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Gender, the Nigerian Civil War and Hard Choices: Nihilism or Absurdism (?) in Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*

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Abstract

This paper entitled "Gender, the Nigerian Civil War and Hard Choices: Nihilism or Absurdism(?) in Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*" evinces an evaluative excursion into the author's delineation of gender in war and its concomitants regarding actions, inactions, and the mindset of the actors and the acted-upon (victims) of the fratricidal Nigerian conflict within a designated theatre. We demonstrated that the quantum impact of the war engages some near-totally nihilistic imperatives of the war. Nevertheless, we surmised, at the final count, that the war results in high-wire tension rather than erode the indices for hope regarding the war victims and victimizers alike; and by dangerous extension, the Nigerian nation. Although we conceded the presence of dystopia which is life-threatening and socially destabilizing, our calculation in the final analysis, is that the tensions generated against both genders in the war are essentially absurdist, not nihilist. In this vein of analysis, we concluded that Okpewho's delineation retains deliberately enough rays for reconstructive, rehabilitative, regenerative and cohesive engagements that will pave the way for societal survival and continuity.

Keywords

war, victims, gender, humanity, nihilism, Nigeria

Introduction: Text as Context

Chidi Amuta in his article "History of the Dialectics of Violence in African Literature" has posited that the imperatives of history engage the dialectics of violence in African literature. This is true not on the ground that African imagination is innately violent or prone to the discourse of violence (Amuta 132). On the contrary, Amuta demonstrates that African Literature "has consistently appropriated the violence which is integral to its historical determination," and has gone ahead to reproduce this violence imaginatively, giving it aesthetic appeal (132). Further to this, Africans objectify the concept of violence in their literature so as to understand, appraise, recycle, most importantly decry the various epochs of violence in African history. Amuta traces the episodes of this violence from slavery to colonialism, to what Emmanuel Obiechina calls "post independence disillusionment," (Obiechina 121) down to the internecine civil wars that dot post-independence African space; and to military dictatorships. Amuta scores the point that Soyinka's depiction of violence in *Madmen and Specialists* is the "most excruciating objectification of violence as a constituent of Nigerian history", with the likes of *The Last Duty* representing variations in the cycle of this great metaphor (153).

Okpewho like several other African creative writers has responded to Soyinka's clarion call to shift from cultural nationalism, take a break from the past and focus attention rather on those forces that "threaten the disintegration of the African society" (Palmer 240). Okpewho's is a "last duty" in an Urukpe at war where scheming for sex, vindictiveness, and personal greed thrive with the throbs of uncanny appetite among men and women. To Okpewho, Nigeria's Mid-West was the beautiful bride sought after by the belligerents. Hence, the fictional mid-western Urukpe is first "liberated" (occupied) by Simbian forces and later by Igabo. Both sides woo Urukpe in turn and try to win her favour during each occupation. Urukpe's dilemma inheres in the fact that "it is a border town harbouring two tribes and perhaps two sympathies" (Okpewho 95).

So the author seeks to show that the Mid-West was like the proverbial farmland ripe with palm fruits where two aliens scramble for possession and do each other great harm. However, in the scuffle the people are perpetually wary of their movements lest they should fall foul of the emergency regulations. Human rights abuse and witch-hunting are routine in the war. Innocent people are harassed, hounded into jail on mere suspicion either as enemy collaborators (the case of Mukoro) or security risks (Agbeyegbe for a count). Soldiers easily patronize civilian informants without cross-checking facts to sift errors. Thus, Major Akuya Bello easily hounds Oshevire into jail on trumped up charges as enemy collaborator and sympathizer. Okpewho equally underscores the criminal complicity of several civilians whose motive is selfish and vindictive in the perpetration of injustice against the innocent consequent upon the state of war.

The War, Its Saints, Idiots and the Helpless

Toje Onovwakpo and Omonigho Rukeme represent this crop of dark-minded persons who capitalize on the soldiers' eagerness to curry favour and maintain security to give false information and false witness against a victim. It is an indictment of the intellectual as well as administrative capacity of soldiers who "officer" the war and administer the people, as represented by the illogic of Akuya Bello. Okpewho's craft in this regard is equally a disavowal of war, a sick polity where innocents suffer and criminals continue to scheme.

The Simbians are obviously a protest force. They are not on ground and do not deploy good military equipment in their incursion in Urukpe. They merely engage in guerrilla attacks, which is subtle, roguish and mainly intended to discomfit Igabo. This is the tactic of the weaker adversary. Pockets of gunshots are therefore heard now and again in the streets of Urukpe and these signify guerrilla insurgency and Igabo's counter insurgency moves. Had the Simbian rebels of Okpewho's imagination the craft and mien of the Boko Haram degenerates of today, or a modicum of the criminal ferocity of the Syrian ISIS rebels, the war would be a different ball-game.

There are air-raids too. Simbians deploy their "moths", which have "to fly so low, to achieve anything like a hit" (Okpewho 94). In one of their combined air-raids and guerrilla operations, a record number of 207 people are killed including 72 civilians. Okpewho thus underscores the state of chaos, fear and foreboding that grip the Mid-west of the civil war years. The town is equally, hostile to Aku, a Simbian married to Mukoro Oshevire. This hostility underscores by extension the insecurity suffered by Igbos trapped in parts of Nigeria, in this case the Mid-west, during the civil war. It is Aku's sense of insecurity that first of all debars her from resisting Toje's initial advances. Aku and her husband are victims of the cross current of a war they did not initiate.

Oshevire is in jail on trumped-up charge thereby exposing his wife to the whims and caprices of the times, symbolized by Toje. To this extent, Okpewho shows that war does not know the innocent. This is why the innocents of the Daesh or ISIS expansionism and religious war suffer through no fault of theirs. Again, the starving victims of the intractable Syrian war are mainly those who have no say in the matter. These are integral to the fact of the psychological torture suffered by victims of the Korean war during which close relations were separated from one another. War only respects the strong and sometimes the lucky. Oshevire and his family suffer the greatest ravages of the war. This is made more annoying by the fact that it is the sins of others that are visited on the innocent. But this is to be expected. For Okpewho seeks to show that war is a diseased state and activities that surround it are diseased too.

In the novel, the war is not as pictorial, as ferocious, and as involving as we find it in, say, Aniebo's *Anonymity of Sacrifice* or Nwagboso's *The Road to Damnation* or Iroh's *Toads of War*. This is deliberate. Okpewho's intention, as observed by Nyemaeche Udumukwu ("Federal Voices"), is to take us behind the scene of war and place us in a vantage position to appraise "how people have used the war as a cover in order to execute their own selfish war" (108). Toje Onovwapo is emblematic of the cult of greed, opportunism and war profiteering. He is a hawk who does not wish the war to end. His greed, pretence and criminal scheming betray Okpewho's implicit cynicism against self-important members of the upper strata of society mainly responsible for the fratricidal war. It is no wonder that Toje should

urge Oshevire's incarceration and turn round to "protect" Oshevire's wife! Toje is a villain. He equates his personal survival, safety, and happiness with the survival of Urukpe in totality: "If therefore anything happens to me that might detract from the position in which we are held, no sacrifice should be too great from anybody in this town to ensure that we keep our place, that we maintain our position. Every citizen has to pay . . . Great names are rare, and must not be wasted" (Okpewho 5).

To this extent, Okpewho clinically satirizes the hubristic disposition of self-important middle and upper strata of the society whose arrogance and sense of self-worth becloud their reasoning and are only matched by their intellectual emptiness. It is integral to the fact that the ego of uppish villains often leads to skirmishes which enable the social dislocation that gives rise to lawlessness which in turn necessitates the suffering of the weak. Several schools have made the assertion that the Nigerian Civil War was fought to massage the ego of the two war lords: Ojukwu and Gowon who could not agree on points of who was superior to the other. Toje seizes the war as a chance to not only scheme Oshevire out of the rubber business but more annoyingly have him collared on trumped-up charges. His reason is that

Before long, Oshevire was already attracting labourers away from me because he paid better . . . not much later the government came up with all that nonsense about unadulterated latex and in no time the buying agents began to turn their focus away from me . . . and Oshevire began to enjoy increasing attention. Oshevire began to grow bigger and bigger, and even throw his weight about. (Okpewho 122)

Thus, Toje pays 150 pounds to Omonigho Rukeme to bear false witness against the embattled detainee. Rukeme and Toje are representatives of the dark and murky waters of competitive economy made more palpable by a state of war which is quite partial in its conviction or intimidation of the citizenry. Okpewho shows that the war time Nigerian society is sickened by greed and criminal acquisition. Only scheming criminals survive easily in that war. As Udumukwu observes,

When we place the activities of Toje in a broader perspective – the war, the struggle for Nigerian unity - we will be shocked . . . Okpewho confronts us with the startling fact that it is not the actual battle in the war front that will be used to keep the nation one. There is also the need to affect the consciousness of individuals and groups in the nation who are represented here by Toje (108).

Aku is a survival case that borders on the "acted upon", the "enjoyed", the victim whose hourly life depends on the largesse of her worst enemy. This spells out the moral predicament of the helpless woman in the war. Aku is a reminder on Chinua Achebe's war-time reaction to one of Nigeria's propaganda. In his article "In Reply to Margery Perham", Achebe wondered whether Dame Margery was able to ask "what happened to their men folk," when in her tour of Lagos, she "inspected a large structure near the road (and) found it full of 'Ibo' women complete with beds cooking for their reasonably healthy children" (*Morning Yet* 86). These women found near the road cooking for their children are obviously in Aku's situation. They were provided bed and board convenient enough for daily or nightly visits by those who killed or collared their husbands. Aku represents the defoliation of the polity which survival is tied to the whims and caprices of the greedy and the conscienceless. Like the disturbed and traduced polity, she does not lift a finger but wallows in her lot, in self-pity guided by a cautionary survival instinct, which does not earn her any lasting but pyrrhic survival.

Aku is cast in the mould of Rose Adaure Njoku in her autobiographical war memoir: *Withstand the Storm* (1986). Both the historical Njoku and the fictive Aku suffer a similar fate as their husbands are jailed on charges of sabotage; being treated as pariahs by the rustics of society, suffering insecurity emanating from communal suspicion and hatred. But whereas Njoku rises to the occasion and manages to withstand the storm without losing her dignity, the fictional Aku merely resigns to fate and quickly submits to the chance for survival, that of her defoliation and the emasculation of her matrimonial home. Aku is not even able for once to visit her incarcerated husband at Iddu. The man ironically draws

strength from the hoped-for fidelity of his wife for whom he is determined to survive his poor state and return; this would inevitably sharpen his nihilistic tempo when he returns to face the easiest reality of the situation.

Gender, War and Tension: Nihilist or Absurdist?

Aku's disposition is Okpewho's fulfilment of the Freudian psycho-analysis paradigm of the unconscious even if Aku negates the "reality principle", viewed from the prism of the factual Rose Njoku. She could not apply the principle of "repression of desire". Her super-ego is called to question (see Selden and Widdowson 138, Lynn 15-16). Okpewho's goal is to ridicule a society that has gone haywire, where all or most of the actors are mad and vicious. After all, "a desire or a fear too powerful to be confronted directly can be disguised by the unconscious and expressed by the author or dreamer" (Lynn 15). Though Okpewho demonstrates deep psychological understanding in handling the "traumatic effects of war on human lives and minds as demonstrated in the married lives of Oshevire and Aku", as Obafemi observes (61) this researcher is inclined to the view that Aku herself like Toje is an anti-person (an anti-heroine). She merely is a vegetable; no self-asserting fire of the modern female. Okpewho paints Aku with the absurdist tint or tinge.

Let us examine Aku's reasoning on her "predicament": "what would I lose if I did? What wouldn't I lose if I didn't? . . . and so let discretion get the better of tired conscience" (Okpewho 68). But what she achieves by "succumbing to tired conscience", is the final destruction of the home Aku thinks that she is being careful to protect. And like Sisyphus, she ends up carrying her cyclic boulder, being left in the hands of soldiers who help her husband to self-destruction (see Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*). Okpewho would have done better to invest Aku with strength of character to stand out where immoral, greedy and profiteering men scheme to destroy society, the innocent, and themselves in the process. But then, that might have undermined Okpewho's vision to portray men and women conditioned by the ravages of war who throw morality to the winds; a view which yields us the surmise that war is a diseased state that infects man and woman without exception. It is equally a strong contention that Okpewho's delineation is more realistic than utopian.

Like in Amadi's *Estrangement*, Okpewho articulates the effect of war on the human psyche. The total effect of the war in *Last Duty* is traumatic and tragic. Okpewho tilts dangerously towards nihilism but swivels away with nuggets of hope through the death of Toje in addition to Major Ali's iron resolve to live on principles even if it will always discomfit him. On his perceived humane actions in Urukpe which seemingly caused his reposting, Ali quips: "if I had the same chance, if I was to hold this bloody post again, Allah, I'd make the same mistakes all over!" (Okpewho 243). This is in contradiction with Oshevire's disposition towards nihilism. Through Mukoro Oshevire, Okpewho demonstrates his advocacy for truth. Oshevire remains the voice of truth, conscience, morality and humanity in the work. Through Toje and Oshevire himself, we are confronted with the injustice that is meted out to the innocent in the war. Oshevire is wrongfully imprisoned and his traducers aim at double gain from his incarceration. He is charged with sabotage and collaboration with the enemy. Mukoro does not know his real traducers but Okpewho gives us that benefit of knowledge to sharpen our critical interest in the question of the wrong war.

Oshevire gives insight into his wonderment at the ostensible reason for his incarceration. Again, Oshevire wonders why his wife is treated with suspicion having demonstrated her solidarity with Igabo: "If my wife did not consider herself Simba enough then to want to run away from the town like all the others – if it did not matter at that time that she was a Simba, why should it matter now just because someone suddenly remembered that one inconsequential little soldier paid us a handful of visits?" (Okpewho 183).

Under cross-examination by the jury that he "helped a number of rebel soldiers escape from Urukpe at the entry of Federal soldiers", Oshevire explains: "I saved the life of one helpless little boy . . . And if I had the same opportunity, I'd gladly do it again" (my emphasis, Okpewho 191). This echoes Major Ali's position earlier mentioned, and describes a mind made towards what is correct and morally sound. Of course, we know that Mukoro is incarcerated not because of any crime. He was roped in. He must remain in detention as Okpewho's point of contact with our judgmental turn. Like Dr Kanu in

Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, Oshevire is the innocent victim. Even the judge at Iddu admits that "You cannot silence the truth" (Okpewho 188).

Of Oshevire's position as a dialogic metaphor on the questions of conscience and justice, Chinyere Nwahunanya observes that this is a major thematic concern since it borders on those issues that strained human relationships and negated the goals of the war. He further points out that "although it provides us a 'Nigerian' picture of a chunk of war time history of Nigeria, it shows too that the pattern of power-profiteering, witch-hunting and the exploration (sic) of the weak by the strong that we see in the Biafran accounts took almost the same form in Nigeria" (Nwahunanya 32-3).

One is discomfited that Oshevire fails to survive to the last. His iron determination in prison gives way to a gradual degeneration consequent upon his psychological turn of mind. His inner rhythm is unable to match his outer rhythm. Nwachukwu has noted that "When there is a contradiction between the ego and the superego, between the individual and the society (or between one social strata (sic) or segment and another), the result is a searing asynchronism, leading to impatience and restlessness" (12).

Olu Obafemi is of the view that by thus portraying the character Oshevire, Okpewho tries to judge whether or not life is worth living in relation to what Camus calls "the fundamental question" (Obafemi 62). Oshevire and Aku are cast closely in the mould of Idemudia and Adisa in Iyayi's *Violence*. Both are victims of a diseased condition which they did not cause. But whereas Idemudia reaches an understanding with his wife Adisa, that they have a common enemy and resolve to fight it and forge ahead, Mukoro Oshevire is unable to rise to that lofty height. According to Nietzsche, nihilism is "the belief in valuelessness as a consequence of moral valuation" (11-12). Nietzsche claims that the state of nihilist tendencies is reached in the individual when "the highest values devalue themselves" (12). Has Mukoro Oshevire reached that psychological state, a point of no return where he could no longer rise higher than his emotions? Mukoro Oshevire is not allowed to grow into a gigantic hero like Idemudia in *Violence*. He is a decadent hero operating at the level of withdrawal. Confronted with the disarray in his home caused by his long absence, he empties into hopelessness, burns his house and literally commits suicide.

Because Oshevire bottles up his "manly emotions", he is unable to achieve catharsis. He is unable to reconcile both his inner and outer rhythms. This betrays a confirmation of Pleck in "Prisoners of Manliness" that "The conventional expectations of what it means to be a man are difficult to live up to for all but a lucky few and lead to unnecessary self-depression on the rest when they do not measure up. Even for those who do, there is a price; they may be forced for example to inhibit the expression of many emotions" (130).

Oshevire becomes a demented case and is destroyed by the passion he could not express. Mukoro Oshevire should have wept! Like Idemudia manages to speak to Adisa (*Violence* 305-8) and even weep, Oshevire should have spoken with Aku, and possibly achieve a disembowelling, and save his home. Rather, he reminisces: "What else can a man do but that which his mind urges him to do and he is genuinely convinced he should do, whatever the consequences are? To do otherwise would be to betray his honest manhood. And I would be the last to allow myself to fall under the pressure of fear" (Okpewho 236).

This kind of stance is akin to Okonkwo's fear of being thought weak which leads him to kill Ikemefuna, in spite of Ogbuefi Ezeudu's advice to the contrary (Achebe 45-49). Thus, though Oshevire knows that "the dishonour brought on (his) household is unjust", he sticks to the fact that "the stain remains. The smear is there, clear in the air as a hangman's rope, the noose through which the head must pass" (Okpewho 237). Having made up his mind towards nihilism, he sets his house ablaze. Mukoro's turn makes him a commoner. Perhaps, commoners are incapable of rising to great occasions!

Okpewho lampoons the concept of witch doctors who administer the wrong remedies and also cannot cure themselves. These constitute part of the total problem. Emuakpor alias Godinheaven is symbolic of that dark portrait. Godinheaven tries to survive through a facetious self-effacement and denigrating eye service. Major Ali is not impressed by Emuakpor's quackery, just as his soldiers engage in clandestine visits to Emuakpor for "protection" behind their façade of braggadocio and pretended bravery. Emuakpor, interestingly is a good match to Toje Onovwakpo. A master crook who has

perfected the art of quackery, Emuakpor brow-beats Toje into submission and fraudulently obtains a lot of cash to cure him of his syphilis. In fact, Godinheaven actually administers defective poultice on his clients.

Therefore, despite Emuakpor's boasts that "It was I who circumcised the tortoise; it was I who scaled the elephant's rump to scoop the curative flea from his crotch," and this other "It was I who caused the mad dog to stray to damnation . . .," we discover that he is not only fake to his clients (victims) but quite ironically to himself. He has boasted that his long practice and efficiency had ensured that "no one has had either the cause or the courage to question the efficacy of my medicines" (Okpewho 164). The fact that Godinheaven is destroyed by the same war against which he gives protection to his clients proves that men who lay claim to empty power would not be lions if people around them were not hinds, to paraphrase William Shakespeare. Emuakpor represents national witchdoctors who pretend to parade solutions but always administer fake remedies.

Okpewho's art equally encapsulates a preoccupation on the question of greed, war-profiteering, vindictiveness, and witch-hunting. These are the deplorable fall-outs of the war some of which directly helped to prolong the conflict. War profiteering in fact is at the centre of the rest of the vices that accrue from the war. War contractors are rich and influential. Toje submits: "I have been able to secure this contract to supply the troops in this sector with food. Nobody can deny that a sizeable income comes to me, and I can boast that if today a count was ordered I would have the whole town and even the wretched chief prostrating before me. If that is not enough power and appeal, what is?" (Okpewho 26).

This situation makes Toje oppose any kind of dialogue with the "rebels". He rails at the vocal press for urging dialogue:

Only last week they were urging the federal government to agree to meet the rebels anywhere if those people showed any genuine willingness for negotiations. Negotiations! What kind of negotiations? . . . I think those bastards should be left to receive a good pounding . . . I don't blame those boys. They are sure of their daily keep, earned from a wicked distortion of facts and misguided presumption at judgment. Little do they know the hazards involved in a change of business (Okpewho 30).

Finally, we notice that the urge to witch-hunt the innocent is driven by both vendetta and selfish greed. Rukeme represents un-called for vendetta while Toje is the hall-mark of vindictive selfishness. The message that is central is that the war throws up dark dealings and often the cruel and evil seize the chaotic space to unleash evil machinations on the just, the humane, the innocent, and the helpless. Ingrained in Okpewho's craft is a distillable harvest of absurdist, not nihilist tension where the question of existence is answered with undertones of the kind of purposefulness that we distil from Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. There, the world of Azaro is a cyclic maze of imperfections but the maze actually sustains the man-essence. With the death of the likes of Toje and Emuakpor, and with the latter volte-face enacted by Rukeme, coupled with Major Ali's iron resolve to hold onto correct principles, hope for humanity is restored. These are able to offset Oshevire's nihilism. Even though Aku is left in a condition of helplessness in which we originally find her, there is hope for her; who knows but she may learn a lesson from her other easy option, and choose an honourable option, a new site, a defiant slant that may offset her earlier complacent acquiescence. Hers too is absurdist, not nihilist tension.

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