

GROWING UP WITH BIAFRAN NATIONALIST CONSCIOUSNESS: MBACHU'S *WAR GAMES*

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Abstract:

Mbachu's novel 'War Games' is about the impact of war on the ordinary people of Biafra. He belongs to the Igbo generation that had closely witnessed the war during their childhood. They had experienced the harshness of the situation. It is these war experiences that Mbachu pours into the present novel. The novel is published in the first decade of the 21st century, which is nearly thirty five years after the actual war. Hence, it may be treated as a war memoir in the form of novel. Mbachu adroitly presents the war realities in his novel. He portrays the male coming-of-age experiences of its protagonist Basil Chekwubechukwu Odukwe, nicknamed Cheche, against the backdrop of Nigerian Civil War. As the war begins and continues to devastate life in Amafor, his family suffers disorderly and muddled civilian life caused by the war. Cheche describes his rural idyllic life in Amafor and the struggle of his people to survive the war conditions. However, despite the war crises, by the end of the text, Cheche successfully completes the phase of coming-of-age. He shows much precocity in his overall behaviour. As the text explores male coming-of-age during war crises, the present paper focuses on the formation of Cheche as a moral human being by the end of the text.

Keywords: Nationalism, Biafran Nationalist Consciousness, Coming-of-Age, etc.

Nigerian Civil War took place from the year 1967 to 1970 soon after Nigeria's independence in 1960. Having declared its independence in 1967, the Eastern state, which is Igbo majority state, separated from Nigeria and became known as Biafra. As a result, the civil war broke between Nigeria and newly independent state of Biafra on 6th July 1967. During the war years, Biafra was not recognized by any of the European nations. The only African nations that recognized this tiny nation were Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania and Zambia (Williams 247). However, due to lack of ammunition and weapons and much essential international support, the weak resistance of secessionist government of Biafra was easily crushed by Federal forces of Nigeria. Subsequently, Biafra was defeated in January 1970.

Chinua Achebe views the Nigerian Civil war as 'big incredible experience' for millions of Biafrans (Achebe 31). While describing the war situation, he says:

Food is short, drugs are short. Thousands-no, millions by now- have been uprooted from their homes and brought into the safer areas where they really have no roots, no property, many of them live in school buildings, camps, and the committee does what it can (31).

Assessing the real causes of the civil war, he opines that the creation of Biafra makes Nigeria worse 'not only in terms of natural resources, but in human resources' (36). He also adds that because of 'visible progress in things like acquiring wealth, education and so on, the Northerners had antipathy towards Igbo' (36). It is only due to power struggle that politicians exploited the tribal sentiments and remained in power (36). Achebe mourns for the victims of the war. It was so horrendous that as many as two million people were killed in the conflict. The young Biafran generation was completely devastated during this civil war

due to starvation and malnutrition. It underlined the tribal conflicts in multi-ethnic society of Nigeria and questioned the idea of one Nigerian nation.

The above Nigerian situation during the war conflict has been replicated in Nigerian literature. Since Biafran War, many novels have been written that deal with 'Nigerian Civil War' as a central theme. Ogunyemi's essay, 'Poetics of War Novel' analyses the novels like S.O. Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* (1971); Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra: a Civil War Diary* (1973); John Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* (1973); LN.C. Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice* (1974); Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1976); Eddie Iroh's *Forty-eight Guns for the General* (1976) and *Toads of War* (1979); Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976)...and Tony Ubesie's Igbo novel *Juo Obinna* (1977). The above novels were compared with famous American war novels of Stephen Crane, E.E. Cummings, Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller (Ogunyemi 206). By doing so, he attempts to find out the parallels between Nigerian war novels and its counterpart in American literature. He asserts that 'Although the Biafrans lost on the battlefield, the Igboman, by portraying Nigeria's victory as pyrrhic, has tried to recapture his manhood through the pen. There is ironic laughter in the portrait of a powerful giant who defeated a child' (204).

Besides, Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), Dulue Mbachu's *War Games* (2005) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) also present the war torn Biafra in their narratives with its graphical portrayal of war realities. These novels attempt to assess the causes of postcolonial failed nation building. They reflect on what went wrong in the post-independent phase of African nations.

Mbachu's novel *War Games* is more about the impact of war on the ordinary people of Biafra. He belongs to the Igbo generation that had closely witnessed the war during their childhood. They had experienced the harshness of the situation. It is these war experiences that Mbachu pours into the present novel. The novel is published in the first decade of the 21st century, which is nearly thirty five years after the actual war. Hence, it may be treated as a war memoir in the form of novel. Mbachu adroitly presents the war realities in his novel. He portrays the male coming-of-age experiences of its protagonist Basil Chekwubechukwu Odukwe, nicknamed Cheche, against the background of Nigerian Civil War. The protagonist is an Igbo child of a rich oil trader in Jos. In the beginning of the text, Cheche is four years old and living a peaceful life with his parents. However, the pre-war massacres of Igbos in the north compel Cheche's family to move from Jos to their native village Amafor and from there to Umuahia and again back to Amafor. As the war begins and continues to devastate life in Amafor, his family suffers disorderly and muddled civilian life caused by the war. Cheche describes his rural idyllic life in Amafor and the struggle of his people to survive the war conditions. However, despite the war crises, by the end of the text, Cheche successfully completes the phase of coming-of-age. He shows much precocity in his overall behaviour. As the text explores male coming-of-age during war crises, the present analysis focuses on the formation of Cheche as a moral human being by the end of the text.

It may be argued that Mbachu's coming-of-age novel is what Ogunyemi calls 'a special pleading that history should not be permitted to repeat itself' (204). It may be reckoned as a personal war chronicle that gives the accounts of horrors of Biafra. In order to portray these horrors, the novelist uses child narrator who naively describes the impact of the war. Mbachu's narrative gives the most unbiased account of the war impacts. Taking an objective stance on the war, Mbachu neither tries to justify the civil war nor refutes its historical essentiality. He simply places his hero and other characters amidst the war situation and shows how the civil war makes the people of Biafra suffer physical and mental damage. It is through his innocent and unique perspective that the narrative is unfolded. The novel explicates the birth and eventual death of Biafra. At the same time, it is paralleled with the development of its hero Cheche and his successful coming-of-age. Cheche grows up witnessing the nationalist spirit and consciousness of Biafra.

It can be observed that Mbachu recreates the Biafran spirit of the independence for their state

through the narration of Cheche.

Then one day, there was a great rejoicing and merriment all over Igboland: *we were a new country, the Republic of Biafra*. I heard everyone saying. We were no longer part of Nigeria, and it was now that I understood exactly what Mama meant about her and Papa being older than Nigeria. They were there when it was declared. I didn't need any telling to realize that I was older than Biafra (emphasis mine) (34).

He seems to prove Benedict Anderson's idea of nation as 'an imagined political community' (6). The idea of new nation of Biafra interpellates Cheche and his people with its Biafran consciousness. All of a sudden, the people of Eastern state of Nigeria become Biafrans. This Biafran nationalist ideology subjects the people of the region and they have to suffer the war consequences. Nonetheless, Mbachu never seems to romanticize the war. It is evident when Cheche implies the foolhardiness of his people. He says:

War, I gathered, meant a scale of killing and destruction worse than the pogrom we had already experienced. But surprisingly, they spoke of it with enthusiasm, in a manner that suggested they welcomed it as if it was some big sporting event (33).

Mbachu tries to denounce the imposition of the war on common people. He mocks the forced recruitment of young people in the army who are half trained through the character of Uncle Emeka who always fears conscription gangs and avoids joining Biafran Army. He makes a point that 'it would have been better to have joined up voluntarily and received proper training than go into battle as a poorly trained conscript "to face obvious slaughter"' (78). Mbachu emphasizes the absurdity of these conscript gangs and the insanity of the war politics. Instead of promised secession and independence of their state, the war turns Biafra a place of refugees, starvation and malnutrition, diseases like kwashiorkor, scarcity of food, deadly air raids of federal forces and the death toll. It also brings mental derailment of its people. However, Cheche survives all these crises.

Cheche, an observer of the impact of the war events on the commoners, represents the generation of Nigeria which suffered and survived the war crises of Biafra. His coming-of-age is greatly influenced by the war crises as his ordered life in Jos is disturbed by the crises. His forced migration from northern Nigerian city of Jos to his native place Amafor can be identified as his temporary regression from peaceful life to a war affected region of Biafra. Cheche is migrated from pre-war healthy conditions of Jos to dystopian conditions of Biafra. He refers:

People now talked of "Before Independence", "Since Independence" and "After Independence," and dropped names like Zik, Awo, Ahmadou Bello and Tafawa Balewa ...Then they talked of "Army take-over" or "Military take-over." Names like Major Nzeogwu, Major Ifeajuna and Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi came up but things only got worse and there was fear in the land (16).

These adroit references clearly imply the debilitated political structure and the death of infantile democracy in Nigeria. Mbachu explicates how ordinary people are deeply affected by the surge for the political power. It is in these malevolent postcolonial civil war conditions that Mbachu puts his protagonist Cheche and shows the impact of war on his coming-of-age.

While touching the tribal issues of Nigeria, Mbachu mourns the cruelties inflicted on fellow Igbos by Northerners. For instance, Cheche narrates horrifying experiences during riots in Jos:

Nights became even more frightening, dominated as they were by blood-curdling cries of "Oshebee! Hey! Oshebee!! Hey!! Oshebeeeee!!! Heeey!!!" Mama told me they were the war cries of the Hausa mobs attacking the Igbo in another part of town' (17).

Before war, what Cheche knows about his identity is that he belongs to a better off Odukwe family that follows Roman Catholicism. However, it is war that makes him aware of his own identity. The riots between Hausas and Igbos create in him what may be called tribal consciousness. When Igbos are attacked and killed in Jos, Cheche's perceptive mind questions the violent psychology of his fellow countrymen. He

reflects:

I now realized I was an Igbo and wondered what I had done to deserve such hatred. The adult said it was because the other tribes were envious of our success in commerce, the civil service and other fields. I wondered how they came to single out the Igbo as the common enemy. Did they hold a meeting somewhere to decide it? No one seemed ready to provide an answer (17).

This collective Igbo hatred in the wake of the civil war shapes the budding mind of Cheche. He receives his tribal identity at the very earlier stage of his life due to warriots. Mbachu seems to suggest the rifts between the Nigerian tribes that widened during the Nigerian civil war. He questions the very idea of multi ethnic society in which one tribe tries to dominate the other. Igbo hatred by the Hausas and other tribes and eventual Biafran war may be interpreted as the outcome of false jingoistic consciousness of both Biafran and Nigerian military leaders. He emphasizes the disillusionment and failure to build one nation of Nigeria in the postcolonial phase due to tribal conflicts fuelled by politicians. It is through Cheche's character that Mbachu underscores Nigeria as a bunch of tribal leaders fighting with each other for power politics.

As far as socio-cultural ethos of Amafor is concerned, it can be said that it is in Amafor that Cheche receives his true Igboness. Amafor endows him the rich Igbo heritage which he may have been deprived of otherwise. His vacant time is filled with the tasks like fetching water from stream, plucking wild fruits of Udala trees, spending time with his cousins and friends and safeguarding himself from air raids. As the war makes the Igbo people turn towards their traditional life as farmers, Cheche also learns farming skills from his Grandpa and Obiukwu. Mbachu makes a romantic description of childhood plays and romps through the fields and bushes. Cheche's Grandpa becomes the rich source to Cheche to know his traditional religion with its positive as well as negative aspects. Mbachu presents the character of Grandpa as a man with traditional wisdom of medicine. At the same time, Mbachu denounces the pagan practices in Igbo religion. Cheche never partakes in any of his chicken killing rituals. Mbachu, by sketching the character of Grandpa, criticizes the traditional paganism of Igbo religion. However, concurrently, he admits it as a part of an Igbo life cycle and appreciates its positive aspects. For instance, Mbachu explains the pantheistic nature of Igbo religion. Cheche describes the significance of Ishigwu forest which is dedicated to god Ishigwu. He says:

In obedience to that god, it was permanently conserved in its natural state and was often used by medicine men to collect herbs. There we children often hunted for wild fruits or collected Okazi leaves for our mothers to make soup with. Cutting live trees was forbidden but dry branches could be hacked off. A number of such forest plots were dedicated to Ishigwu around Amafor (195).

Cheche's stay with his Grandpa and other members of Amafor makes him realize his own roots. He learns his own Igbo culture by witnessing annual Ogwugwu festival, its spirit dance and songs and folktales. It helps him build his unique perspective to look at his own people and their culture. Amafor brings him in the vicinity of nature that changes his outlook towards rural traditional life. It may be argued that Mbachu contrasts and heightens the insensibility and ugliness of the war with the descriptions of beautiful Ogwugwu valley, its streams, fields and landscape. Mbachu paints a sad picture of the war affected Biafra.

Mbachu also focuses on the issue of scarcity of food during the war. In pre-war period, hunger is never an issue in Cheche's life as he belongs to a well to do family. However, it gains a huge importance during the war in the wake of lack of food. In Cheche's words:

It was now that I realized the true meaning of hunger, and how things that didn't matter before or which I took for granted suddenly assumed unimaginable importance (108).

In the beginning of the text, Cheche informs that he is raised in a better-off Odukwe family in which there is the abundance of food. He says 'invariably, there was a lot to eat and drink' (5). Mbachu contrasts this abundance of food with the scarcity of food during the war crises. As Cheche and his people have to eat

lizards, rats and frogs, Mbachu sarcastically remarks that these small creatures 'must have realized that a war was indeed going on' (122). It is not only humans but also animals got affected by the war crises. The most significant lesson that Cheche learns from the war is that the war disgraces the dignity of man when it comes to basic drive hunger.

Furthermore, it is due to the war that Cheche's education is frequently interrupted which damages his educational growth. However, it does not hamper his moral growth. In these hard times, his family plays an important role in the formation of his character. His parents remain a great influence on Cheche's formation as a rational and thinking man. Cheche is well protected by his parents. Though other children become the victims of kwashiorkor due to lack of nutritional food, Cheche does not suffer from malnutrition. His parents become the significant protective factors in regard of Cheche's physical and psychological growth. He says 'Mama always made sure I was well fed. But she didn't bother anymore about what I wore' (127). Nonetheless, Cheche does not fail to notice the physical deterioration of his parents as well.

The most significant experience that the war renders him is 'the value of being alive' (40). Being always under the burden of survival, he begins to understand what death means. Cheche's companion Little Johnny is killed as he unknowingly keeps an unexploded grenade in his hand. Cheche describes Little Johnny's shredded body: 'Where his head had been was blood and gore. Only his lower torso and limbs were still intact' (166). Though Cheche faints at the sight of Little Johnny's body in pieces, the experience of the death helps him understand the futility of the war and the worthlessness of lives of ordinary people in the wake of the civil war.

By the end of the text, the focal point of the narrative is shifted from the war to the moral development of Cheche. Mbachu shows the significant role that his parents, church and Bible play in Cheche's complete formation as a rational human being. Cheche displays the development of moral tenacity in him when he begins to attend Church as an altar boy. On one occasion, when the president of altar boys Paulinus Nweze and his associates wrongly deny the Jollof rice and corned beef to Cheche and others, which is actually meant to be equally distributed among all, he rebels against them and refuses to apologize for his disobedience. Subsequently, Cheche is suspended from his duties of altar boys. It creates a psychological conflict in the cognitive mind of Cheche. His restlessness can be seen when he says: 'I was all alone with my problem and felt like an outcast' (199). Instead of apologizing, Cheche stops attending the Church. His rebel is the outcome of his moral and rational thinking that he develops at his pubescent age. His moral growth can be clearly viewed in his reflection on virtues and sins:

I wanted to tell her that it wasn't that corned beef was such a novelty but that it was a matter of principle; that I was only acting with the teaching at home and in school and church that we should always stand up for truth and justice...(201).

He fights lonely against the corrupt altar boys of Church. His decision of not making apologies for his rebellious and disobedient behaviour is appreciated and wins him the title "the hard-headed one" (204). Finally, Cheche remains firm to his decision and resolves his problem with dignity. Therefore, his act of rebellion symbolizes the moral fibre of Igbos. Mbachu suggests moral toughness of Igbos through Cheche's character. All in all, Cheche is portrayed as a boy growing during the national crises and how these crises transform him into more humane, sensible, rebellious and morally tough individual.

In a nut shell, it may be said that it is the war crises that render Cheche a revelation to trust himself. His formation as a rational being that is capable of making judgment between justice and injustice, sin and virtue and good and evil is caused by his exposure to war realities. The political turmoil in the nation, pre-war riots, the civil war conditions and the Igbo socio-cultural ambience shape Cheche's opinions, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies about his own self, his cultural identity, his religion and his society. In Mbachu's view, the war quickens the process of gaining maturity as children come of age earlier during this period. At the same time, he mourns those children who face deadly consequences of the war.

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