

NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR POEMS: A LITERATURE IN TRANSITION

Samrat Banerjee

Asst. Professor of English, Kabi Sukanta Mahavidyalaya & PhD Research Scholar at Rabindra Bharati University, Email:samratspassion@gmail.com

Dan Izevbaye in his study on West African literature in English has noted that the history of Nigerian Literature in English has invariably been connected to significant events in the continent like Slave trade, Colonial experience and War. If the slave trade era produced Olaudah Equiano's autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) -an African's account of the horrors of slavery, the Colonial experience gave birth to seminal novels like *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) that displayed the African artist's endeavor to decolonize the mind. However it was the War in the West African countries that had inspired an entire corpus of literature which in its magnitude has outdone all other thematic preoccupations. According to Oyeniyi Okunoye the war in the African continent and its concomitant crises have positively influenced African writing and has "served as a rallying point for literary expression" (Okunoye, 266). Literary artists have recreated the blood-soaked days with an artistic precision that has in turn enriched the existing body of historical writing from Africa. Chinyere Nwahunanya has observed that "the writers [in the African Continent] have made literature continue to function as the mirror of the society. In the process of mirroring society and criticizing its pitfalls, the war literature also serves as a compass for social re-direction". (Nwahunanya, 14).

In terms of artistic and imaginative recreation of the War experience the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) has produced a fusillade of literary works that has outdone all other historical experience in Africa so far. According to Chidi Amuta "the Nigerian Civil War could well be said to be the single most imaginatively recreated historical experience in Africa so far" (Amuta,85).. For Chinyere Nwahunanya the barrage of literary works that emanated out of the experience of civil war is actually a- Harvest from Tragedy. Ogaga Okuyade observes that the "period of civil war in Nigeria recorded a bumper harvest of artistic and imaginative creativity-most of which painted an apocalyptic vision. Numerous voices spoke of the tragedy and cruelty of the war. Commissioned and non-commissioned officers of the military cabal, Nigerian nationalists, scholars, students and politicians of all sides produced a plethora of print, ranging from autobiographies and memoirs to pamphlets, plays, poetry collections and poems, scattered across the pages of journals and anthologies" (Okuyade,128). The Nigerian universities turned out to be the hot bed of intellectual activities as young students started publishing poems depicting the Biafran resistance. Chinua Achebe published *Okike* (1971) from Nsukka, a journal that exclusively dealt with the issues of Biafran War. The Department of English at the University of Ibadan published a journal named *Idoto* that focused upon the Biafran experience. Some years after the war Sam Omo Asein and Femi Osofisan founded another journal from Ibadan entitled *Opon Ifa* which too dealt with the Nigerian Civil War and its aftermath. Thus, Afam Ebeogu has rightly observed that although the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) was brief still "it provoked profound insights into the human condition, and these insights have been preserved in poems that preserve the essence of life on earth." (Ebeogu, 41). However, as most of the literary activities on the subject of war flourished from the universities of Nigeria, critics have accused Nigerian Civil War literature to be elitist in orientation. As a matter of fact the early poetry of Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* do exhibit an individualistic solipsism and a general apathy for larger social problems.

Actually the mid sixties marked a turning point in Nigerian politics and literature. The Western Nigerian Crisis of 1965, the rigged violent elections, fraudulent census and inter-ethnic conflicts culminated in an era of