



Review article



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Heteronyms of hate: Name/naming as fate in Sam Omatseye's *My Name is Okoro* (2016)

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Abstract

The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967–70), which took place decades ago, has continued to engage the creative afflatus of Nigerian writers, notably those from the Igbo ethnic group, the group of people who bore and continues to bear the brunt of the war. Part of the reason why the tragic events of the fratricidal war continue to exercise a strong influence on Nigerian authors is because the war, which constitutes the darkest chapter in the chequered history of the Nigerian post-colony, has remained the *central* issue in the country's geopolitical calculus. Given, thus, the preponderance of pro-Igbo narratives on the war, Sam Omatseye, an ethnic minority from Urhobo-Itsekiri, in his novel entitled *My Name is Okoro*, provides an important counter-narrative on the war, furnishing what might be termed “a minority report” that fills in the textual silences and lacunae in the Igbo monologic narrative. This paper, therefore, closely and carefully examines, assesses and evaluates Omatseye's dialogic and counter-canonical riposte and concludes that his novel helps furnish a full-orbed portrait of the war. Consequently, this paper investigates the *trauma* and the continuing tragedy of the war and proffers credible solutions to Nigeria's hydra-headed problems.

Keywords: Biafra, history, memory, Nigeria, trauma, war

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The novel's setting revolves around contemporary Nigeria comprising the northern and southern parts which constitute the theatre of hostilities during the war. But more crucially, *My Name Is Okoro* is an important novel which furnishes an alternative reading on the war.



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Introduction

In Wole Soyinka's play *A Dance of the Forests*, the character behind whom the playwright hides his authorial stance remarks thus: '[T]he only consistency in life is war' (emphasis added). This assertion underscores the ineluctability as well as the universality of war or conflict, an aspect of human experience that has spawned a slew of conflict theories, all of them united by the commonality of conceptual interest. One may, of course, be charged with the fallacy of essentialising war, but if we must be guided by history or even myth, one would discover that man has, down the ages, made war either with himself or, as it is often the case, with the *other*. Thus, we could have a situation whereby two individuals are locked in conflict; or two communities, peoples, countries or even the world as a whole going to war with/against itself. Coming closer to home, the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1967-70) has given birth to a plethora of creative writing based mainly on the war. However, a careful and close reading of the war novel tradition in Nigeria reveals a rather troubling tendency towards an ethnicisation of historical events and circumstances, a rather propagandistic re-imagining of the tragic event itself, thus sparking charges of what Adichie has called 'the Danger of the Single Story'. Regardless of the burgeoning repertoire of extant literature on the war, the fact still remains that the last has not been heard on the darkest chapter of Nigeria's chequered history. Perhaps, it is the need to fill in the perceived lacunae created by biased and prejudicial readings of history that has made Sam Omatseye, an Urhobo-Itsekiri novelist, a minority voice, to write his novel entitled: *My Name is Okoro*.

The novel dramatizes the tragic events of the civil war from the point of view of a minority character called Samson Okoro, a young Urhobo-born American-Nigerian *Beento* who returns to Nigeria, fresh from a failed marriage and a divorce from his African-American wife. Relying on the money he inherited from his adoptive American parents, Okoro is able to set up a school in Warri. Just before the onset of hostilities, he travels to Northern Nigeria, specifically Kano, in search of a business contract involving one Mr. Madueke. Unfortunately, Okoro finds himself in the midst of a bloodlust unleashed on mainly the Igbo by Hausa-Fulani guttersnipes, masterminded by Hausa Fulani soldiers. Okoro barely escapes death by pleading his *American* citizenship, and, thus, is spared being commandeered to pronounce the word 'ṭɔ̣ɔ' (Yoruba for 'three pence'). The assumption is that, Igbo indigenes cannot pronounce the word 'ṭɔ̣ɔ' properly, due to the peculiar phonetic structure of their mother tongue Igbo's are summarily butchered and massacred owing to their uniform inability to say 'ṭɔ̣ɔ', instead they say 'ṭɔ̣ɔ'. Small wonder, then, Kano as well as other parts of Northern Nigeria roils and reels with a deluge of Igbo blood as irate Hausa-Fulani youths go on a revenge mission over the January 15, 1966 coup, mischaracterized by most Nigerians as 'an Igbo coup' due to the roles played in it by some Igbo-born soldiers. These Northern youths go about slaughtering for fun Igbo men, women and children, ransacking homes, offices, hotels, roads, railway stations and airports in search of any Igbo person to kill without compunction.

Samson Okoro is able to escape South in the company of a catholic priest after shacking up briefly with a Yoruba family in Kano. On getting to Warri, he cannot find Nneka, his pregnant wife, and, therefore, he sets for the east in search of his wife. By this time, a full-scale civil war has begun and Biafra forces seize his car including his essential personal effects.

Finding himself in the heartland of Biafra, Okoro is unable to find Nneka owing to his mispronunciation of her village of Umueze (which he pronounces Umunze!). He is consequently misdirected to Umunze rather than Umueze. He meets another woman, Clara, in Umunze and falls in love with her. Together they survive the depredations of the war and go their separate ways after the war. Okoro finally reunites with his wife, Nneka who herself has got a child for

another man during the war. They both begin life anew as a couple.

In ancient society as of now, the *names* given to children by their parents are of great significance. In Genesis, God ordered Adam to name everything, flora and fauna, that He had created; Abrams had to change his name to Abraham in response to the prospect of a new dispensation of grace, thus empowering Abraham to receive divine blessing which Abrams, his former name, might have obstructed. By the same token, Jacob also underwent name-change, indicating an inner spiritual transformation. In the same vein, Jabez experienced an endless bout of ill-fortune owing to his accursed name until he cried to God for redemption. Interestingly, in 19th century America, the poet, Walt Whitman in his poem captioned

‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ intones:
What gods can exceed these that clasped me by
the hand, and with voices I love *call me*
promptly and loudly by my rightest name as I
approach? (964, emphasis added)

James Baldwin, the African-American novelist, wrote a novel entitled *Nobody Knows My Name*, an important work which ostensibly must have influenced Isidore Okpewho, the Nigerian novelist and oral scholar in entitling his own novel *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. From the foregoing discourse, it is evident that many cultures and communities across the world attach a lot of importance to the names people bear for a host of reasons. According to Olatunde Olatunji:

The Yoruba believe that the name which a man bears affects his life, dictating his fortunes in life. This is reflected in some of their proverbs, as in:

A sọ ọmọ ni sódé, O lo s Ebi, ode, a ọo ọmọ ni ọobọ, o lo àjà, o bọ; a wá sọ ọmọ ni ọorinlo, o lẹ s’ajo ko de mọ á nsò; tani ko mop e ilé l’ọmọ ti mu oruko anu lẹ? (Adeoye 1-2 cited in Olatunji 68).

Translation:

A child is named Sode (Ọso has arrived), he goes to Ebi and returns, a child is named Ọobọ (oso has returned), he goes on a journey and returns; a child is then named Sorinlo (oso has walked away), he goes on a journey and fails to return, and people start to complain; who is it that doesn’t know that it is from home that the child has taken a name that inflicts loss? (Original translation, 65)

Accordingly, this is why ‘great care is taken before a child is named because the name is meant to reflect not only the circumstances of conception and birth of a child, but also its family, history, fortunes and misfortunes, its family’s hopes and fears’ (68). Thus, the name an individual bears indicates more than a tag of identification or an individuatng device. Niyi Osundare goes a step further to highlight the cooperative principle between an entity and the rest of nature, therefore, when an entity has a name, it is easy to summon it from relative nothingness into being:

The calling forth is easier, more efficacious when the referent has

a name, the name being the product of a cooperative principle between verbal signification and ontological identity. (Osundare 2)

Osundare elucidates further:

The name opens the door to the house of being:
It is the readiest, most direct channel to a person's *ori* and all it stands for in the liturgy of existence. The Yoruba believe that to endow something with a name is to give it *life* beyond subsistence... To live is to have a name; to have a name is to live. (2)

But the question to ask is: Does one's name as is demonstrated in the Yoruba proverbs furnished above by Adeoye, attract good fortune or disaster, especially in a crisis-riven, war-torn country? How about a dangerous situation whereby the name one bears *isolates* one for profiling and persecution or even death? And, more intriguing, when the name one bears *sounds* like the putative enemy's name, even if one is innocent? How, then, does one plead one's innocence and live?

The central thematic concern of the novel turns on these questions and the posers excavate the frightening fault-lines of ethnic hate and mutual antagonism that exist among the various ethnicities cobbled together by colonial fiat, a 'fraudulent togetherness' commonly dubbed 'The Mistake of 1914' – the year Lord Lugard and his fellow British politicians amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorates. However, before we proceed, it is important that we pause to ponder on the phonetic peculiarities of the titular name, *Okoro*. In Nigeria, the name *Okoro* is borne by the Yoruba, Igbo, Bini, Ika-Igbo, and Urhobo. Whilst the name is spelt the same way, it is, however, *pronounced* in a variety of ways, thus reflecting in the process the linguistic behavior or the phonetics of the particular tongue. Although the point must be made that most African, or to be more exact, Nigerian languages are *tonal* in nature. As members of the Kwa language family, these languages may and do share certain lexical features in common, but the factors of geographical dispersion, social change, cultural evolution, among others, account for the perceived broad/wide gaps between one language and another, say Igbo and Urhobo.

Nigeria, according to available statistics, has over 250 nationalities and over 400 languages. Thus this multiplicity of languages and/or linguistic pluralism has over time proven a major source of ethnic rivalry, which, in the context of the novel under discussion, flared into an all-out 30-month civil war. Writing about this issue of the heteronyms of *Okoro*, Sam Omatseye states: 'Urhobo sounded differently from Igbo and his Urhobo *Okoro* differed in meaning and in accent from the Igbo *Okoro*' (65). Further on in the narrative, Omatseye remarks in greater detail on the thorny issue of the heteronyms of *Okoro* vis-à-vis the novel's protagonist's search for self-authenticity:

He decided to relocate to Warri because he wanted to know his roots, and Warri, a cosmopolitan place, had many Urhobo even though the Itsekiris lay proprietary claim to the city. He had told himself several times that he was going to interrogate his past, and he thought the name *Okoro* would have simplified matters. He learned *Okoro* was not tethered to any single community. It was as generic an Urhobo name as it was an Igbo name, although they meant different things

and they sounded differently in accents and intonation. (95)

In adumbrating the disquieting pervasiveness and the universality of prejudice and bigotry, the novelist calls the reader's attention to the similarity between the contemporary American social scene and war-time Nigeria:

He [Okoro] was in the United States and suffered discrimination, he said to himself but nobody had a right to come after him with a knife without consequence... colour gave them – or deprived them of – a status and forced them to speak in a certain way. In Okoro's home country, sound extinguished colour. He was Urhobo, but he looked like the Hausa man who thought he was Igbo. He was not Urhobo because the irate Hausa man thought he sounded Igbo. (47-8)

Ethnic Tensions as Rebuttal of Myth of Nation-Formation

Beginning life in 1914, Nigeria has lived a charmed life since and has managed, defying gravity, to 'hang in there'. This longevity of its existence so far has made some commentators wax rather lyrical in characterizing Nigeria as a *nation*. The myopia and, indeed, the blightful ignorance of these commentators inheres principally in the fact that a group of people can only correctly be described as 'nation' if certain preconditions are in place, or if certain socio-cultural desiderata are met. To that extent, therefore, it is crucial to ask if Nigeria has these socio-cultural characteristics to merit the status of a nation. What is a nation? How did it come about and when, in historical terms? In trying to understand the origin of the modern nation-state, let us turn to the views expressed by Adebayo Williams (aka Tatalo Alamu):

Contrary to widespread myth, the *Treaty of Westphalia* in 1648 did not inaugurate the modern nation-state. As Philip Bobbitt recently argued so brilliantly, it merely restored sovereignty to the religion of the subsisting ruler of a territory after centuries of sectarian wars between and within religions. The dividend is encapsulated in the saying, he who rules let his religion prevail (*cuius region, eius religio*). Those who were not at peace with the religion of a particular ruler were at liberty to move to the territory of their preferred ruler ('National Security').

Williams goes further to shed more light on the origin of the modern nation as a concept and political practice:

[T]he organizing principle was identity by religion and not by nationality. It was the *Treaty of Utrecht* in 1713 almost sixty five years later which consecrated territoriality or what we propose as delimited space as the organizing fulcrum on which the power of the subsisting ruler revolves and around which the modern nation-state is organized (3).

Having explored fairly the probable origin of the nation or the nation-state both as *doctrine* and *practice*, we need to further theorize the constitutive elements of a nation. The question, then, is: What is a nation? What are the features of a nation? In an essay entitled: 'What is a nation?' Ernest

Renan posits that: 'Nothing [purely] material suffices for [a nation]' (18). He explains: 'A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history; it is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth...' (18-19). Renan goes to great lengths to discuss some socio-economic and political elements that may bind a group of people together, elements such as race, language, material interest, religious affinities, geography, and military necessity (19). In his considered opinion, Renan notes that these elements, important and vital as they are, are not the *sine qua non* for nation-formation. He pursues his argument further:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form... The nation like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion... A heroic past, great men, glory... this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. (19)

In a most persuasive access of verbal lucidity, Ernest Renan delivers his clincher:

A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely; consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life,. A nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite.... (19).

In the light of the above observations, can we in all good conscience regard Nigeria as a nation? Haven't some prominent figures from Nigeria dismissed their country as a mere political contraption based on 'fraudulent togetherness'? Indeed, Chief Obafemi Awolowo played a key role during the civil war as the federal commission for finance and General Yakubu Gowon's right-hand man as well as the leader of the defunct Action Group party. Awolowo it was who characterized Nigeria at the time as a 'mere geographical expression of political intent'. To be sure, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* describes her country as 'a cluster of ethnicities held precariously together by a fragile clasp' (117). Without a doubt, these few comments and views expressed at various periods of time by Nigerians themselves underscore the essential artificiality of the Nigeria project. Even so, in a dire situation whereby the 'nation' or the 'nation-state' is fundamentally delegitimized, leadership at all levels of governance is sorely needed to sustain a semblance of a social contract. Leadership deficit in this context is synonymous to political *harakiri* as the civil war tragically monumentalizes. According to Adebayo Williams (aka Tatalo Alamu):

[T]he logic and imperative of ruling over a particular nation, whether it is pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial, demand that it must be done with utmost seriousness and a sense of mission. Failure to do

so, particularly in the context of people newly empowered with a radical consciousness of their rights, often results in revolutions, civil wars, outright liquidation of the ruling class and sucks in the ruling classes of several countries at the same time. (3)

Sam Omatseye's novel *My Name is Okoro* dramatizes the baleful fault-lines of ethnicism, tribal jingoism and the deadly struggle over the 'ownership' of the commonwealth as well as the free-for-all over the scarce resources at the centre. Clearly the ethnic groups which make up the country do not, to use Renan's points, possess the same language, material interest, religious affinities and geography [Northern Nigeria is mostly semi-arid while the Southern part is densely wooded). The people do not share the same ancestry or 'heroic past' nor are they driven by the same outlook on life. Even the all-important element for nation-formation, that is, consent, which Renan metaphorises as 'daily plebiscite' is non-existent. Nothing in the novel bears this out more than the sad episode of Bayo, one of the characters in the novel. Omatseye narrates:

Farouk knew Bayo's mother was Igbo. His father, a police officer on a posting to Umuahia in the east, had met and impregnated Bayo's mother...

Farouk knew that some of his Hausa-Fulani friends were aware of his mother's origin, and he just wanted to warn his friend.

"You know, some of our people are taking advantage of this situation to settle old scores. I don't know if you know anyone who hates you.

"Is anyone coming after me?" Bayo asked nervously.

"No. I don't know. I am just trying to warn you to be careful. Even if it means that you should go to Ibadan before things cool down".

(50-51)

Bayo, a product of miscegenation, exemplifies the tragedy of love in an ethnically-charged, crisis-ridden society. But more crucially, his dilemma speaks to the desperate fraud at the core of the postcolonial boondoggle called Nigeria. It is the same politics of exclusion which is at play even in the historical reconstruction of the civil war as depicted in non-fiction and fiction alike, as our next sub-heading makes evident. In fact, from Babel to Biafra, it does seem a single tongue speaks the language of peace, whereas a multitude of tongues stoke the conflagration of violence. Accordingly, Igbo people who are derogatorily referred to as *Yanmiri* (39) are methodically and systematically chased down, smoked out of their hiding places and hacked down with machetes, cudgits, clubs, spears, swords and guns by irate Hausa-Fulani hordes in what is known as *in the 1966 pogroms*. In their genocidal bloodfest, these marauders do not differentiate between *real* Igbo indigenes and others who are linguistically contiguous with ethnic Igbo.

Due to this non-discriminatory act of violence on the part of the head-hunters, Okoro, the novel's protagonist, asks:

"Why do the newspapers keep writing about Igbo pogrom when they killed everyone who was a southerner except the Yoruba?" (62).

The kolanut supplier who Okoro meets at Chief Subomi's apartment also corroborates Okoro's concerns. She narrates how an Ukwani couple she met on a bus were summarily butchered at a checkpoint around Zaria because the couple was considered by the officers as Igbos. "Ukwanis are not Igbos", she said. "The animals are killing everyone" (63). She explains further:

"Only by name and language, but they are not the same people. Now that is the problem. Ukwanis can understand Igbo language but they can distinguish who is speaking Ukwani and who is speaking Igbo. The Igbos know who is speaking Ukwani as distinct from who is speaking Igbo" (63).

Thus, typically, the tonality of Nigerian languages, from which they derive their autochthony, their cultural identity and their pride of place on the map is paradoxically their Achilles' heel. *Sound* which echoes *sense* and *sensibility* in most cases in peacetime sparks horrid and horrendous bloodbath and repine in the land. The hate crime which flares into a full-scale war originates from *sounding*: the heteronyms of Okoro – same spelling, different pronunciations, different meanings. Yet to the Hausa-Fulani killers, Okoro is Okoro, period. Your name is your fate, and your fate is death!

Poetics of Revision: Recalibrating the Trauma of History

In a well-publicised lecture, Adichie spoke on the 'Danger of a Single Story', yet, in an ironic fashion, it does seem as though she were referring not only to herself but, more crucially, in the context of the imaginative reconstruction or re-interpretation of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, to her fellow Igbo writers, who for all intents and purposes, have portrayed the war in the novels, plays, and poetry from a distinctly pro-Biafra or Igbo perspective. This tradition of ethnic partisanship has demonstrated the hollow claim to objectivity, either in historiography or literature, particularly the mode called *faction*. The writer, thus, elects to de-emphasize some aspects of an historical event and give prominence to other aspects of that same event, much in the same manner as the fable of the six blind men and the elephant. In this process of selective embossment or/and *deliberate* downplaying of brute fact, for whatever reason(s) would forever make the debate over what *really* constitutes *Truth* a will-o-the-wisp or a moot point.

Posterity and those who rely solely on historical/archival material, *including* literature for source of *authentic* and *authoritative* information on the civil war are likely to be duped and deceived. Whilst, however, the jury is still out on the competing claims of the conspiracy of silence leveled against other ethnic groups over their perceived reluctance or unwillingness to say a word or two about the war, thus leaving the story of the war to be told *only* by the Igbo, Sam Omotseye, an Urhobo-Itsekiri novelist, has written *My Name is Okoro* as a counterfiction of the 'subaltern'. He has said that he was inspired to write the novel because only pro-Igbo point of view is projected in most writing he has read on the war. The impression that is, thus, created, according to Omotseye, is that it was only the Igbo that bore the brunt of the 1966 pogrom, and the genocide unleashed on Southerners by the Hausa-Fulani. This perceived bias in representing history and *memory* is what has given rise to the poetics of revision in *My name is Okoro*.

Sam Omotseye's novel, thus, *revises* the historical details of the civil war in a new historicist temper, and, in the process, ventilates the repressed/suppressed/marginalized and *untold* points of view of ethnic minorities such as the Urhobo, the Itsekiri, the Isoko, and the Ijaw, among others.

In retelling the story of the war, Omatseye invariably foregrounds the biases of description, the complex politics of re/membering, the dubious defence of *memory* in orthodox war writings. And, in so doing, he dramatizes the primordial ties of blood between the ‘core’ Igbo and its satellites on the western flank of the Niger. The *Enuani* or the Anioma peoples, including indigenes of Asaba and its outlying villages and towns, the Ika-speaking people around the Agbor township and the Ndokwa people in the novel are said to be sympathetic to the Biafra cause, this hampering the federalist effort to put down the Biafra secessionist crisis.

As has been stressed earlier, most southerners, apart from the *Ndigbo*, were targeted during the war by the marauding Hausa-Fulani. The kolanut seller and Okoro in the early stages of the narrative swap information and first-hand experiences about the pogrom. Even as the Igbo are believed to have appropriated the tragedy of the war, thus ethnicizing it. So, it does appear, they have ‘colonised’ the name *Okoro* by default. Although the *Ndigbo* are not to blame for this perception of *Okoro* as peculiarly Igbo, precious little is done by them to *embrace* the protagonist who happens to bear the name, *Okoro*. Allowances could be made for the xenophobia, the ethnic suspicion, the blood-curdling inhumanity exhibited towards Okoro up north by those with whom he shares very little in term of language, culture, environment and religion. Sadly, Okoro is ill-served by the Biafran soldiers by the River Niger (99). Mistaken for a ‘lost’ rootless Igbo man, Okoro is jeered at by the Igbo soldiers, stripping him of his personal effects, save a knife with which he manages to get along in the bush and forests. The mistreatment of Okoro, the minority eponym, both in the ‘diaspora’ (i.e., the North) and at ‘home’ (i.e., South-east) demonstrates his precarious situation and status as a *personal non grata*. The equalization of barbarism shown on the one hand by the Hausa-Fulani up North, and on the other, by the Igbo soldiers at Asaba and elsewhere in the South, ultimately, embosses Okoro’s humanity and personal (and, even, *cultural*) identity as *despicable* in the grand scheme of things.

It is troubling to note here that this fringe existence of the marginalized minorities continues to this day. This shows tragically that the country has learnt very little, if anything at all, from the bitter past. Omatseye’s novel strikes one as a counter-narrative to the mainstream war novel tradition in Nigerian fiction by exposing some of the chinks in the Biafra armour. The role of Udeze and Akon, in espionage and treachery, for instance, provides a sobering sub-plot in the narrative. Given the awesome war machine of the Third Marine Commando led by “the Scorpion” Adekunle, the Biafra Think Tank or military top brass charge Udeze and Akon with the responsibility of neutralizing the Nigerian couple, masquerading as restaurateurs and soldiers specializing in intelligence gathering. But their cover is blown when the old cripple, Obiechina, a Biafran soldier, disguised as a pro-Nigerian soldier, is exposed for what he is: an impostor. Obiechina and Unigwe are supposed to poison the water tank and kill off the division under Commander Adekunle. The plot fails, thereby exposing Akon and Udeze as accomplices. They consequently flee with the Nigerian soldiers in hot pursuit. Udeze who joins the war in order to prove to his mother that he is a hero like his younger brother, Okey, fails spectacularly. He merely drifts and flits about from place to place, not really involved in the conflict. His desultory gambols highlight both personal and, to a degree, *collective* failure of the Biafrans.

Whatever measure of heroism attributed to the Igbo in works written by mostly Igbo writers and authors is exposed as undeserving and hollow in Omatseye’s novel. In the same vein, Omatseye creates a mole, a chameleonic lickspittle called Emeka (same name as Ojukwu the Biafra leader!) who snitches on his people to Lieutenant Abdullahi and his Nigerian troops at Umunze. In an atavistic backpedaling of sorts, Emeka is made a Warrant Chief like the Warrant Chiefs of old

under colonial rule. Crucially, the novelist uses him to cut Ojukwu to size:

“Let me tell you something”, growled Emeka, “did Ojukwu not come out of Hausa vagina? This same Ojukwu you all worship.”

“Shut up, you rat!” She shouted.

“He is not a full-blooded Igbo man, “he continued exultantly, “Only his father, the millionaire who made his money outside Igboland, is an Igbo man. His mother was an Hausa commoner. He even speaks better Hausa than his own so-called native tongue” (190).

Emeka is not done yet in his bombshell:

“Go and do research before you make yourselves slaves of a slave. Ojukwu is half a slave, since he is defending half of himself and fighting against half of himself. All of you are throwing your full birthright for a half slave. Fools.” (190)

The above excerpt is a well-primed deflationary put-down aimed at the larger-than-life Biafra warlord, Col. Emeke Odumegwu Ojukwu whose towering figure and well-groomed beard impart to his bearing the image of a Promethean hero. The gulf, indeed, the disconnect between appearance or ‘image’ and reality is played up by Emeka the mole; and, it is vital that the hated pariah, Emeka is portrayed by the novelist as the voice of Truth, the essence of revisionism. In further dwarfing the *image* of Ojukwu, the writer reports that Ojukwu’s abysmal moral turpitude shows through his poor judgment and partiality where integrity and good sense are required. He awards, for example, sensitive contracts to his cousin whereas the proper thing to do is to seek out suitably qualified candidates for the jobs. Such poor judgment could sponsor or provoke mutinous rifts in the rank and file, thereby jeopardizing the *esprit de corps* among the troops and ultimately leading to a *coup de grace*.

Even keeping of trysts as he does during the war in which his soldiers are being killed by the enemy, does not *heroize* Ojukwu in the least. He is said to clandestinely visit a goodtime girl at the *Queen of Hearts* at Sapele amid a hail of both friendly and enemy bullets. How, one may ask, does such display of rank irresponsibility ennoble the Biafran leader?

Little wonder, then, Sam Omatseye portrays the Igbo as cannibals who, albeit unwittingly, are made to eat the flesh of their fellow soldiers felled in battle. The collusion and complicity of the Niger-Delta peoples, especially the Urhobo is telling in this regard. Okungbowa, Okoro’s next-door neighbor in Warri, ‘bore a deep resentment against the Igbos’ (90). He argues that: ‘Most of the minorities emphasise with the Igbos, but the Igbos think they are alone. We are spurned sympathizers’. It is a selfish persecution complex’ (90). Okungbowa in the novel encapsulates the ambiguous sentiment of minorities towards the Igbo on the issue of the war. Omatseye thus uses ambiguity as figural tool to weave the complex and complicated lineaments of the Nigeria story. This can be seen, for instance, in his authorial stance in relation to the role of the minorities in the war, the phono-semantic and, indeed, the existential import of the name, Okoro and the ‘pregnancy’ of Clara, among others. Even the revelation of Ojukwu’s parentage by Emeka the mole, tends to imply that the warlord, like a Byronic hero, goes to war for egoistic reasons, suffering

as he does from conflict of interests, or, worse, from split personality disorder syndrome. To this extent, therefore, Sam Omatseye in *My Name is Okoro* 'writes back' to the Igbo centre through his revisionist agenda as he tries to recalibrate the enduring trauma of the Nigeira-Biafra civil war.

Soldering a Fractured Polity and Rebuilding Peace

The historical novel, *My Name is Okoro* explains the mystery of love against the pathology of war, demonstrating in the process, the transgressivity of love. We see this exemplified in love affairs between Okoro and Nneka, Okoro and Clara; Nneka and Captain; Nkechi and Lieutenant Abdullahi, and Udeze and Akon. It is important to stress that *My Name is Okoro* in this regard follows the love-in-war tradition established by precursor-texts such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms*, in the relationship between Henry and Catherine, George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* in the romantic dalliance between Captain Bluntshchil and Raina, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* with regards to the steamy romance and, later on, marriage between Ginika and Eloka.

Perhaps, Sam Omatseye's variation on the theme of love in a war situation can be located in the relationship between Lieutenant Abdullahi and Nkechi, which, regardless of the novel's eponymous prominence of the protagonist, Okoro, comes through for us as the fulcrum of the narrative. Overhearing how Lieutenant Abdullahi had used and killed a girl he ostensibly was in love with in Onitsha, Nkechi suddenly develops cold feet and all desire to allow Abdullahi deflower her disappears. It is instructive to note that a similar episode involving a ranking Hausa soldier and Ginika is dramatized in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*. Ginika asks the soldier who is head over heels in love with her to under circumcision in order to be allowed access into her 'Holy of holies'. Similarly, Nkechi demands that Lieutenant Abdullahi undergo circumcision as precondition for her defloration. Seen as the Igbo belle by her townspeople, Nkechi is misperceived as sluttish, loose and irresponsible for dating Abdullahi. Even Nkechi holds her mother, Ngozi, responsible for allowing Abdullahi 'abduct' her through a combination of threats, force and importunity. All her defences broken by these factors, Nkechi thus begins to date him. She allows him access to her body including foreplay but stoutly stands her ground on the matter of sex. She cannot stand the thought of sleeping with an *uncircumcised* moslem. Desperate to consummate the love affair, Abdullahi agrees to undergo the extremely risky procedure of circumcision, more so in the touch-and-go vortex of a fratricidal war and on enemy territory, that is, the Biafra heartland. In a curious twist of fate, Nkechi happens to be within earshot when Lieutenant Abdullahi's bodyguards are reflecting on an earlier romance gone awry at Onitsha. This piece of intelligence obtained by Nkechi on the cusp of consummating her affair with the convalescing commander forces her to renege on her promise to Abdullahi; and, instead commits suicide in rather ambiguous circumstances, thus plunging both her family and her village on the one hand, and on the other, Abdullahi and his troops into deep sorrow and outrage.

It is not clear why the novelist chooses to resolve the love affair between a Northerner and a Southerner the way he does. The climate of ambiguity enveloping this rather unfortunate incident seems to open up a number of options for speculation. For one thing, Nkechi's death or suicide may be read by some as martyrdom, a heroic feat and one which feminists are liable to celebrate *ad nauseam*. By the same token, her death which helps her preserve her virginity will be interpreted as a sign of victory for Biafra (246). Moreover, Nkechi as a striking figure of African womanhood can also be seen as a *femme fatale* in reverse: rather than seduce men to their destruction, she achieves self-immolation as a kind of female Christ-figure. This much is made of her virginity, like Pamela in the novel of the same title by Samuel Richardson, and it provides a rich

site for much debate to be dominated by Marxists, feminists and psychoanalysts.

Perhaps, the obverse equally holds true. Probably if Lieutenant Abdullahi and Nkechi had got married, their relationship could have symbolically gone a long way to solder the ethnically-riven polity (254). We do know that marriage in Nigeria is not a private affair; it always involves the families of the intending couple, friends, associates, and even communities of the bride-to-be and the prospective groom. Evidently, an Igbo girl, thought to be the pride of her community, and a Hausa-Fulani *elite* coming together in matrimony holds the beautiful prospect of cementing and healing the fault lines which polarize the polity and help rebuild peace. Although the novelist manages to sustain the other love affairs between Okoro and his Igbo wife, Nneka, who violates and breaks her marriage vows by having a child with another man; as well as the affair between Okoro and Clara and Udeze and Akon, the main purpose of these relationships is to provide a human-interest angle in a conflict situation. All of these love affairs do not really hold the promise of fundamentally changing the surfeited gloom and doom in which the fraught nation-space is enveloped. Only the Abdullahi – Nkechi relationship could have significantly impacted positively on the warring nation-state.

Small wonder, therefore, that in 2016, nearly five decades after the civil war ended, Nigeria has remained stuck in a time-warp, with little or no prospect of peace or prosperity. According to Vincent Ujumadu in his *Vanguard* piece entitled ‘Nigeria deeply divided, says UN report’, things have not only fallen apart but are spiraling out of control. Ujumadu reports:

A report just released by the United Nations, UN, on Nigeria’s Common Country Analysis, CCA, has revealed a deeply divided society on the basis of the plurality of ethnic, religious, and regional identities that had tended to define the country’s political existence. (*Vanguard*, September 5, 2016, Web).

The piece goes on to add that: ‘Nigeria’s population had at different times expressed feelings of marginalization, of being short-changed, dominated, oppressed, threatened, or even targeted for elimination’. On a lighter note, Madam Onitiri, the kolanut seller seems to have hit on the magic wand for peace building and for cobbling together a polarized country. The solution to Nigeria’s elusive peace and unity is *kolanut*: ‘The kolanut is the soul of our palate. I grow it in the west, in the east it is the crop of worship and, in the north, it is the nut of play. I say, like the Igbos, he who brings kola brings life’ (64). The kolanut seller concludes: ‘My solution is simple: let everyone eat kolanut’ (64). The light-hearted intervention of Madam Onitiri may appear facetious and even risible, but on deeper reflection, it reveals the essential futility of life itself vis-à-vis man’s needless fight-to-the-finish exertions over ‘nothing’, as Shakespeare would say in *Macheth*. The kolanut trope hints at the need to cultivate neighborliness, camaraderie, love and understanding. Also, it invites all Nigerians, despite the divisiveness of ‘tribe and tongue’, to build bridges of unity, tolerance, fellow-feeling and solidarity and emphasise the things that *bind* them together rather than what separates or *divides* them.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to interrogate the socio-political implications of the name of the novel’s protagonist, stressing the deep ethnic hate and resentment stirred up in the Hausa-Fulani breast who sees an Igbo person as sworn enemy. The paper has been able to establish the fact that

ethnicism is at the heart of Nigeria's tragic fate, thus making the so-called 'Mistake of 1914' ever more regrettable. To be certain, if there is any new dimension Sam Omatseye's novel, *My Name is Okoro* adds to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war novel tradition, it is that it is NOT only the Igbo that suffered the 1966 pogrom, but ethnic minorities from the South-South region did as well (90). On the whole, Sam Omatseye has given the world a well-wrought and technically accomplished addition to the burgeoning canon on the Nigeria-Biafra civil war.

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