagonists of both *Song for Night* and *Beasts of No Nation* are Igbo, but she is not convinced that both texts speak about the Biafra/Nigeria war. In the case of *Song for Night*, she cites the presence of a Lexus car in the narrative as proof that it speaks of another time (196)²²⁸.

Indeed, if we are to appraise the texts on the strength of their absolute fidelity to historical verisimilitude, we would miss out on the queering of historical truths which they

²²⁸ In fairness to Coundouriotis, Lexus was launched as a car making company in Japan in 1989.

stage, particularly, the manner in which they shave off the rigid constraints of spatiality and temporality in their narratives to imbue Biafra with metaphoric qualities which speak beyond the specificity of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. The presence of a Lexus car in a temporal period which precedes its entry into the automobile market could also be linked to the ways in which nostalgic recollections are shaped and framed within the present. Svetla Boym, writes in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) that the past that is re-membered or recollected nostalgically is one that is essentially crafted within the quotidian images of the now; this, in a sense, relieves historical recollections of the burdens of facticity or temporal fidelity²²⁹. But be that as it may, when one considers the ways in which character names are given²³⁰, the naming of specific cartographic locations, and the allegorical depiction of some wartime key players, it becomes possible to read the selected texts as Biafran war narratives²³¹. Also, the centrality of the civil war as a watering hole for Abani's muse is clearly stated in his introduction to a short story collection titled *Lagos Noir* (2018) which he edited²³².

Importantly, the selected texts transcend such strictures of veracity by situating their narratives within in-between spaces that are geotagged but imbued with polyvocal representational values capable of speaking beyond the local. They are situated in the realm

²²⁹ Jay Winter (2006) and Daniel Walder (2011) also make similar arguments concerning historical remembrances. Daniel Walder builds on Boym's research on nostalgia in his exploration of postcolonial nostalgia(s) in literature. See Daniel Walder. *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representations, and Memory* (Routledge, 2011).

²³⁰ David Mastey has called attention to the import of names to child soldier narratives. He observes that they are narratorial and historical tools for gaining a nuanced reading of such texts. See David Mastey. "Child Soldiers and their War Names." *English Studies*, vol. 99, no. 2, 2018, pp. 166-182.

²³¹ For instance, the protagonist in *Song for the Night* is explicitly identified as Igbo, and cartographic markers of eastern Nigeria (former Biafran territory) like the Cross River are also deployed to firmly root the narrative in Biafra. In fact, between pages 54 and 55, the text narrates different legends about how the river came to be known as Cross River. Although the version of Cross River which flows in the text bestrides both the chthonic and real worlds, recasting the river as a border between the world of the living and that of the dead. There is also a clear intertextual connection between the post-war ghosts that haunt Innocent, Elvis's cousin, who fought in the civil war as a child-soldier in *Graceland* (2004), and the peregrinations of My Luck in a Biafra haunted by restless ghosts. Also, in *Beasts of No Nation*, the protagonist is named Agu (an Igbo name which means Leopard), and he has a friend named Dike, another Igbo name. His description of the landscape, dressing (the police uniform on page 44 and the red cap chiefs) and even the language of the characters he interacts with indicate the closeness of the narrative to eastern Nigeria. Take for instance, the appearance of Igbo lexical items like *mma* which means mother (120).

²³² Abani writes about his mother's frontline role in the war as a vocal "war wife", and for this, his family was briefly detained at the Lagos airport when they returned to Nigeria after the war in 1970 (Abani 6-13).

of second modernity (Beck 2006) which bursts the contours of nation-state to enable a globalised view which acknowledges that “the territoriality of the nation as a place of belonging is an unsettled, anxious *habitus*” (Bhabha, “On Disciplines” 2)²³³. But it is not only the boundaries of nationhood that are crossed or unsettled in the selected texts, even the boundaries between the real and the spiritual are transgressed. In *Song for Night*, the landscape (or nationscape) of Biafra encountered is a ghost-infested space where the border between the dead and the living is unsettled to allow the ghosts of memory to float around unencumbered – so much so that separating the living from the dead is almost impossible. It is not that the border between the past and the present (ghosts/living) is wholly destroyed, rather, it is portrayed as fluid. It is represented as a river, the Cross River, which signifies the cartographic specifics of the story’s setting in the East, but which also reveals the text’s imaginative attempt to transcend the known by garbing the river’s genealogy in mythopoetic narratives that are glocal and metaphysical. In a profound sense, what the texts achieve is a “metaphysics of locality” (Gikandi 2017) where a local event is properly situated within its socio-historical context, but also made to speak to a global discourse. Simon Gikandi calls attention to the importance of acknowledging such “metaphysics of locality” of texts in his 2017 keynote address at the African Literature Association conference (ALA). He observes that situating texts within the epistemic systems which birthed them allows a teasing out of certain “introverted” narratives embedded within their textual world, while also acknowledging the way they circulate within global spaces²³⁴.

Paying attention to the specificity of the texts’ locality, Hawley (2008) argues that both *Beasts of No Nation* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are ineluctably bound to the specifics of wartime Biafra. Writing about *Beasts of No Nation* he notes that although the text is grounded in the gore of the civil war, it is much more than that in the way in which the narrative creates room for other devastating tales of war on the African continent (Hawley

²³³ Although Bhabha writes about a different context here, he also gestures to the endlessly mobile – and consequently liminal – state of those at the margins of nation states. The characters in the texts I read in this chapter also inhabit a similar space characterised by endless dislocations and unbelonging.

²³⁴ By metaphysics of locality, he refers to the ways in which seemingly linear narratives assume palimpsestic valency when read within the epistemic systems of their setting. See Gikandi Simon. “African Literature in the World: Imagining a Postcolonial World” (June 16, 2017). www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6g1pL0qTuE. However, this ‘locality’ does not equate to a fixed spatiotemporal sense of space. It could be an imagined space where an encounter with a mediated form of history is enabled.

22). In this sense, the selected texts could be read as palimpsests that allow for a continuous inscription and re-inscription of stories of war and suffering over their foundational Nigerian-Biafran tale. This is even more evident in their choice of unnamed countries as setting and the presence of an unknown but ever-present enemy as one encounters in Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*²³⁵.

The child soldier as a signifier of the plague of civil wars unleashed on the African continent is a staple of humanitarian rhetoric²³⁶. Their existence is also firmly fettered to the changing face of modern warfare and the proliferation of small arms. These reasons, and some even more invidious ones, present the child soldier phenomenon as another indicator of the dark viciousness of the African continent as showcased in timeless racist narratives like H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). However, as scholars like David Rosen have observed, child soldiers have always been present on battlefields throughout histories of the world. Rosen writes that the American civil war was a "boys' war" (*Armies of the Young* 5) in honour of the copious use of child soldiers which defined the war's prosecution²³⁷; and that even the world wars featured remarkable use of child soldiers who were deemed war heroes – not victims of the manipulations of a savage adult. In his second book on the subject of child soldiering, *Child Soldiers in the Western Imagination* (2015), Rosen sheds light on the tendency to demonise African child soldiers in comparison to children elsewhere:

While children have been recruited as child soldiers in wars all over the world—Columbia, Kurdistan, Laos, Mexico, New Guinea, Pakistan, Palestine, Peru, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and New Guinea come immediately to mind—the contemporary literary gaze remains firmly fixed on Africa. Exactly why is unclear. Certainly some contemporary examples of the use of child soldiers in Africa, such as the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, have provided chilling examples of the abuse of children. But these extraordinary cases have also come to serve as the archetype of children's

²³⁵ Also, there is something to be said concerning the exilic status of the writers of both texts. Both Chris Abani and Uzodinma Iweala live in the United States where they continue to write about the continent. It is possible that their identities as "Afropolitans" is responsible for the ways in which their narratives avoid any explicit declaration of cartographic specificity regarding the setting of their narratives?

²³⁶ See www.child-soldiers.org and www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/child-soldiers.

²³⁷ Rosen notes that between 250,000 to 420,000 young boys served in both Confederate and Union armies during the civil war (*Armies of the Young* 5).

experiences in both Africa and elsewhere. (104)²³⁸

It is hard to infer from the quote above if Rosen's declared lack of clarity regarding why the Western gaze is fixated on African child soldiering is a rhetorical manoeuvre or a deliberate denial of the well-known, well-researched, fetishization of Africa in the Western imagination as the savage other, and as the uncouth continent that allows the West to retain its humanity and modernity²³⁹. It is a fixation that Pius Adesanmi has aptly described as the "Mercy Industrial Complex" (94) to capture the complex economic ecosystems that surround this mode of seeing and the salvationist impulse it eventuates.

It seems fairly apparent that this portrayal of child soldiers allows the West to continue in its role of a brave knight riding in to save the savages from themselves²⁴⁰. This produces a stock image of Africa and her children as agentless victims of savage brutes. Chinua Achebe eloquently troubled this imagining of Africa in his 1975 essay, "An Image of Africa", a seminal article which critiques Joseph Conrad's horrific portrayal of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*. In the essay, Achebe argues that Africa is set against Europe as a binary

²³⁸ A remarkable book volume edited by Alperslan Ozerdem and Sukanya Podder titled, *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration* (Palmgrave Macmillan, 2011), also gestures to the presence of child soldiers in several other countries. The book weaves country specific case studies from 11 countries together to indicate the prevalence of child soldiering across troubled regions of the world. Also, Jason Hart critiques the hypocrisy which shapes the frenetic child soldier debates within humanitarian discourse. In an article titled "The Politics of Child Soldier", he argues for a need to locate the lived experiences of child soldiers within the context of the local politics and need for survival. Perhaps, the article's strongest point is the manner in which it equates United States Army's use of technologies like gaming to lure children into the army – by showing the children "how to kill the enemy soldiers while wearing [their] pyjamas" – to the recruitment of child soldiers (Hart 221). See Jason Hart. "The Politics of Child Soldier." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 13.1, (2006): 217-226. Even much closer to one of the concerns of this thesis, which is the question of locution, Katharine Bell (2013) tackles what she describes as the phenomenon of white celebrities speaking for Africa, and how this 'speaking for' further infantilises the continent. This 'speaking for' is most evident in the realm of humanitarian efforts on the continent, particularly as it concerns the experiences of children. Thus, as stated in the introduction to this chapter, the question of children enunciating their lived experience is a crucial one.

²³⁹ Interestingly, he later links the treatment of child soldiering in literary accounts of conflicts on the continent as pandering to the Conradian vision of Africa (Rosen 104).

²⁴⁰ This is not to deny the prevalence of child soldiering in conflict zones in Africa. It is estimated that there are over 250,000 child soldiers on the continent (Rosen 2015); with notorious groups like Joseph Kony's LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) leading the charge in this despicable act. Recent findings have also implicated Boko Haram, the terror group plaguing Nigeria's north, as making extensive use of child soldiers. These children are used for military engagements and as suicide bombers. The aim of my argument above is against the sensational essentialising of child soldiering as a uniquely African depravity.

opposite. It is set “as a foil” (783) which helps maintain the morality and sanity of Europe²⁴¹. Essentially, it could be extrapolated that in the binary oppositional sense of white is white because there is black, Europe can only be modern and imperial against the backdrop of a savage, cannibalistic Africa. Teju Cole also calls attention to the productive nature of this “White Saviour Industry”, as he describes, it in an essay with the same title. Decrying the version of Africa portrayed in *Out of Africa*, *The Constant Gardener* and *Kony 2012*, he laments that “Africa has provided a space onto which white [Western] egos can conveniently be projected. It is a liberating space” where a European commoner can “become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied” (Cole 344).

Within this spectacle of imagined orgiastic violence, child soldiers are positioned as signifiers of Africa’s savagery. Maureen Moynagh traces the genealogy of this imagining of child soldiers and Africa to Rudyard Kipling’s lurid – but, one must admit, imaginative – description of Africans as half devil, half child (Moynagh 42). This image of *le enfant terrible* infantilises and demonizes Africa simultaneously, and it is at the intersection of these seemingly antinomic positions that the need to save Africa flowers. But let us attempt to salvage some usefulness from the ‘half child half devil’ imagery: I believe that it indeed captures the complexity of the child soldier figure as an interstitial character, as ‘half and half’ – as an *Abiku* of sorts. It is within the knowledge of such interstitial position of child soldiers that I set up shop to query monolithic narratives that constrict children’s wartime

²⁴¹ Wole Soyinka, in a similar but more caustic critique of the imperial gazes which define representations of Africa within Western narratives, links such views to a “wilful cataract in the eye of the beholder” (*Of Africa* 30). Essentially, he situates the parturition of this fantastic image of Africa at the intersection of a lack of knowledge/an inability to see or know (cataract), and a wilful decision not-to-know.

experiences to that of agentless victims²⁴².

My thinking is that it is possible that the blanket criminalization of child soldiering in African conflicts contributes to the silencing of child soldier narratives in popular historiography (or hagiographies) authored by belligerents, due to fear of prosecution for war crimes and to protect the morality of their cause. Consequently, these children are deprived of voice and the capacity to tell their own stories, which could certainly enrich the corpus of narratives of conflicts on the continent. This absence of nuanced stories of children's diurnal experiences within warzones then fuels simplistic depictions of children as innocent-agentless victims of conflict, eternally incapable of violence, or of contributing to struggles they believe in and sacrificed for. As a result, their contributions and sacrifices to political struggles and conflicts are totally erased. Also, when they do get platforms to tell their stories, these stories are shaped and reshaped within a humanitarian discourse which does not leave any room for interiority that could allow the child-narrator to come to terms with her/his possible role as a perpetrator. As a result, the child loses out on the

²⁴² To quickly cycle back to the words of Chijioke Uchendu (quoted above) and which is really echoed in most wartime Biafran child soldier interviews, "every child was willing to fight." It is this agency, this strong sense of belonging and willingness to fight for the survival of the collective, that children are deprived of when pictures of them starving are presented as their sole presence within Biafra. African history is indeed replete with examples of children sacrificing their lives to change the course of situations that affect them. An instance is the 1976 Soweto students uprising which was spearheaded by young students. The resultant massacre brought the brutality of the apartheid government to the full glare of the world. Piers Pigou writes that children constituted between 25-46% of detainees during terror years of apartheid (Pigou 118); however, children (below 18 years of age) were not allowed to tell their stories during the TRC hearings based on expert advice. And when sessions were organised to examine the experiences of children, still, those considered as children were not permitted to narrate their experiences (Ibid. 119). This might suggest that the commission assumed, erroneously, that children born during the dying years of apartheid do not have stories of brutality to narrate – but interestingly, some of those that testified during the hearings suffered under apartheid as children. The decision to bar testimonies from children under the age of 18 must have silenced a remarkable volume of child-narratives. As I have observed before, it is the framing of children as non-agentic victims of conflicts that produced this silencing which stems from paternalistic protectionism. Mthethwa Nanhla's documentary, *Children of War* (2018), depicts children involved in the armed struggle against apartheid as child soldiers. The documentary presents a troubling commentary on the fate of some of these 'child soldiers' in the post-Apartheid era through testimonies. To Mthethwa, these children of war have been forgotten. The documentary seems to suggest that the supposed vulnerability which defines childhood is responsible for the occlusion of their stories of resistance from the corpus of anti-Apartheid heroics. And that disavowing the violent participation of these children also meant that they were never properly rehabilitated or reintegrated into the community; they never truly returned. See *Children of War*, (2018) dir. Nanhla Mthethwa.

psychological abreaction which ownership of one's life story affords²⁴³.

Struggle for Voice and Belonging in *Song for Night* and *Beasts of No Nation*

Song for Night is the story of My Luck, a 15-year-old mute child soldier, who belongs to a landmine diffusion unit comprised of children whose vocal cords have been surgically removed to ensure that they would not scream and give away their platoon's location if and when they get blown to pieces by landmines. Thus, our protagonist is voiceless as his voice has literally been wrested from him. But he is not deterred by the loss of voice in narrating the traumatic story he tells. He joined the army after escaping from the massacres in the North which claimed the lives of his mother and stepfather. He helplessly watched from his hiding space in the ceiling as his mother was raped and murdered. After the assailants leave, he wears his father's Fulani robe in order to blend into the marauding mob. He escapes from the north to Biafra, riding on a train laden with butchered corpses of Easterners. Thus, his story charts the orgy of violence from the antebellum through his movement in a war-torn society in search of other members of his platoon. All through this journey, he is unaware of his status as one of the ghosts haunting the landscape of war. He roams the war-ravaged community as a ghostly witness, in a setting akin to the one depicted by T.S. Elliot in "The Waste Land", and constantly rehashing his fond memories of prelapsarian times when he had a home. In this journey, he is perpetually in an in-between space where there is no home, but in this unsettled threshold space, he resists erasure by asserting his presence through a narration of what he saw. In the end, he does find a home, but in a chthonic otherworld, in a numinous passage. Although he finds his mother in this otherworld, the world of the dead being a transitory space can not home him. Indeed, it is not the home he set out to find.

Beasts of No Nation tells the story of Agu, a nine-year-old boy soldier, who joins a rebel group after losing his family. He reveals his induction into the murderous world of violence and how child soldiers are dehumanized. In the world he inhabits, there is no true sense of belonging. He is perpetually afraid of his commander who harasses him sexually.

²⁴³ This also has a negative effect on children's post-conflict re-integration. Steinl (2017) argues that child soldiers's refusal to come to terms with their role as perpetrators makes it difficult for reintegration to occur – since their family and community are often still smarting from the pain of the brutality inflicted on them by soldiers, including such children.

On the other side, the enemy also tried to kill him along with his father at the beginning of the war. Thus, neither side promises a safe space for him. Using a first-person point of view, Agu intimately narrates several episodes of violence perpetrated by and on child soldiers. Through a profound use of onomatopoeia and simile, the child soldier struggles to graphically capture the many violent acts that occur during wars. Like *My Luck*, Agu also searches for his mother and sister but, in the end, he neither finds them nor finds the home he knows and craves for. Although unlike *My Luck* he is alive at the end of his odyssey, he is still in a middle space where he does not know his location; even his saviours, the humanitarian organization, are unknown to him. Taken together, both texts weave a potently affective story of children who are so much more than children. They speak of children who have seen “the dying with the eyes of youth” (Okri 111). However, the texts employ different representational modes in their depiction of the complicity, or otherwise, of children in the perpetuation of violence during the civil war. While *Song for Night* depicts a protagonist that is well-aware of his role in the orgy of violence, and who asserts his agency all through the novel, *Beasts of No Nation* revolves around a protagonist who displays a striking unwillingness to take responsibility for his acts of violence.

A productive portal into the fraught world of these two texts is their front covers. In *Song for Night*, the ambiguity of belonging and the paradoxical identity of child soldiers as victims and perpetrators is evident on the cover page of the 2007 edition. The cover features the image of a boy standing at a threshold – at the doorway of an abandoned house – holding a bazooka while giving the camera a forlorn look. The threshold is a powerful metaphor for the “occult instability” (Bhabha, *The Location* 35) that defines the third space which child soldiers inhabit. While the image of a lonely child would ordinarily elicit empathy from readers, the piece of armament he clutches in his hand, which resembles an umbrella at first, makes this affect almost impossible. On first view, the bomb is not immediately obvious as one focusses on the sad emotions etched on the boy’s face. It is a look one knows too well, the look of a child who feels abandoned, and longs for the warmth of home. Then, after a few seconds of focussing on the image, in a gestalt moment, the bomb becomes obvious, and one’s perception shifts, chaos sets in, one is in a zone of precarity, a zone of knowing and not knowing. Should he be pitied, feared or hated? On another level, this also reveals the struggle that the paradoxical image of child soldiers evokes. From the

limited view of what lies inside the house, darkness also peeps out. It is dark inside the house, hence uninhabitable, even unknowable; and the armament that the boy holds suggests that it is not Eureka outside either. This is the bind in which the child is embroiled, this is his crisis of survival and belonging.

The 2009 edition of *Beasts of No Nation* features the image of a boy with a belt of bullets wrapped around his neck on its cover. The boy's gaze is stern, unsmiling and focussed. This follows the tradition of depicting child soldiers as boys heaving heavy weapons of destruction. However, the 2015 cover is semiotically richer. In the edition, the child is depicted as a shadowy form – which seems more productive in capturing the amorphous identity of the story's protagonist and that of child soldiers generally. Also, within the fluidity of this shadowy form, the image becomes capacious enough to accommodate a conception of child soldiering beyond the popular gender-narrow boy-soldier image. The cover page also features a sun, but it is not clear if the sun is rising or setting; however, it is deducible from the mellow glow of the sun that it foreshadows hope. But alas, we do not know if the boy is heading towards that hope or heading away from it. In a sense, the rising sun, which is a prominent symbol of the emergence of Biafra (land of the rising sun), is a most potent strategy of firmly grounding the text within the corpus of Biafra civil war literature. Unlike the image in *Song for Night* and that of the 2009 edition, the child soldier here does not lug any weapon around which suggests that, in a sense, the image has been sanitised to rid it of all icons of perpetratorhood. He merely has a stick with which he navigates the darkness. It should be noted that this image of an unarmed child bears a redolent link to the conception of child soldiers in humanitarian discourse, and as will become clear in the later part of this chapter, it is further connected to the text's attempt to launder child soldiers into saintly victims. Also, in classical NGO tradition, words on the page are etched in blood red print to call attention to the graphic tale the child soldier tells.

Song for Night

Of the two texts that I read in this chapter, the narrative in *Song for Night* is the more imaginatively close to the historical landscape of Biafra. The story starts mid-way into the civil war; however, through the deft use of flashback, the narrator ushers us back to where it all started – in Sabon Gari (visitors Quarters), in the North. The narrative thrives on a robust deployment of prosopopeia in a manner which seamlessly lures readers into willing

suspense of disbelief. That is, by reiterating the imaginary nature of the story right from its beginning, readers are made aware that the narrative is not geared towards historical truths. This invites a drift into the imaginary world of the text without the distracting ritual of fact checking. The aim also seems quite similar to the goal of Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, loosely translatable as distancing effect, which seeks to create emotional distance between the audience and the performance to stimulate a critical reception of the art on stage as against an emotive one. To further foster this critical but intimate relationship between the text and its readers, events are filtered through the eyes of the protagonist, who despite being a ghost, is not imbued with the gift of omniscience. Consequently, the narrative is positioned as an imaginary witness account which represents an unencumbered attempt to narrate the "manner of it" (Garuba 26).

The story *My Luck* re-members is disjointed and episodic (it is divided into 36 short sections) in a manner which simulates a witness's struggle to recount a traumatic moment; this beautiful marriage of narrative form and content leaves readers groping in the "night" alongside *My Luck* on his failed search for lost comrades. As a result, the text, unlike most narratives of the civil war, does not allude to co-textual narratives like radio announcements, newspaper reports, etc, which are mostly tooled to create verisimilitude; it is as if the protagonist is more interested in stubbornly declaring that, I am a child soldier and this is what I saw, this is my own story of Biafra. However, through the text's reimagining of the 1966/67 northern massacres, it does two things profoundly; on the one hand, it teleports the readers back to that moment of orgiastic massacre through the eyes of an ingénue who does not understand why and how belonging became a currency on the killing fields of Nigeria's north. On the other hand, it firmly localises its narrative within the corpus of literary works that grapple with the grim realities of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war.

Song for Night and the Speakability of Silence

Song for Night opens with an invocation of the tenuous struggle for voice, narrative presence, and agency which pervades children narratives of war. The protagonist declares:

what you hear is not my voice.

I have not spoken in three years: not since I left boot camp [...]. We are simply fighting to survive the war. It is a strange place to be at fifteen, bereft of hope and very nearly of your humanity. But that is where I am nonetheless. I joined up at twelve. We all wanted to join then: to fight. There was a clear enemy, and having lost loved

ones to them, *we all wanted revenge*. (Italics added, 16)

What is immediately apparent in the passage above is the narratorial competence of this young protagonist. The generous way he deploys the pronoun “I” to speak for the “we” signposts his ability to speak as a representative of other child soldiers, dead or alive. Although his oxymoronic description of himself as a silent-speaker seems to introduce a form of ventriloquism which might threaten authorial ownership and interiority, the protagonist reveals that this absent – yet present – voice is indeed an indication of interiority because, in a literal sense, the reader is let into My Luck’s mind (or head) to mine his traumatic story without the mediating presence of a speaker. In this deft move, the story stretches Motsemme’s arguments on the ways in which silence speaks, sometimes in a louder tenor than voice, to include a form of necromancy which exists in a phantasmagorical realm, where Ben Okri’s Azaro holds sway as a patron saint. Within this otherworldly space of narration, the possibilities of narration and stories are endless since the emergent narratives are not bound by the linear constrictions of spatiotemporal verisimilitude.

Thus, what emerges is a new mode and space of speaking, a new space of enunciation. Homi Bhabha calls attention to the insurgently creative mode of enunciation which burgeons as a result of unspeakability through his explanation of what it means to “un-speak.” In his essay, “The World and the Home” (1992), he writes that “[t]o ‘un’-speak is both to release from erasure and repression and to reconstruct, reinscribe the elements of the known” (146). In this sense, to unspeak becomes an insurgent act which allows an emancipatory questioning of what is known and the status quo. To be clear, to unspeak does not refer to being mute, it describes a form of silent speaking which works against hegemonic demands to ‘give an account’. Hence, this mode of enunciation is a site for insurgently asserting presence and narrative ownership; it is a nourishing space in that, as My Luck also observes, the silence which defines this space “brings interiority of the head” (*Song* 18), which then stimulates intellectual depth and rumination captured in words like “misnomer” (Ibid. 18). Although the protagonist presents the existence of such words in his register as an indicator of intellectual depth, ironically, it also signals the incongruence of his status as a child who is so much more than a child. But overall, his status as a “misnomer” has positioned him as a child who speaks, but on his own terms.

The productive nature of this trancelike somnambulant space of enunciation is also present in K.Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* where the protagonist, Azure, is able to vent his rage, and violently defeat his oppressors in a phantasmagorical realm where the past is married to the present, and where Sci-Fi befriends African myths to produce a potentially-liberating cocktail of prophetic dreams on Table Mountain. The view from this realm which transcends ontic dimensions has been described by Brenda Cooper (Cooper 2004) as "seeing with a third eye", an expression which she fashions to explore the ways in which three selected West African novelists employ magical realism to articulate the 'unsayable' through a blend of myths, diurnal specifics of postcolonial Africa, and the technology of printing powered by capitalism. If seeing with the "third eye" (a deliberately imaginative mode of seeing) enables other stories of existence to emerge, as Cooper argues, then it becomes possible to read silence not as the absence of voice, but as the inability of the listener to transcend the hegemony of voice – the inability to listen creatively.

Beyond the attention that *My Luck* calls to the absence of voice in the above, he is quick to check any lachrymal feeling that readers might have regarding his voicelessness. He reveals that the silenced child soldiers resist a total wresting of voice from them by inventing their own language (which is similar to Bhabha's observation concerning the state of unspeakability as a space of invention): "we have developed a crude way of talking, a sort of sign language that we have become fluent in" (*Song* 16). But he clarifies that this language that they invented is solely theirs, and it is different from the mainstream sign language: "[o]ur form of speech is nothing like the kind of sign language my deaf cousin studied in a special school before the war. But it serves us well" (*Song* 16). This is a profound subversion of the silencing regime. They have resignified the loss of voice from a marker of exclusion to a prerequisite for belonging to their alternative community. In this alternative community, the children find voice and belonging; they speak in codes that exclude adult soldiers who do not belong to their mute circle. Hence, it becomes impossible for outsiders, or hegemony, to speak for these children due to a lack of access to the enigmatic language of trauma which bears the violent weight of their experiences.

One only achieves intelligibility by either joining the group, which entails a loss of voice or by telepathically inhabiting the mind of one of them, as *My Luck* allows us to – with his consent. Undoubtedly, this group of children has created a closed circle of

belonging where they can truly own and control their stories. This is in tandem with Yuval-Davis's observation that struggles for recognition also involves elements of construction. In this case, their struggle against silence – or “silencio” (*Song* 18), which My Luck defines as a more dangerous form of silence – demands that they construct their own community of belonging where they can take full ownership of their stories. In the same vein, Gehrmann and Schönwetter (2017) write that this insurgent creation of an alternative mode of narration is revelatory of the children's creativity which flows from a need to smelt a “strong collective unity” to “protect them against the horrors of the outside world” (6).

To further understand what drives the children's fervent struggle for voice, it is important to pay attention to the connection that exists between death and being silenced within the sign language created by the child soldiers: “Death is two fingers sliding across the throat” (25). Death is having one's throat slit; to die is to be silenced. My Luck equates the surgical removal of his vocal cord to the act of being slaughtered; “[d]eath is always the expectation here and when my throat was cut it was no different” (*Song* 25). My Luck's description of how death is articulated within this language also suggests that when the mine diffusers had their throats slit, they were recreated as living dead. As Hamish Dalley observes, this twilight state of not being fully alive yet not dead allows them to transgress boundaries and borders (449). This ability to move here and there, albeit dangerously, is best encoded in their position as custodians of the minefield – a no man's land where they “intersect” with the enemy (*Song* 19).

Essentially, this creation of a new form of language is akin to an assertion of sentience, and the production of a linguistic community of belonging²⁴⁴. It is this community of belonging that serves as an anchor for the children in the middle of a devastating war. It is where they can laugh, play pranks, and retain some modicum of humanity. Hence, when My Luck loses the communion of this group, he is lost in an eternal dark maze where he is not sure if his movement is forward or backward. Furthermore, in this linguistic struggle for voice lies a validation of Michel Foucault's idea that each manifestation of power or

²⁴⁴ At the end of My Luck's Sojourn, he reclaims voice, and only then could he find something close to a home. He consolidates this moment of quasi-return by calling out his mother who then wraps him in her warm embrace (126).

oppression produces forms of resistance²⁴⁵.

Also, the protagonist forcefully claims his identity as a soldier who joined the war without coercion. This is a radical departure from the narratives of forced recruitment often encountered in humanitarian debates of child soldiering. In fact, he goes as far as speaking for other child soldiers by declaring that “we all wanted to join.” This gives more fillip to claims made by many Biafran children, some of which I have glossed over in the opening section of this chapter. In a nutshell, he lets us know that his war is a war of revenge for his loss of loved ones. Interestingly, he declares that he knows the enemy clearly – like Obilu in Festus Iyayi’s *Heroes*, which I examined in the third chapter of this thesis. Like Obilu, he falls victim to a form of misrecognition at the beginning of the war. However, much later, My Luck realises that both belligerents are complicit in the orgy of violence within which he is trapped. In these early stages of his narrative, he seems reluctant to acknowledge that the violent way in which the older comrades snatched voice from the children makes them enemies. The commanders were not only willing to sacrifice the children but were also quick to deprive them of voice, and consequently erase their stories and footprints from the war’s historiography. Read as a metaphor, the scar that My Luck fingers on his neck (*Song* 17) thus becomes a visceral proof of the silencing of children’s voices within popular Nigeria-Biafra war narratives. This silencing is framed as a deliberate act which seeks to avoid the denunciation that interstitial stories like child soldier accounts would present, and to sidestep the capacity of such accounts to undo hegemonic accounts at their wefts. But it is also symbolic of the birth of an insurgent mode of speaking which mocks hegemonic projects of silencing.

In a statement which reveals a clear malediction of the “imposed code of silence” (Ejiogu 2013) which pervades hegemonic historiography of the civil war, our ghostly chaperon to the abyss of muted phantoms and angry ghosts asks: “[w]hat kind of leader forgets his men?” He then proceeds to remember all the soldiers in his platoon, every single one of them (*Song* 99-100). To remain immune to the sedate allure of amnesia, he transforms his body into an archive which bears witness to the lives and times of his

²⁴⁵ In a chapter titled, “Incitement to Discourse”, Foucault writes about this form of action, which every manifestation of power and suppression births, while thinking about the polemics which surround the framing of sex within discourses. See Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978).

comrades through a painful process of carving little crosses on his right arm to represent each dead comrade as well as his victims. Through this scarification ritual, he is joined in pain and blood to his deceased friends in a manner which burnishes their stories onto his being eternally. His body is transfigured into a textual surface in a manner reminiscent of Yvonne Vera's description of her body as the parchment where she hones her writing after discovering "the magic of [her] own body as a writing surface" (Vera 506). The children are aware of the importance of their bodies as archives of memory; this is evident in its description as "a pattern cut into an arm" (*Song* 29) in their sign language. I think the choice of an arm (a body part that is mostly uncovered) as the textual surface for inscribing history indicates that while this history which they bear on their bodies is privately owned, there is also a desire to share it, to make it legible.

Thus, My Luck's body is portrayed as a textual surface that bears witness to violence. His body bears a roll call of death – "the cemetery on [his] arm" (*Song* 99) which also functions as a "mnemonic device" (*Song* 21). With this embodied mnemonic device, he can return to the particular moment of each comrade's death by touching the scarified bookmarks on his arm. This helps him sort-through the densely populated archive of death which is ineluctably grafted to his very being, ensuring he never forgets²⁴⁶. In this embodied cemetery, both his loved ones and his victims are linked in the eternal dance of death; it is a map of love and a kill list:

I turn over my right forearm. There are six X's carved there: one for each person that I enjoyed killing. I rub them: my uncle who became my step-father, the old women I saw eating the baby, and John Wayne, the officer who enlisted and trained us and supervised our throat-cutting and our first three months in the field, the man who was determined to turn us into animals—until I shot him. (31-32)

²⁴⁶ Ngugi also writes about the centrality of texts inscribed on bodies to the preservation of identity and "place" (15) in his book, *Something Torn and New*. Although he is more concerned with the ways in which texts used to beautify the body also testify (or textify) about the place and belonging of that body, it would not be too far-fetched to invoke his argument in relation to My Luck's "embodied cemetery". Despite the stark difference that exists between the violent texts of history inscribed on My Luck's body and the beautifying texts which Ngugi calls attention to, both attempts are related in that they use the body as a parchment which captures the ineluctable bind that exists between bodies, place, and belonging. For instance, Ngugi writes about the practice of writing Christian names on the bodies of converts in the early days of Christianity in Africa (*Something Torn* 15). Through this ritual of embossing new names on erstwhile named bodies, the missionaries waged a battle against the memories of who and what these bodies were before conversion. This sort of relationship has been explored in the third chapter of this thesis. See Ngugi wa Thiongó. *Something Torn and New* (BasicCivita Books, 2009).

This kill list reveals that it was not solely the war that started off My Luck on his killing spree. He killed his wicked stepfather in the North before returning to Biafra. After that, he joined the army in order to avenge his mother's death²⁴⁷. In fact, quite interestingly, the narrative embedded within this corporeal archive troubles My Luck's attempt to blame the war for the loss of his childhood. The embodied narrative charts his agentic deployment of murder as a survival tragedy from the pre-war murder of his abusive stepfather. What this indicates is that bodies are capable of encoding a much deeper narrative of trauma than storytelling could ever achieve. What his body archives are "bodiographies", which Sarah Nuttall describes as the capacity of the body to participate in history-making as an active speaker (Nuttall 190)²⁴⁸. Also, according to Akresh et al. (2012), the bodies of Biafran children continue to speak of their debilitating experience of starvation even in adulthood.

Through the embodied cemetery that My Luck bears as a constant reminder of his complicity in the perpetuation of violence, the idea of children as innocent victims of war is unsettled. Thus My Luck speaks back to the stock characterization of child soldiers as victims by asking the following questions:

If we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice? I have seen rebel scouts cut off their enemies' ears or fingers or toes and keep them in tin cans as souvenirs. Some collect teeth, which they thread painstakingly into necklaces. Who taught us this?

Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivalled only by an orgasm? It does not matter how the death is dealt—a bullet tearing through a body, the juicy suck of flesh around a bayonet, the grainy globular disintegration brought on by clubs—the joy is the same and requires only the complete focus on the moment, on the act. (*Song* 109)

The rhetorical questions woven together here are meant to interrogate the claims of innocence made by belligerents and the humanitarian framing of children as agentless

²⁴⁷ Missing on this kill list is the assailant whom he mercilessly diced while escaping massacres in the North (*Song* 75). Although the reason for excluding him from the list is not clearly stated, it is deducible that the anger which overcame him as he made minced meat of the man, and the cold detachment he felt after the act (Ibid. 75), are reasons for banishing the man's death from memory. This reveals the incompleteness of remembrance. By denying the man a space on his integument cemetery, he attempts to wish away the man's memory; but he refuses to be forgotten, he is a part of My Luck's story of violence. It could even be argued that the man's memory is so present that a mnemonic device is not needed to codify his existence.

²⁴⁸ The scarification on My Luck's body also brings to mind Sethe's scarred back in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Although unlike My Luck's self-inscribed bodiography, Sethe's scar is from a whipping by her master, both scars serve as important archives of traumatic memories in both texts.

victims of the savagery of African wars. It is arguing against narratives which advocate that children should be saved, forgiven, rehabilitated – essentially habituating them into victimhood. My Luck couches the act of killing in sexual imageries to tease out the sadistic pleasure he derives in the empowering act of stealing a life – and to shock us even more by showing how much he knows about sex and pleasure. Even when he is coerced by his commander to rape a woman, he acknowledges the sadomasochistic pleasure that floods his body: “As I dropped my pants and climbed onto the woman, I wondered how it was that I had an erection. Some part of me was enjoying it and that perhaps hurt me the most. [...] I moved, and as much as I wanted to pretend, I could not lie, I enjoyed it” (*Song* 66). The nuanced way this troubling scene is portrayed makes it difficult to neatly frame My Luck as either perpetrator or victim. Rather, he demands to be recognised as both, as caught in-between these conflicting positions as a result of his existential struggles.

Furthermore, the reader is not primed to blame the commander, John Wayne, for this egregious act of violence since we have been forewarned of his troubling state of mental health by My Luck. Unlike other protagonists in child soldier narratives, an instance of which we would encounter in the second text I read in this chapter, My Luck fully embraces his perpetratorhood. He does not attempt to curry any empathy from readers as an agentless victim of a sadistic commander, a stock character which is also a staple of child soldier narratives and which is very much present in this narrative too. However, in this case, the agentic child soldier executes John Wayne after he taunts his platoon of child soldiers with the lurid details of what he plans to do to a seven-year-old girl who had innocently run into his psychopathic embrace (*Song* 31-32)²⁴⁹.

This sadistic enjoyment of cold-blooded murder within the orgy of violence which the civil war occasioned is depicted as cutting across belligerents and involving all classes of soldiers. Both sides killed and looted: “Looting is something we all do, rebel and federal troops, officers and enlisted men alike (*Song* 42).” In this desolate landscape where everyone struggles for survival, the view from My Luck’s position inculcates both belligerents. In another moment of troubling clarity, he displays a remarkable sense of

²⁴⁹ This scene also suggests child rape as one of the forms of violence which war throws up. Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) also bears the burden of such stories in her depiction of the gang rape of a bar girl in which Agwu also participates.

responsibility for his crimes: “I like to pretend that I do it [kill] to ease the suffering of the mutilated but still undead foes, that my bullet to their brain or knife across their throat is mercy; but the truth is, deep down somewhere I enjoy it, revel in it almost” (*Song* 19). This seems like an effort to find abreaction through the Freudian idea of talking cure. It also gestures to the centrality of a listener, and an enabling narrative space to healing²⁵⁰.

Furthermore, My Luck reveals that his situatedness in a twilight zone of belonging precedes the civil war. His identity is enigmatic like that of his father because, as Igbo Muslims, they can neither be Igbo enough to their Igbo kin, nor Muslim enough in the eyes of their Muslim northern hosts. In other words, they are ‘outsiders-within’. His father does not fit into the strict definition of Igboness as synonymous to Christianity: “[m]y father the imam and circumciser who it was said betrayed his people by becoming a Muslim cleric and moving north to minister; and all this before the hate began” (30). The ‘betrayal’ of daring to be different is cited as possessing a violently dislocating sting, however, My Luck does not see a continuum between this pre-massacre rejection that his family suffers and the hate-fuelled massacres that followed. He fails to notice that the same conception of belonging as non-negotiable and fixed is the force that rendered Easterners as outsiders, and as such, “not-grievable” to the northern marauders. What his description reveals is an inculcation of the Igbo people in the violent politics of belonging that is believed to have birthed the civil war. Through the intolerance of fixed conceptions of Igboness for difference, intra-group dimensions of violence are brought to the fore²⁵¹.

A spatial dimension to the violent politics of belonging is also introduced in his description of how his family negotiated existence within Sabongari:

²⁵⁰ In the next chapter, which is the concluding chapter of this thesis, I pay attention to the ways in which the civil war texts, as a corpus, indicate a need for spaces of narration which would allow for shared mourning, abreaction and belonging.

²⁵¹ This fixed conception of the Igbo as homogenously Christian continues to thrive in secessionist rhetoric although Christianity is often erroneously conflated with Judaism, which is most apparent in narratives that weave Bantu Igbo genealogy around Jewishness. For instance, IPOB, the leading Biafra secessionist group, states its mandate as “the restoration of sovereign and independent nation-state of Biafra, a Judeo-Christian nation.” See www.ipbinusa.org. Essentially, within this religiously defined framing of ‘pure’ Igbo identity, My Luck and his father would be mapped as outsiders, despite genealogical proof of their Igboness. See also Achebe’s specious description of the creation of Nigeria as a forced welding together of “Animists, Muslims, and Christians [...] by a delicate, some say artificial, lattice” (Achebe, *There Was A Country*, 9). In this triadic partitioning of a vast country of over 250 different ethnic nationalities, only the three major ethnic groups are invoked. The Igbo is Christian, Yoruba Animists, and the Hausa-Fulani are Muslims; thus, religion, in Achebe’s thesis, becomes the major cause of the civil strife that plagued and continues to plague Nigeria.

It is a terrible thing in this divided nation, even in its infancy, for an Igbo man to be Muslim. I will never know why my father chose that path; one that put him outside his own community, his own people, most of whom are Catholic, and made him a thing that the people who would later become our enemies feared: a hybrid. Even though he had been a Muslim since he was fifteen and traveling as a singer with a band, and an imam for twenty, the only mosque they gave him was inside Sabon Gari: the foreigners' ghetto. Everyone hated the mosque, sitting as it did by decree of the Sardauna in the midst of the Christian enclave. Everyone hated my father. (*Song 72*)

To fully comprehend the multiple layers of exclusion which plagued My Luck's family as described above, it is important to briefly explain the role of Sabongari as a space of otherness. Sabongari is a Hausa word which literally translates as visitors' quarters, new town or "foreigners' ghetto" as My Luck aptly describes it above. These uncanny enclaves which house non-autochthons, who are mainly southerners, function as zones of unbelonging where difference is policed and maintained. These settlements are mostly situated at the fringes of northern towns, and have historically served as deviant heterotopias where pubs, brothels and all things considered deviant in Sharia-ruled states of the North are sited. As a result of its position as a receptacle of all things lurid in northern imaginary, it features prominently in most of the bloodlettings that have plagued the North²⁵². It is within this kind of unhomely space, where kinship should've been a form of panacea, that My Luck's family is further pushed to an interstitial position. The intersection of ethnicity, religion and cartographic location produces a traumatic form of exclusion for My Luck and his family. In other words, "everyone hated [his] father" because he transgressed the normative – purist idea of Igboness²⁵³.

However, the traumatic slippage which this layer of exclusion produces creates My Luck as a questioning witness who sees beyond the utopian image of Biafra as a space of

²⁵² For instance, in Kano, a city considered to be the commercial centre of Nigeria's north, this geographic mapping of difference is even deeper. There is Sabongari for non-indigenes from outside the North, while Tudun Wada houses non-natives from within the North; Tudun Wada is not regarded as prurient as Sabon-gari. What this creates is a scaling of belonging according to the one's closeness to the North. The farther one's home is from the North, the lower the level of belonging. Sabongaris have also started springing up in some towns in the southern parts of Nigeria. Interestingly, these southern versions are mostly created by Northerners who live in the south as spaces of otherness where they create mini-replicas of their northern towns.

²⁵³ This deployment of exclusion in the service of hegemonic politics of belonging is also similar to what Wamuwi Mbao deeply examines in his reading of Afrikaner identity in Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water* (2009). He observes that attempts to step beyond the hegemonic ideas of Afrikaner-hood, especially when it intersects with masculinity, produced forms of exclusion for the transgressive characters (Mbao 82).

belonging – which is very much in line with my arguments in this chapter, and in the thesis as a whole. Shaun Viljoen also lends a voice to the lucidity characteristic of views from in-between – within and through the cracks – in his robust introduction to Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* (2000/2013). His description of Azure’s threshold belonging which affords him the intimate knowledge of an insider and also the critical distance of an outsider (Viljoen 8-9)²⁵⁴, is applicable to My Luck’s interstitial position too. For instance, while his knowledge of Islamic rituals such as the call to prayer saves him from marauding mobs in the North, it is his Igbo identity that averts his deaths from the hands of angry Igbo men when he returns to Biafra dressed as a Hausa-Fulani boy riding on a corpse-filled train. Importantly, the fluidity of this twilight space positions him as an authoritative witness who gives account of the northern massacres as well as the self-serving, freewheeling violence within Biafra.

In My luck’s twilight position, time is complicit in the unending trauma which enfolds his very being. Time is frozen. He is frozen in time. To riff on a clichéd expression, time has refused to heal this wound or synthesise a pastness to the trauma. Using the broken wristwatch he inherited from his father as a metaphor, he laments that

[t]ime is standing still—literally. My watch, an old Timex that belonged to my father, is fucked. Already broken when he died, it was the only thing of his that my uncle let me inherit. [...] Since I’ve had it, the second and hour hands have fallen off, both nestling like tired armatures in the bottom of the cracked glass case. My life it turns out is a series of minutes. [...] I look at my broken watch and think, One more hour. Rustling the broken arms like pods in a shaker, I head off again. (42)

The idea of broken time aptly captured in the metaphor of a broken timepiece is here rendered as the main reason why My Luck can neither move forward nor go back. It is the avatar of his suspended time. On a deeper level, it is possible to read this metaphor as speaking to the moment of rupture which the war represents in the life of both the protagonist and the nation. Walter Benjamin sees such moments of frozen time as productive for engaging with history because it renders chronologizing phrases like “once upon a time” void by establishing a link between the past and the “time of the now”

²⁵⁴ Shaun Viljoen opens his essay with K.Sello Duiker’s “One Breezy Night Late in November” (2005), a poem which foregrounds his thinking about in-betweenness in the essay quite aptly.

(Benjamin 262). History then becomes a continuum, an event that never ended²⁵⁵.

Furthermore, when we pay attention to the fact that the watch was broken in pre-war time, when his father was murdered, we get a sense that My Luck sees both the wartime violence and the pre-war murderous orgy in the North as contained within the same temporal moment. The 'now' of violence then becomes a never-ending nightmare from which neither the participants nor the nation has been able to wake. This is revelatory of the depth of trauma to which the event plunged the nation and the failure of post-war reconciliation, especially for those that fell out of the narrow scheme of belonging that was used to define those to whom mourning and rehabilitation were available. The view of children as neither participant in nor victims of violence beyond starvation meant that they were also not properly rehabilitated. By providing them with food after the war, Nigeria, and indeed the world, assumed erroneously that the work of rehabilitation was complete.

This theme of a war that never ends is also present in the accounts of former child soldiers interviewed in the *Caracal Report* which I referred to earlier. As one of the interviewees in Mthetwa's documentary *Children of War* makes quite clear, the participation of a child in violence during conflicts creates the child as a persona non grata in the post-conflict moment because the new identity that the child now bears as both a child and soldier represents a transgressive category in the society. In a sense, one could argue that the child is thus refigured as an embodiment of the disruptive violence of war or conflict because her presence is a constant reminder of the depth of violence to which the society sank; a depth that occasioned children having to bear arms. The child soldier, as a signifier of an unwanted memory, thus becomes a haunting presence within the landscape. Like Mene in *Sozaboy*, the child who is no longer a child is not welcomed to the community²⁵⁶.

It is also important to note the curious relationship between this watch that can not tell time (yet it is described as My Luck's most prized possession), and a narrator with no voice. And since our narrator relies on this spoilt timepiece to guide his sojourn temporally,

²⁵⁵ Jay Winter's writing on the centrality of 'the now' in creating the past through a process of remembrance is also linked to this line of theorization.

²⁵⁶ Kirsten Fisher also writes about this difficulty which child soldiers encounter while trying to return to their communities after wars. She links this lack of reintegration of some demobilised child soldiers to the society's fears concerning the atrocities they might have committed during military service (Fisher 38).

while also relying on an absent voice to articulate his story, it is possible to deduce that the oxymoronic conflation inherent in the broken but functional tools used to navigate the narrative speak to the enigmatic nature of the story he tells. It is a traumatic story within which there is a rupturing of the limit of time and the reliability of voice. Also, his description of the spoilt watch as the only inheritance he is allowed to keep gestures towards the transgenerational nature of the trauma of war. He is an inheritor of a fraught memory.

Memory is a River I Hate

My Luck's inheritance of a past that is polluted with trauma and violence is further metaphorized by the image of the Cross River²⁵⁷ which flows through the text from the beginning to the end. This imagined version of the river present on the pages of *Song for Night* is fecund with memories, with corpses; it ebbs and flows past funereal pyres where fetid smokes continue to drift out. Its flow functions as a map through the grotesque landscape which My Luck traverses²⁵⁸. If the haunted landscape of the novel lends itself to an allegorical reading as the terrain of Biafran collective memory of the civil war, then the Cross River is the most potent metaphor deployed to depict the continuous trauma which plagues those who witnessed the war as well as the postmemory generation. It flows into the ocean with its baggage of cadavers to symbolise the ways in which the Biafran experience flows into a global corpus of haunting tales of violence. In the transnational flow of the ocean, the local memory of the war becomes circulated across global shores to create a "cosmopolitan memory" (Levy and Sznajder 2002).

Abani's gift for midwifing troubling scatological imagery which rivals that of Ayi Kwei Armah and Labou Tansi is deployed to the fullest in the portrayal of this river which links the past and the present. The river, the river of memory, which is pregnant with bloated corpses, speaks of the traumatic memories that continue to haunt those that witnessed the war as well as the inheritors of its dark clouds. It is a "river [that] winds through [My Luck's]

²⁵⁷ The Cross River is the main river which flows through the eastern part of Nigeria. It originates from Cameroon, charting its course through major parts of the East on its flow to the Atlantic Ocean.

²⁵⁸ Like the river Styx in Greek mythology, the Cross River is also a river to be crossed by the dead on their journey to the underworld. And like the river Styx bestowed immortality on Achilles' body when he is dipped in its murky flow at birth, the Cross river also offers some protection to My Luck in its smelly womb.

journey like an irritant that will not go away, and yet the water will not wash [him] clean” (104). The river serves as a compass and safe space for our narrator from marauders that constantly threaten his presence. However, his relationship with the river is a love-hate one, as evident in how he describes it as “an irritant”. It is to the river that Ijeoma, My Luck’s girlfriend, leads him to wash off the taste of rape after he is forced to rape a woman (42) – as a ritual which reconnects him to the pre-war moral structures of the society. He abandons the safety it offers when the putrid smell of the past it bears becomes insufferable. But he always returns to the river, to memory, as the only guide through the mines of the present on his search for return and belonging. For instance, to avoid being seen by enemy soldiers, he observes that “the safest thing to do is to grab hold of one of the corpses, get under it, and float downstream for a while. [...] The smell is beyond anything I even have words for (52).” Yet, with all its disgusting contents which make him “throw up silently in the river” (Ibid. 52), he is carried away from the danger of the present by the river.

Like Clorinda’s voice represents trauma as a past event which continues to disrupt the present in Caruthian intellection, the river of memory is also responsible for reminding My Luck of his psychic wound and consequently rupturing his attempt at inhabiting the now, the present. He says: “I stand at the edge of the forest down to the river. But then the war intrudes again: floating past in the river like a macabre regatta is a cluster of corpses. Riding them like barges, and breakfasting at the same time, are a bunch of vultures” (*Song* 37). Comparing the terrible scene before him to a regatta also represents an invocation of pre-war memory; the Cross River is known for the colourful regattas and carnivals often hosted in its waters. In juxtaposing the colourful sights which the river bore before the war and the putrescent memories it now bears, My Luck depicts a profound image of loss. His attempt to abandon the river is futile; it does not matter whether he is interested in immersing himself fully into memory or not, it continues to haunt him. However, it does much more than that. It also serves as a marker of a pre-war bucolic state which gets ruptured – like Ijeoma’s yellow house in *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), which I read in the previous chapter. He describes the river as

a breathtaking river over two miles wide, in many places etched out of the horizon only by the line of palm trees on the opposite bank. It was dotted with sandbanks—many of them a good acre big. These glistening white mounds humped the river every dry season and lasted months, developing a whole ecosystem of water

hyacinths, bull rushes, fluorescent white egrets, basking hippos or crocodiles, and fishermen camps. (*Song 55*)

Here, the river is portrayed as a touchstone for My Luck's nostalgic escape from a traumatic present into an idealised past. His invocation of the river's contribution to an ecologically balanced pre-war home enables one to envision the crass despoliation which the war produced. In the text's present time, the river has been transformed from "a breathtaking" sight to behold to a literally breath-taking (choking) carrier of a gory memory of destruction (*Song 52*). In its prelapsarian state, the river is clean, filled with happy memories of fishing trips punctuated with folktales, myths, and legends that initiate My Luck into Igboness. Essentially, the river's flow functions as a temporal timeline which helps the protagonist keep track of what happened, when, and where, and as an anchor for his identity.

In addition, the Cross River is positioned as a wellspring of many stories as revealed in the multiplicity of stories surrounding its genesis. And all these stories are important, as grandpa informs us: "Don't trust any of them, he always cautioned. Trust all of them, he warned" (*Song 56*). In grandfather's warning lies an important message regarding how to approach history, memory, and remembrance; this represents the main force behind the text – the capacity of literature to archive many voices and their disparate stories. One could say that grandpa has just echoed Walter Benjamin's idea of historical materialism²⁵⁹ in an African setting. The witty saying gestures towards the need to be open to multiple narratives in order to maintain a sense of self that is unshackled from sensationalised histories. Within such an ennobling narrative space, a beautiful mosaic of interwoven but textually varied stories could emerge to stake a claim to their presence. It is within such spaces that it becomes possible to listen to intersectional stories which defy neat strictures of belonging.

What emerges from accompanying My Luck on his movement through the uncanny spaces, through interstitial zones that are "transitional yet inchoate" and defined by a

²⁵⁹ In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Walter Benjamin problematises the linearity which orders the form of historiography deployed in traditional historicism by calling attention to the excess which lies unacknowledged in the canonization of metahistories as indisputable truths. To him, this portends grave dangers to human interactions with history because this is a version of history that has been cleansed of all "complicity" (258). For while "[h]istoricism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past" (262). Thus, he proposes, as one of his theses, that a historian "regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (254).

“matrix of death and becoming” (Soyinka 142), is that children are bearers of the scars of memory just as much as their adult compatriots. They are active participants and important witnesses to the violence of war. In a sense, it is possible to read this assertion that they too bear the burden of memory as an assertion of belonging; as a credential for entering into the community of remembrance. Aleida Assman calls attention to the centrality of remembrance as a prerequisite for belonging; although she writes about another context – the Holocaust and how its remembrance is a requirement for membership of the European Union (Assman 100) – it speaks to how collective remembrance is a parameter for mapping the boundaries of belonging. For instance, communal myths are often areas where these ways of remembering are canonized as lines which mark where the ‘we’ ends and the uncharted territory of the other begins. Thus, *My Luck* invokes his presence and belonging by citing his knowledge of the community’s founding myth which is encoded in the Cross River. In fact, the text presents the river as *lieu de memoire* (a la Pierre Nora)²⁶⁰ imbued with memories of both the pre-war peace and the trauma of wartime despoliation.

At the end of the text, *My Luck* finds a measure of peace by surrendering to the river’s flow; indeed, “everything comes back to the river” (*Song* 88) as he declares; the river transports him, in a coffin, to his mother in the world of the dead. It seems to me that Abani is suggesting that it is only by following the fetid flow of the river of memory, with its many corpses (its many stories of violence), that a return to a prelapsarian concinnity or belonging could be achieved. However, the text undercuts all feelings of Eureka by calling attention to the impossibility of a fully satisfying ‘return’ through its depiction of *My Luck*’s pyrrhic return home in the world of the dead. This lack of return is similar to what emerges in Simon Gikandi’s exploration of Ngugi’s narratives of “homeward journey” (texts he wrote between 1963- 1968). Gikandi writes that while the ex-combatants of the Mau Mau uprising did return home, the home they returned to was an uncanny one, it was a home “that was no longer the hearth they had dreamt it would be, but a site of radical displacement” (Gikandi 29). In this, *Song for Night* defies Coundroutis’s classification as one of the narratives shaped by a humanitarian discourse of victimhood and healing

²⁶⁰ Pierre Nora describes *lieu de memoire* as sites of memory which serve as receptacles of communal memories and remembrance. See Pierre Nora. *The Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (Columbia UP, 1997).

(Coundroutis 194), there is neither healing nor a white saviour evoked here. In fact, to echo Stef Crap's observation in his reading of "Turner" and "Feeding the ghosts", what the haunting presence of My Luck as a ghost in the memoryscape of Biafra indicates is a refusal to permit a "clearing away of the dead" which then "permit[s] this traumatic history to live on as a haunting, troubling, foreign element within the present (Craps 64). The spectral presence of My Luck is indicative of the nature of the war as a past that is still very present. It is a past that continues to haunt.

Beasts of No Nation

The title, *Beasts of No Nation*, is an explicit ode to absence and otherness; it immediately indicates that the story it narrates is located at an interstitial space of unbelonging where the excess produced due to intersectional positionality has created characters that can not be contained within the fixed frames of the politics of belonging. Those caught in this in-between space are written out of the conception of citizenship. To further capture the placelessness of the story and its characters, the writer opts for a focaliser who, as a child, is not aware of either his specific cartographic location or the broader politics of the conflict he is caught in. James Hawley also notes that the sense of nowhere evoked by the title represents Iweala's attempt to transcend the specifics of the civil war in terms of temporality and geography (Hawley 23). It should be added that narrating from this space that is nowhere but everywhere relieves the narrative of the burden of facticity which often plagues historical narratives.

Indeed, the prefigurative nature of the title has made it a favourite point of entry to several scholars who seem most interested in charting its genealogy. Schultheisis writes that the title, *Beasts of No Nation*, was derived from Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, and argues further that the title posits a challenge to the very idea of post-colonial nation-statehood. In terms of the title, although Schutheisis might seem right if one considers that Soyinka's text was published in 1974, it seems fairly certain that Iweala's inspiration for the title came from Fela Anikulapo's 1989 song of the same title. Given that Iweala's text opens with lyrics from the song, which is a vitriolic dressing-down of the United Nations (which he puns as "disunited United Nations"), Fela's songtext seems closest in tenor to the Iweala's narrative. Fela refers to the member countries as "Beasts of No Nations, egbe ke'gbe (bad society)" due to their warmongering tendencies. If we follow this line of

argument, it is possible to see how Iweala adumbrates Fela's message to further berate the humanitarian narratives which shape child soldier stories in Africa. Linking his story to Fela's song allows a channelling of Fela's scathing critique of the patrimonial global politics that he finds in the United Nations. Susanne Gehrmann makes the same point while locating some of the texts that the writer might have drawn the title from (Gehrmann 38). She links the title to Fela's song but takes it even further by citing Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) as Fela's muse for the title.

Another stylistic aspect of the text which has enjoyed some attention in critical scholarship is the aspect of language, which Iain Lambert describes as a "linguistic experiment" that builds on Ken Saro-Wiwa's linguistic project of smelting a subaltern speak in *Sozaboy* (Lambert 284)²⁶¹. Lambert also teases out some of the stylistic ingredients of Saro-Wiwa and Iweala's linguistic experiments as reduplication, the use of infinitives, and the deployment of onomatopoeia (290). However, he does not linger long enough on these stylistic items to be able to tease out their functions as narratorial tools which enable a multisensory immersion into the narrative landscape of the texts. For instance, in *Beasts of No Nation* reduplication, and capitalisation, are combined with onomatopoeic items to depict both intensity and volume. When Agu describes the destructive rainfall of bombs around him, it is captured as "GBWEM! GBWEM!" (*Beasts* 66, 79). And later the same sound is used to describe the laugh of a personified depiction of war: "he [war] is just laughing GBWEM! GBWEM! GBWEM!" (*Beasts* 118). This concatenation of a sound that had been established earlier as the sound of bombing to the sound of a person called war makes the personification of war most potent. It makes it possible to imagine war sitting somewhere, feasting on the spoils of violence while laughing.

Iweala's linguistic project in *Beasts of No Nation* does a whole lot more than inserting the text into an intertextual commune of texts that seek to create a form of language which captures the original voice of marginal characters. It is an integral part of the creative tapestry of the text; in fact, it could be said that it is what distinguishes the text from many other fictional accounts of the war written from the perspective of a child. This linguistic

²⁶¹ He eventually takes this exercise in tracing intertextual links a tad too far; a level of conceit is introduced when he argues that the use of a first-person point of narration in *Sozaboy* links it to Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (287). This position suggests that the first-person point of view, which is mostly used in narrating quester tales in Africa is Amos Tutuola's invention.

experimentation is also symptomatic of one of the difficulties of representing the voice of a child. Debbie Pinfold calls attention to how this struggle threatens the expediency of the child as a “reliable witness” (Pinfold 186). However, since reliability would suggest a form of truth-telling, I find the unreliable nature of Agu to be quite productive for my endeavour. It is the contradictions which come through in his narrative which further call attention to the excess which is disavowed in grand narratives.

Although this text archives gory tales of desolate landscapes patently similar to the ones that haunt the pages of *Song for Night*, it is no doubt a different narrative in the ways in which the protagonist recounts his odyssey. A fitting point to start untying some of the creative knots woven together in the text is from its end, from a space which the protagonist describes as “heaven” (171), but which is of course ‘nowhere’ spatially. I know this seems a queer approach to an already cyclical narrative. However, starting from the end provides crucial insight into what shapes what Agu remembers and how he re-members them. As previously noted, unlike *My Luck*, the protagonist here is not ready to take responsibility for his murderous orgy, and this can not be unconnected to the demands of the politics of belonging which rules his site of address – the humanitarian camp. Amy, Agu’s case officer, demands that he speaks: “she is telling me to speak speak speak and thinking that my not speaking is because I am like a baby” (175). The repetition of “speak” is an urgent attempt to forcefully invoke Agu as a speaking subject, but on Amy’s terms. The urgency of Amy’s desire to have Agu speak and consequently have access to his story of trauma, which is apparent in her repetitive demand for narration, is in no way altruistic. It is to simulate the kind of dynamics of power, skewed in favour of the listener (the analyst), for which psychoanalysis has been most criticised. What becomes clear is that Amy needs access to the child’s story in order to achieve a full stature.

Here, again, we are reminded of the ambivalent functions of silence. As Agu observes, the case officer is convinced that the boy’s silence is a symptom of his vulnerability which is linked to his status as a child. However, the boy’s decision to remain silent is agentic; on the one hand, it is to maintain ownership of his story, and on the other hand, it is to remain in the good books of his saviours. He fears that narrating the gory details of his participation in the war as both perpetrator and victim might throw him outside the unnamed humanitarian organisation’s scope of belonging. Since they have come to Africa in search

of children who are solely victimised, a child who acknowledges his bloody past has refused the forgiveness offered by the likes of the fat-cheeked Reverend Father Festus. The priest who demands “confession” in return for “Forgiveness and Resurrection”; however, [t]he only thing that is making sense to [Agu] is memory” the memory of “another boy—Strika—sleeping next to me” (*Beasts* 139). It is this memory that he eventually trades for a right to belong to the humanitarian camp. On the whole, it could be said that it is this demand for victimhood that produces the exculpatory tenor which defines his narrative, making him qualify all his horrific acts with caveats that highlight his helplessness.

The Precarity of not being ‘Child Enough’

Although Agu’s remembrance of war has now been NGOised, strands of other stories which threaten neat categories of belonging emerge from time to time in his troubling chronicle. Halfway through the devastating story of violence which Agu narrates, he briefly returns to some of the pre-war events that are responsible for him being caught in the civil war’s cycle of violence. And in the nostalgic return to the past which he remembers “like dream” (*Beasts* 35), the non-negotiable demands of heteropatriarchy and its signature toxic masculinity comes to the fore as responsible for exposing the child to the whims and caprices of war. When it becomes apparent that the war would affect Agu’s village, a meeting was called to sensitize the people and map out safety strategies. It was agreed that the women and children should be helped to safety by the United Nations troops. However, being a ‘boy’, Agu’s father refuses to let him go with the group of women and children. He is essentially removed from the team for the sake of keeping his father’s sense of belonging to the masculine fold intact. Listen to the back and forth debate Agu’s mother and father have on this issue, and note that Agu’s opinion on the matter is not sought:

I am hearing my mother and my father talking. What do you mean you are not coming, my mother is saying to my father and I am hearing my father saying back, how can Agu be coming with you if we are supposed to be the men of this village? What is that looking like if everybody is staying to make sure their house is all right and we are just running from place to place? Enh? [...] Wait now! It is my duty and it is his duty as my first son to be—before my mother is shouting, YOUR SON THIS AND THAT! Sometimes I am thinking that you are having no sense at all. Let me just be taking him with me enh. If there is war and everybody is dying, then who is even going to say anything if he is not staying around? (*Beasts* 67-68)

But this is how the child really feels about things:

I am lying and thinking that I am not wanting to be seeing all the killing, but I am also knowing that I can't just be leaving my father alone here and running off otherwise all of the other men will be laughing at him. (*Beasts* 68)

What becomes obvious in the passages above is how Agu's father's subscription to the cult of toxic masculinity produces Agu as a sacrificial lamb. He chooses to save his male ego at all costs, even if he dies, as he does, while at it.

Agu becomes susceptible to the raging violence of war because his father fears that his belonging to the cult of masculinity and to the society would be questioned if he allows his son to flee from the war because as a boy, he is a marginal member of the cult of maleness. However, as a marginal member, he is co-opted and disavowed as the context dictates²⁶². It is also important to note that neither his father nor mother deems it appropriate to ask for his opinion on a decision that could mean death for him. This stems from the belief that children lack agency and can not really articulate what they want. But the child knows what he wants. He does not want to stay behind, but considering the exclusion and attendant vulnerability that that would breed for his father, he decides to stay. So, contrary to the father's grand view of himself as a man (in the toxic sense of the word), by demanding that Agu stays, the text undercuts his masculinity by revealing to us that his son's decision to stay is out of sympathy for the fragility of his father's ego²⁶³.

Also, the passage reveals the ways in which heteropatriarchy, and the toxic masculinity which acts as its guard, silences both the child and his mother. Agu's mother's sound advice is discarded because her place is mainly in the kitchen, washing and cooking, while his father "is always just sleeping sleeping or listening to his radio, so we [mother and children] would be moving quietly" (*Beasts* 24). Within this economy of domestic labour, Agu makes

²⁶² For instance, while hiding from soldiers in a small room with the men that are left in the village, Agu's questions concerning what was happening are rewarded with slaps that draw blood from his mouth: "Somebody was slapping my face and saying SHUTUP. Is it my father who was slapping me?" (*Beasts* 70). The capitalization of "SHUTUP" suggests that Agu's inclusion in the cult of maleness, though forced, also comes at a price of silence. It is even possible to stretch the implications of this curt silencing act as speaking to the overall silencing of the voices of children within metanarratives of the civil war.

²⁶³ Leaving is not really an option for Agu because he sees his identity as ineluctably tied to his father's. For instance, when the commander asks for his name, he remembers how his father used to call him Agu, and how everybody followed suit. In this sense, his father is seen as his (Agu's) channel towards belonging to the society. The centrality of this process of naming is also present in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* which I read in the third chapter of this thesis. When Mene is renamed Sozaboy, he starts "prouding" because he felt like he truly belonged to the community. In essence, the process of naming becomes synonymous with a process of hailing into beingness and membership of the community.

a statement about the oppression of women without knowing it. It is useful to observe that even as the man sleeps, his very presence in the house still demands absolute silence for both mother and children. Against the backdrop of this silencing, it then becomes clear that when we listen solely to the voice of the father as the voice of the family, and as a representative of hegemonic tellers of tale, a robust cache of other stories, which might even convict the father, will be lost. The intersection of Agu's gender and age, as mutually constituting sites of vulnerability, is responsible for plunging him into the centre of the war's rabid violence. He is a child that is neither child enough nor an adult. The text also introduces a class dimension to this pre-war stage of the narrative. For instance, Agu describes Dike's rich family, and how his father, being educated and not fearing that his 'manhood' would be questioned, abandons the village with his wife and son before the war arrives²⁶⁴.

When Agu describes his induction into the act of killing, he depicts himself as an unwilling participant: "Kill him, Commandant is saying in my ear and lifting my hand high with the machete" (22). His hand is literally held to deliver the first killing stroke he ever musters. But he takes over from there, fleeing into a hacking frenzy:

He [the commander] is taking my hand and bringing it down so hard on top of the enemy's head and I am feeling like electricity is running through my whole body. The man is screaming, AYYYYIII, louder than the sound of bullet whistling and then he is bringing his hand to his head, but it is not helping because his head is cracking and the blood is spilling out like milk from coconut. [...] He is annoying me and I am bringing the machete up and down and up and down hearing KPWUDA KPWUDA. (*Beasts* 21)

It is not difficult to see that there is a bit of savagery bottled up in Agu's body even before this introductory class on the killing fields. The veneer of an innocent child forced to kill is threatened when he confesses to the readers, and to Amy of course, that the cries of agony which emanate from a dying man anger him, spurring him to make minced meat of the man's body. Although we are well primed to place the blame for the child's violent

²⁶⁴ I should also include a caveat here that, in calling attention to how an intersection of gender (maleness), age and class renders Agu susceptible to violence I am in no way framing child soldiers as essentially boys, or gesturing towards an absence of female child soldiers within literary landscapes of war. Chris Abani's *Song for Night* depicts a female child soldier, Ijeoma, who serves as an important anchor for My Luck during his chaotic journey. There is also Lovelita, a female child soldier in Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (2006).

behaviour solely on the commander and gun juice, it is difficult to totally absolve the child of all blames given the ferocious desire which radiates all over his body as he chops away; he even gets an erection: “I am growing hard between my leg. Is this like falling in love?” (*Beasts* 22). Here, the Freudian sexualised conception of childhood has broken through the kindergarten curtains. The emergent child character resists the linear identity being smelted for him within the humanitarian discourse. There is an excess that can not be disavowed here.

It is possible to connect Agu’s reaction to the killings to his pre-war understanding of what it means to be a man. He describes the bloody community ritual which ushers boys into manhood as the dance of the ox and leopard:

Then the top boy is going to the village chief and kneeling before him while the other leopard and ox dancer are dancing around and around him. The chief is giving him real machete and saying something into his ear until the boy is going and chopping one blow into the neck of the ox. Blood is flying all over his body and he is wiping it from his mask with his hand. Then he is putting his hand where he is cutting and collecting the blood to be rubbing on his body. When he is finishing, all the other is doing the same until everyone is covering in so much blood. [...] [A]nd now all the boy is becoming men. (*Beasts* 56)

The symbolic act of handing the leader of the cohort of boys a “real” machete is a clear statement of the community’s violent demands of manhood. It is instructive to note how the emergence of the boys as men is tied to their willingness to not only participate in the brutal killing of the ox, but also their desire to be baptised in its blood. To riff off a Calvinist rhetoric, the boys are reborn as men in the blood of the ox. In a sense, it is the blood that grants them belonging. It then becomes possible to link the sexual desire which washes over Agu’s human-blood splattered body to this ritual of becoming. In killing the man, Agu has become a man (in a quintessential Freudian fashion) and finds belonging within the group. Thus, contrary to what Agu will have us believe, he is not as unwilling a participant as he claims. For him, this is also a ritual of belonging.

As the curtains begin to draw on the story, Amy, Agu’s white case officer cries after listening to the boy’s gory narrative (*Beasts* 141). But in crying, she achieves part of her mission to Africa. Her ability to offer compassion to a debased “beast/devil” is an ennobling experience. I should again call attention to the ways in which she harangues the poor child, who had chosen silence and occasional remembrance as ways of coping with his trauma

until he gives in to her demands that he “speak, speak, speak”. It might also be instructive to call attention to the fact that the NGO’s camp is a space of otherness, it is a space in the middle of nowhere, outside the children’s community of belonging which does not encourage reintegration. It is a cage of some sort which keeps these ‘dangerous children’, who are believed to have transgressed the boundaries of childhood away from society. In a sense, it is a space of otherness which seeks to erase the presence of the children from ‘the now’ of the society – so that the war becomes a distant past event. The sights, presence, and voices of children who have become eternally tainted by war would make this amnesiac exercise impossible.

The child soldier resists being othered by the gaze of Amy (the white saviour) by forcefully reclaiming his subjectivity: “So I am saying to her, if I am telling this to you it will be making you to think that I am some sort of beast or devil. [...] And I am saying to her, fine. I am all of this thing. I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me” (*Beasts* 141-142). His resistance is not exactly successful; the argument that possessing a doting mother automatically locates him above the class of beasts is an exercise in hair-splitting. Of course, animals also have mothers. But the centrality of remembrance of the pre-rupture historical moment to his conception of beingness is an important theme that is deducible from Agu’s declaration that “I am having mother once”. It reveals a painful loss and a nostalgia occasioned by absence. It is in this perpetual struggle to reclaim personhood that his story ends, in a space where he is considered neither human nor animal, in a fraught unhomely space. This depicts the saviour mission of the humanitarian organisations as a failed one. Despite telling his story the way they want it told, Agu is not afforded full belonging.

This last part of the text reveals humanitarian organisations as memory-magnates who are interested in shaping the landscape of how conflicts are remembered. And within these hegemonic narratives which they author, through a ventriloquist child speaker or through its image, they deploy binarist accounts which clearly map the borders of being and belonging as either/or: perpetrators/victims, child/soldier, and good/bad. Within these totalised and often spectacular narratives, voices of children who inhabit the margins of these positions are lost, and with them, a nuanced view from the in-between. To tie this to the Nigerian scenario, contentions to belong to the right side of this binary narratives have

continued to engender violent contestations, while the voices of the children, the owners of the story, remain trapped behind the grainy Polaroid images which confine their stories of belonging to that of starvation.

Taken together, the texts examined in this chapter gesture to the incompleteness of the monolithic framing of Biafran childhood. The voices archived in the texts transcend the borders of Nigeria-Biafra positions; they are voices from a space that is neither here nor there. Also, the narratives invite us to recognise children as bearers of memory capable of contributing to the culture of remembrance. We are requested to pay attention to what these children have to say. The unconventional ways in which some of these children speak (as in *Song for Night* for instance) demands that we listen creatively to be able to mine their voices. In some cases, this might involve a re-reading of some of the metanarratives that emerge from conflicts to read silence and absence as modes of speaking – as advised by Bhabha and Motsemme. Allison Mackey also indicates a need for a special mode of listening through her reading of the voiceless interactions between Agu and Strika. She writes that it is important that we “listen to what is not being said” (Mackey 109).

In the next (and final) chapter of this thesis, I provide a brief summary of all chapters, and I also examine what the recurrent leitmotif of botched returns encountered in the course of this study reveals concerning the persistence of the trauma of the civil war, and how this creates a feeling of unbelonging which is powering demands for secession.

Conclusion

Lack of Return in Nigeria-Biafra Civil War Literature

This study has shown that adopting a situated intersectional reading of narratives of Nigeria- Biafra war is productive in complicating linear narratives of the conflict. My reading has demonstrated that when different intersectional axes of identity are considered in examining the multiple voices and experiences archived within the corpus of civil war texts, third space stories caught between and betwixt the Nigeria-Biafra hegemonic binary narrative positions come to light. Thus, what has emerged from this fraught space are stories of ‘insiders-within’ whose stories unsettle hegemonic memorialisation of the war while also contributing to its historiography by suggesting other stories and possibilities. These narratives of characters who are neither here nor there gesture towards a more complex articulation of belonging and Biafranness beyond the settled depictions which one encounters in metanarratives. Thus, as a way of concluding this study, I will pay attention to what these perpetually open-ended, or aporetic, stories which emerge from fraught third spaces reveal concerning a need for continuous narration as a ritual of rediscovery, abreaction and return; particularly within the spectre of contemporary agitations for Biafra. But first let us return to the narrative landscape covered in the course of this study.

In the first chapter, a brief background to the politics of the war and an overview of extant literature is provided to indicate the interventions I intend to make. Also, key concepts are discussed and some of the controversies surrounding Biafra in secessionist discourse highlighted, and selected texts are briefly introduced. In the second chapter, two memoirs are brought into conversation with two fictional texts to set up the stage for a parley between literature and autobiographical history.

In the third chapter, I complicate the linear framing of soldiers as hegemonies during the war by reading three texts: *Heroes*, *Toads of War* and *Sozaboy*. I teased out the layers of exclusion and suffering often masked when the military is homogeneously described. The fourth chapter examined how the intersection of axes such as sexuality, class and ethnicity unsettle the conception of belonging to the category of ‘Biafra woman’. In the fifth chapter, I delve behind the popular Polaroid images of starving Biafra Babies to mine the ‘other

stories' that might lie hidden. I visit the troubling landscape of Biafra through the eyes of two child characters in *Song of Night* and *Beasts of No Nation* to trouble the depiction of children as agentless in popular narratives of the civil war.

In these narratives, we have encountered characters that are perpetually stuck in-between the Nigeria-Biafra positions, spatially and ideologically, due to their intersectional status. The ways in which this position produces a form of representational excess and a fraught sense of belonging during and after the war have also come to light. I have examined the ways in which the narratives which emerge from this fraught interstitial space represent efforts at enunciating memories of Biafra that do not fit into popular imaginaries of the war. And from this in-between space, a leitmotif has emerged: the struggle to return home.

All the texts examined in this thesis, and indeed, most of the literary narratives of the civil war, archive stories of characters who struggle to return home but fail woefully. Also, within secessionist discourse, this lack of return and the attendant struggle to return fuels a powerful form of nostalgia which is deployed to stimulate a non-negotiable demand for a return to and restoration of Biafra. It is evident in the way Biafra is framed as a lost home to which people from Nigeria's east must return to find belonging and development. In fact, some Biafran apologists frame this return as pivotal to Africa's achievement of true decoloniality (see Emeka Emefiena, *In Biafra Africa Died*). Thus, to conclude this study, it is important to pay attention to what this failed struggle to return might reveal concerning post-war reintegration and belonging.

Tracing 'Lack of Return' in Nigeria-Biafra Civil War Literature

As I have noted above, most of the narratives that have emerged from the abyss of the civil war tell stories of characters whose war continue in perpetuity even after the pounding of mortar guns has stopped. I include a brief survey of some literary texts that contain this lack of return within their plots below to highlight the salience of this leitmotif²⁶⁵.

In Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), the protagonist, Ijeoma, and her lover can only envision a home in the realm of dreams after their experience of

²⁶⁵ I have selected a range of texts that transcends the scope of texts selected for this study to show the applicability of my argument to a broad range of civil war texts.

unhomeliness within post-war Nigerian society. By the end of the war she had lost her father, her almost utopian home, and with it, her sense of belonging, which ruptured her coherent life story beyond the narrative space of the novel. In Eddie Iroh's *Toads of War* (1979), Kalu Udim, a wounded soldier, ends his narrative in a prison (in an abyss) after losing a limb, his home and his mother who served as his anchorage to the community. In I.N.C Aniebo's short story, "A Hero's Welcome" (1983), dramatic irony is used to capture the failed return of a Biafran soldier, Johnson. After returning home from the warfront, Johnson is murdered by his father who mistakes him for a thief.

In Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), the final silencing of the guns does not bring Olanna any closure regarding the fate of Kainene. Olanna waits for the return of her twin at the end of hostilities, but that is not to be.²⁶⁶ Thus, while peace is being celebrated by the government, Olanna's war continues as she is plagued by her twin sister's lack of return; consequently, she can not have any sense of return herself as that would mean she has abandoned Kainene in wartime Biafra. And because there is no body, no grave, no knowledge of what happened to her sister, Olanna is frozen within the war's traumatic moment.

In Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1978), James Odugo survives the shooting war but is killed in the post-war moment by armed robbers. The text uses the fatal robbery to reveal how the lack of rehabilitation in war-shattered eastern Nigeria churned out desperate youths stuck in the violent moment of war and willing to survive at all costs. In Chinua Achebe's short story, "Civil Peace" (1991), a man who tries to start the

²⁶⁶ This story of no return is quite similar to the story of Nokuthula's disappearance analysed by Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela in a chapter titled "Searching for Closure: The Crying Voice." Like Kainene, Nokuthula does not return, never returns, even at the end of that violent historical moment. And her lack of return too, like that of Kainene, impedes her mother's return to a pre-rupture moment. She is perpetually imprisoned in the abyss of apartheid violence. The chapter lucidly analyses the precarity of this state of 'not-knowing': "We often refer to those who are left behind after a death of a loved one as 'survivors': so and so is 'survived' by her or his closest family members. People who are missing, however, have no survivors. The disappearance of loved ones leaves victims behind, loved ones caught up in a vortex of uncertainty, the prison of their own memory, forever paralysed between knowing and not knowing" (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, *Narrating Our Healing*, 43).

reconstruction of his life in post-war Nigeria with the ex gratia²⁶⁷ (punned as egg rasher) received from the government is attacked by robbers at night. Again, through the violent lines employed by the robbers during their nefarious act, the text ensures that readers understand that the robbery represents a continuation of the civil war for the man and his family. In Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* (2014), Nwakire, who had returned safely from a warfront, kills Eloka (who had equally returned from the warfront) and then commits suicide. The text depicts the violent masculinity which produced such multiple homicides as a continuation of the war.

Also, lack of return as a motif is poignantly present in Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2006). In the text, a child soldier searches for his lost home and members of his squad and fails on both fronts. These narratives of unresolved absences and irreparable loss certainly invite us to examine what they reveal concerning the persistent demands for Biafra by secessionists by listening to how they depict "the continuity of the past in the present" (Just 1065). If we harken to the words of Homi Bhabha that "[t]he unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political experiences" ("The World and the Home" 143), then it becomes imperative to think about the implications of these private narratives of loss and unhomeliness for socio-political realities broadly.

Conceptualising 'Lack of Return'

It is evident from the survey above that the intersectional voices archived in most of the civil war narratives call attention to the freshness of the traumatic wounds of the war through stories that lack resolution (what I frame as a 'lack of return'). Thus, it is imperative

²⁶⁷ It could be argued that the payment of ex gratia and the Abandoned Properties Act of 1969 were some of the policies that scuttled post-war reconciliation. For example, in the case of ex gratia, former Biafrans were given only twenty Pounds as compensation for the monies they had in their bank accounts before the war. Also, the abandoned properties act ensured that many former Biafrans who owned properties in other parts of the country before the war lost them to 'indigenes.' These policies certainly contributed to the lack of return experienced by the Easterners after the war. For more on these draconian policies, see, for example, Michael Gould, *The Biafran War*; Philip Effiong, *The Caged Bird Sang No More: My Biafra Odyssey, 1966-1970* (30 Degrees South Publishers, 2016); Peter, Baxter. *Biafra: The Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970* (Helion and Company, 2015); Marion, Pape. *Gender Palava: Nigerian Women Writing War* (WVT Scientific Publishing, 2011).

to explore the ways in which this lack of unity of plot (in Aristotelian terms)²⁶⁸ encountered in the texts is symptomatic of the unknowable, enigmatic nature of the war's trauma, and how these stories that are perpetually plagued with absences and excess call our attention to a need for the creation of spaces of narrative engagements, textually and discursively, where other voices and stories of the war will be given space to emerge from the margins, from the third space, and to circulate. Here, I will moor my thinking to Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela's book, *Narrating our Healing* (2007) which demonstrates the functionality of stories and storytelling as spaces of healing and the centrality of narration to the rediscovery of an erstwhile ruptured sense of self. I frame this narrative rediscovery as a return to the ruins of a traumatic past, as an important ritual needed for abreaction – and as a means of charting a return to a normative pre-rupture moment.

One of the arguments of *Narrating our Healing* which I find central to my endeavour here is the capacity of narratives to play a dual role of diagnosing the persistence of a traumatic wound by calling attention to moments that demonstrate absence and loss in their narrative plots, and by taking on a therapeutic role by functioning as a site for witnessing and reconstruction of one's life story.²⁶⁹ The questions raised in the text concerning the (im)possibility of speaking about trauma when its 'unspeakability' is exacerbated by the absence of "empathic listeners" (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 30) and "intimate public spaces" (Ibid. 49) speak strongly to the context of my study, Nigeria, where memory culture (especially concerning the civil war) is woven around forced silencing. And as has become quite apparent in the course of this study, within the strictures of such silencing, storytelling then becomes an insurgent site for enunciation and for summoning listeners. In structuring my argument for the creation of spaces of narrative enablement like the TRC where other narratives of Biafra could emerge, I think with this idea of narrative wounding while also drawing on Gobodo-Madikizela's remarkable body of work on restorative

²⁶⁸ Here, I am drawing on the remarkable similarities that connect trauma narratives and tragedy as a dramatic genre. On the one hand, they both narrate troubling stories of descent to chaos from a state of grace and on the other hand, their end goal is a cathartic purgation of emotions – in an ejaculatory manner. Aristotle writes that a good tragedy must have three unities: unity of time, plot and action. For my reading here, the second unity is useful. Unity of plot implies that a tragedy must have a beginning, middle, and an end; and this end must feature some form of denouement, a kind of resolution of the conflict that has been built up in the development of the story. Essentially, at the end of the story, all loose ends must be tightened in order to achieve catharsis.

²⁶⁹ These moments of absence and loss are abundant in the texts I have read in this study and even in the broader corpus of texts on the civil war.

justice.

To be clear, my conceptualization of ‘lack of return’ is connected to a loss of belonging/home; it is not contradictory to the idea of returns on which Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma is built. By lack of return, I refer to the perpetually open-ended plots encountered in Nigeria-Biafra civil war narratives – similar to what Wamuwi Mba frames as an aporetic gap which must be filled with narration (Mbao 2013). My position is that the unresolved conflicts narrated in the stories are symptomatic of a ‘lack of return’ to a prelapsarian state of belonging within Nigeria after the loss of Biafra. Given the centrality of belonging and community to the African conception of personhood, I frame this lack of return, or loss of belonging, as a traumatic dislocation. My thinking is that since reconciliation and reintegration suggest that there was a concinnity which was ruptured, healing and closure would be dependent on a return to something close to the pre-rupture moment. It is possible to argue that the failure to achieve a ‘return’ in this sense contributes to the unabating pain of loss which incubates a crisis of identity and belonging – from which secessionist agitations derive their verve.

The leitmotif of ‘return’ is central to definitions of trauma: in Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), trauma is framed as that voice that keeps returning to haunt, the voice of Clorinda. It is also central to Freud’s thesis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. My interpretation of Freud’s idea of return, which he explains as a persistent return to the scene of conflict, and which he aptly demonstrates through the dreams of the ex-combatants, is that it also reveals a lack of return from that particular traumatic moment due to an inability to make sense of what happened. The unconscious refusal to move on from that moment of rupture then becomes revelatory of an “attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (Caruth, “Violence and Time”, 25). In a sense, this then produces a moment of “arrested historicization” (Coundouriotis 2010). That is, although the combatants physically left the site of war and trauma, they are psychologically frozen within that temporal moment like a deer in headlights.

The trauma archived within narratives of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war straddle the two categories of trauma described by Dominic La Capra as historical and structural trauma²⁷⁰. Although the traumatic rupture could be traceable to a singular violent historical moment, the wounding continues structurally in the aftermath of that particular event – as Biafran agitators continue to argue. In this sense, “it is a history which is essentially not over” (Felman and Laub xiv). Thus, emergent narratives could be said to be perpetually stunted in that historical moment of loss. Framed in this light, it is possible to read civil war narratives as cries for an audience that would listen to the many stories of Biafra, and contribute to the return journey to and from the site of trauma to a space of belonging and healing. These narratives suggest that a return to the ruins of the past – to mourn and make sense of its sudden irruption – is the only panacea for healing. While explaining the centrality of listeners to the facilitation of a ‘return’ from the ruinous landscape of trauma, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub note that

[t]he listener to trauma, [or, I might venture to add, the reader, in the case of literature], needs to [...] be a guide and an explorer, a companion in a journey onto an uncharted land, a journey the survivor can’t traverse or return from alone.
(Interjection added. Felman and Laub 1992: 58–59)

Two important propositions emerge here: the presence of a listener as obligatory for the narration of trauma; and the idea that by being attentive, the listener accompanies the survivor into the abyss of the traumatic event, where it becomes possible to stimulate a measure of abreaction as well as a sense of return. Since the elision of violent memories lies at the heart of trauma, as Cathy Caruth argues (“Violence”, 25), the Nigeria-Biafra civil war texts, by calling attention to these moments of aporetic excess, could be read as recruiting a community of listeners and co-travellers in company of whom this elided memory of ruins could be reclaimed – through narration – in order to facilitate a return ‘home’.

²⁷⁰ Dominic La Capra argues for a differentiation between these two forms of trauma, although he also agrees that the distinctions are quite problematic. See Dominic La Capra. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. (John Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. xxxiii, 76.

Making a Case for TRC²⁷¹

Narratives of the civil war summon readers to bear witness to loss. But the texts also present opportunities for “regaining meaning” through “the rewriting of one’s life narrative to incorporate the traumatic loss in the new narrative” (Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 6). Thus, through the discordant mosaic of stories that these narratives archive, they reveal the rupture, while also providing space for a peaceable re-weaving of togetherness to facilitate healing through coherence. In a sense, as Paul Ricoeur argues, this process of remembering becomes a ritual of self-discovery: “In remembering something (*se souvenant de quelque chose*), one remembers oneself (*on se souvient de soi*)” (Interjections in original, Ricoeur 96). It is also important to note that these texts reveal that contrary to the finished work of reconciliation which one encounters in government-authored historiographies, there was no reconciliation at the end of hostilities. In this sense, there is an “unfinished business of trauma” that plagues the country (Gobodo-Madikizela 170).

This is indicative of a need to ‘know’ the traumatic event beyond metanarratives, to traverse the ruins of the war with the witnesses, and to share in the pain in a manner which creates shared wounding and collective mourning. This shared mourning is missing at the moment. The lack of shared mourning is aptly symbolised in that the museum dedicated to memorialising the war is domiciled in the eastern part of Nigeria; also, remembrance of the end of the war is singularly marked in that region. This seems to frame the war as a traumatic history solely owned by the Easterners, thus implying that its memory should

²⁷¹ Although some scholars have framed the Oputa Panel of 1999 (Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission) as similar to South Africa’s TRC – see, for instance, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, “From the Horse’s Mouth: The Politics of Remembrance in Women’s Writing on the Nigerian Civil War,” *Body, Sexuality, and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures 1*, ed. Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski, Matatu, 29–30 (Rodopi, 2005), pp. 221–30 – I do not think that this is an appropriate comparison. On the one hand, the Oputa Panel was designed to investigate the manifestations of violence in Nigeria’s history – broadly defined – without much stock set in reconciliation or forgiveness. On the other hand, reference to the civil war only came up when the commission moved to the eastern part of the country, and little time was devoted to the issue. Perhaps more importantly, the experiences of ordinary Biafrans did not feature in these hearings as one finds in South Africa’s TRC. This might be due to the juridical structure it adopted. It was headed by a Chief Justice. Thus, given the aversion that some Nigerians have for courts, many of those with stories to tell might have been scared to show up. Conversely, South Africa’s TRC was headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu whose stature as a man of faith and a partner in the struggle against oppression is globally recognised. Also, generally speaking, the commission failed woefully in its mandate. Out of over 10,000 petitions it received, only 340 were heard. And most of the perpetrators that agreed to appear before the commission refused to show remorse or empathy.

remain an Eastern (Igbo?) affair. The inability to share or recognise the psychic wound of the war also comes through in some of the literary accounts of the war that emerged from the Nigerian side. There is an artistic anaesthetisation of the pains of the war in some of these war narratives; for instance, in Kole Omotosho's *The Combat* (which has been translated to isiXhosa as *Limbandezolo*)²⁷², the conflict is framed allegorically as a fight between two irrational friends over a child who dies at the end of the story. The gory details of the war – and resultant shock – are sacrificed in the text. In a sense, the text has been “cleansed of history” (Just 1077).

To create this shared mourning through listening which could then produce a sense of belonging, I suggest that narrative spaces like the TRC might be effective²⁷³. As the selected texts have revealed through the agentic cadence of the third space narratives they archive, the creation of narrative spaces/and engagements would facilitate return journeys into the dark abyss of the conflict which could create a return to a space of belonging for former Biafrans and for Nigeria as a collective, so that “in the listening process we are bound together” (Van der Merwe and Madikizela 28). Thus, the journey of narrating our trauma, of being in dialogue concerning our experiences, becomes a very important one because we need an audience – a person, or people, who will listen with compassion, with a desire to understand what has happened. The potency of shared mourning in building a community of belonging is being employed within secessionist discourse at the moment. Hence, to counteract the sense of alienation from the Nigeria project which this produces, it is important to pay attention to multiple stories of Biafra, to, in a sense, create a feeling of being homed through narration and listening. Indeed, TRC as an “ethical” and “transformative” space (Gobodo-Madikizela 169) could be a productive site for this kind of narrative engagement. The suggested TRC could be non-prosecutorial – to account for the proximity and fluidity of perpetrator/victim positions.

Writing Biafra: Waves and Phases

Another important observation that has occurred in the course of this study is that although all the texts narrate similar traumatic tales of the civil war, there are significant

²⁷² See Kole Omotosho. *The Combat*. (Heinemann, 1972).

²⁷³ While I am aware of the remarkable body of work that has highlighted the failings of the TRC in South Africa (see Rosemary Jolly (2012) for an impressive overview of these debates), I am interested in the usefulness of the narrative space it enables as a starting point for the creation of shared wounding and collective mourning.

narratological shifts observable when texts are grouped in terms of year of publication – what I have framed as waves. While the texts that emerged in the first wave (1970-1990) seem to pay attention to historical facts by deploying a style that is almost journalistic, the second wave of texts (1991-2018) do not care about historical verisimilitude as such; they are more interested in reaching a global audience. In a sense, they are more interested in the “worldliness”²⁷⁴ of their narratives.

Writers in the first wave deploy spatiotemporal markers such as place names etc to indicate the ‘truth’ value of their narratives. Second wave of writers expand the idea of Biafranness beyond the specific boundaries of the embattled enclave to position it as a global reference point for new forms of violence. This produces a form of “cosmopolitan memory” (Levy and Sznaider 2002) which ensures that the memory of the war becomes a global memory capable of stimulating global empathy and action. It might be possible to connect this desire for a global audience to the Afropolitan identities of these second-generation writers (they are mostly exilic writers writing in the metropolises while still maintaining intimate connections to Nigeria). But it is also possible to link this to the economics of global publishing. In this sense, when Biafra, and the conflicts and privations which accompanied its brief existence, is presented as a metaphor for global privations, the texts produced are able to tap into a global audience.

Second wave writers seem quite willing to present gory details of the war unlike their predecessors in the first wave. They depict, in very vivid terms, streets overflowing with bodies, gutted bowels etc. For instance, *Song for Night* adopts a troubling landscape fecund with garish images of bloated corpses and restless spirits, while *Roses and Bullets* depicts shocking scenes of rape (unlike the rape scenes represented in *Destination Biafra* and *Heroes* which are mainly understated and emptied of violence). And finally, writers in the second wave depict protagonists that are third space inhabitants in that they recognise the simultaneity of violence of both belligerents; these characters are very aware of their in-betweenness.

This comparison of waves of writings on the war is an important aspect which has not been adequately addressed in this study. This is an area that deserves more study.

²⁷⁴ See Edward Said. *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Harvard UP, 1984).

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