

Dramatising War, Re-enacting Violence and Trauma: Language and Meaning in Afam Ebeogu's *Madmajor*

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Abstract

This paper examines the achievements of Afam Ebeogu's *Madmajor* as a play on the Nigeria Civil War, focusing on its use of language to re-enact violence and trauma as characteristics of the war situation. It utilizes qualitative research parameters to analyze the primary text and some secondary sources of data to gain insight into the playwright's use of peculiar military language to capture the realities of the social conflict. The study uses the reader-response theory that emphasizes the reader's interaction with the text to generate meaning. The researchers identified and exemplified instances of the use of military linguistic nuances in the play, foregrounding the preponderance of violence and trauma in war situation as human conditions that preoccupy the text and condition its language.

Keywords: Drama, Nigeria, civil war, language, violence, trauma

Introduction

The literature on the Nigeria-Biafra war is largely characterized by the language of violence and trauma. Language use in Afam Ebeogu's *Madmajor*, a play on the civil war, resonates with the harsh realities of the events of the conflict as the playwright dramatizes the historic events of 1967 to 1970 when the Nigerian nation was engulfed by the war, and her atmosphere wore the colours of violence and trauma and death. Fear, horror, and mass death best defined the state of the nation, as streets, roads, detention camps and bushes hosted either swollen, rotten, petrifying, maggot-infested corpses, or breathing skeletons of a malnourished populace. The experience of the war utterly changed the focus of not only Nigeria literature but also other forms of writing such as journalistic writing, memoirs and historical artifacts. The tendency to document the war experience was (and is still) compelling. As

Chinyere Nwahunanya comments, "The Nigeria civil war of 1967-70 now resides in the minds of its survivors. But like other wars in history, it echoes stridently in pages of numerous books (fiction and non-fiction), plays and poetry of varying artistic merit, confirming Kole Omotoso's view that the Nigeria Civil War is the most important theme in post-war Nigeria writing" (2). Thus, the theme of the war is evident in a large body of Nigeria post-war literature.

Against this background, this paper examines the achievements of Afam Ebeogu's *Madmajor* as a play on the Nigeria Civil War, focusing on its use of language to re-enact violence and trauma as characteristics of war situation. An introspective, qualitative research, this study analyzes the primary text and some secondary sources of data to gain insight into the playwright's achievements in the play. The theoretical underpinning of the

work is reader-response theory that emphasizes the reader's interaction with the text to generate meaning (Cuddon, 2014). The researchers concentrated on the identification of the use of military linguistic nuances in Ebeogu's *Madmajor* to foreground the violence and trauma that characterized the war.

The Place of Drama in the Literature on the Civil War: An Overview

By its amenability to performance and instant appeal, dramatic literature towers above other genres of the literary art in re-imagining the war experience. The war has been, however, retold in all the genres. Axel Harnett-Sievers et al have observed that “post-war writing about life under War conditions started with a small collection of short stories by Chinua Achebe and other published in 1971” (2). The short story genre soon gave way to longer narratives that explore the experiences of the war. In prose, S. O. Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* apparently took the lead. Then came Achebe's *Girls at War*, Kole Omotosho's *The Combat*, I.N.C. Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice*, Edie Iroh's *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace*, Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, among a host of other prose narratives. Nigerian poets of the post-war period equally demonstrated the visibility of the war as an indispensable raw material for artistic recreation. Perhaps, it is in this vein that Obi Maduakor posits, “The war jolted Nigeria poetry out of its earlier pre-occupation with personal reflection and alienation into a concern with public themes. The new approach in subject-matter is accompanied with a new attitude to language. The war revolutionized the language of Nigeria poetry, imbued it with a new energy, a new directness, and a new urgency ...” (55). Notable poems on the war include J.P Clark-Bekederemo's “Causalities”, Nnamdi Olebara's “A Warrior's Lament”, among several others.

No matter the volume of prose and poetry written on the Nigeria civil war, lack of immediacy of appeal on the audience places them behind the drama on the conflict. Commenting on the effectiveness of drama as a literary genre, taking cognizance audience appreciation, Udent

Udent opines, “Dramatic literature has specific advantages over fictional and poetic expressions. Apart from its direct aesthetic appeal on the audience who see the realization of the struggles, failures, hopes and successes of life in living organic form, drama also is the most thriving form of collective art in Africa today” (25). Dramaturgy enlivens the civil war experience much more than prose or poetry. There is no doubt that upon the imaginative rendition of the experiences of the 'holocaust' on stage, the audience is made to have a sense of actually witnessing the horrors of the conflict. Amanze Akpuda lends voice to this view by observing that “...in properly situating the various ramifications of the Nigerian civil war, the contemporary Nigerian dramatist seems to have scored the bull's eye. This is because drama, the theatre, is presumably the most lively and engaging genre of literature, one whose palpability evokes impressions of the actual. The uniqueness of drama lies in the fact that as a theatrical event, one is made to appreciate this demarcation between real life and its recreation on stage” (167). The foregoing explains why Nigerian dramatists of the post-war era have not departed from pre-occupation with themes of the civil war decades after the conflict. The early post-war period witnessed the publication of plays such as Charles Ume's *Double Attack*, Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*, Ene Henshaw's *Enough is Enough*, Elechi Amadi's *Pepper Soup and the Road to Ibadan*, Chris Nwamuo's *The Prisoner*, Catherine Acholonu's *Into the Heart of Biafra*, among others. Afam Ebeogu's *Madmajor* is an important addition to the drama on the war.

Language of Violence and Trauma in Afam Ebeogu's *Madmajor*

The role of language in the realization of meaning in literary works is incontestable. Yankson opines that “Literature must also be seen as language use. In fact, it is our belief that a shift from the present pre-occupation with themes towards a greater exploration of the language of literary works...will be positively beneficial to our communicative competence” (iv). An appreciation of the achievements of a writer in any given literary work is incomplete without an examination of the language in which the work is rendered. In re-enacting violence and trauma that characterized the war, in the play (*Madmajor*)

language is deployed to maximum effect. The characters in the play find themselves in situations that influence their language and actions; they employ varieties of language to bring out the violent, hostile, horrifying and terrific situations of the civil war. In examining the language of Olebara's 'A warrior's Lament', Obi Maduakor throws light on the language of war literature when he observes that Olebara "Paints a horrifying picture of war and of the soldiers' moment of self-awareness when death is the only answer. His language is cold and brutal (hence the horror); but it is the only language at that moment when self confronts self"(65). Ebeogu's Madmajor renders the tragic story of Madmajor, a committed Biafran soldier who dies fighting in the Nigeria-Biafra war; the play dramatises the human suffering brought about by the war. The play falls within the category of what Bernard G. Murchland describes as "the literature of despair" (Qtd in Akpuda, 191).

Set in Biafra with predominantly Igbo background and atmosphere of war, hostility, horror and trauma, language use in the play blends with the changing atmosphere and states of the characters. In the text, the reader encounters 'cold', brutal' military language in the forms of expressions, terms and slang peculiar to military personnel and formations. Other variations of language include formal and informal English, dialect, code-mixing and codeswitching. There is the use of rhetorical language, which finds manifestation at the levels of language of self-glorification, language of complaint/altercation, and proverbial language.

The interplay of language, situations and characterisation in the play produces its meaning and lessons: the reader encounters military personnel (Madjor, Corp. Gilbert, 'Voice' of officer in charge of 1st Liberation Brigade, sergeant, and private); intellectuals and peasants conscripted into the Biafran Army (Chuks, Ike, and recruits); Relief workers (Red cross superintendent and his aids); Refugees (Mrs. Ndiche, 2nd Dibia, and Masquerade). It is evident from the composition of the characters that verbal communication among them must vary to appropriately express their idiosyncrasies, to show their emotions and attitudes and to elicit

action from other characters. This, perhaps explains why Sapir sees language as a "...non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires..." (8).

Military Language in Ebeogu's Madmajor: Re-enacting Violence and Trauma

Military language does not feature in normal dialogues; they are exclusively used by military actors in the play. Most of the military linguistic nuances in the text are peculiar to the Biafran Army. It is important to note that military expressions do not follow the conventional patterns of any language. For instance, in the play, there are elements of what Akpuda describes as "cannibalistic and aggressive language... a case of one's psychology manifesting in one's language and action" (189).

Military personnel, especially in times of war, are known to have violent temperaments that manifest in their aggressive, cold and brutal language. This type of language is evident in the following command issued by Corporal Gilbert to the recruit at the parade ground:

*Front rank, take dressing.
Number three, in ...a bit. Isay in!
Idiot!. No sabi in and out.
Tomorrow now you go say you
go to school. O..k Front Rank,
steady!. Middle Ra..nk, middle
rank, fine. You hold it. No
movement! Middle ra..nk stand
still! Rear rank, take dressing.
Number two! O.k stand still!
Now we do close and open order
march. Middle rank, no
movement. You hear people talk
say nothing concern middle rank
for open order march. O.k
squad! Open or ..der, march!
Jam! Idle! You must do it in
unison. O.k. squad, close
or...d..er march! Haip! Open or
or ...der, march! ... (Madjor,
77)*

This command albeit by an uneducated soldier is military in nature. Such expressions as "front rank", "middle rank", "rear rank", "take dressing",

“open and close order march”, and so on are common place terms in military formations. Notice also single words delivered in aggressive tone marked by interjections: “Idiot!”, “jam!”, “idle!,” haip!”, and so on. These register the hot temperament of the commandant. The temperament of the commandant is also evident in his use of split words whose component parts are uttered when he is “satisfied “that the recruits have got him right. Such split words are “Ra...nk”, “or...der” and so on. Here, he utters “Ra...” and looks carefully to ensure the recruit are 'behaving' before completing the word by adding”... nk”. Moreover, the persistent use of interjections throws light on the state of mind of the commandant. He is at best 'aggressive' and as such shouts at the recruits whom he considers as human 'animals' being prepared for slaughter at the war front. He is obviously not interested in their personalities and that is why he calls them” idiot;” and uses such expressions as “you must do it in unison”.

In addition, the reader finds Madmajor telling Chuka in typical military parlance, “So, I am going to make sure you are out of circulation until this conflict is over” (46). The expression, “out of circulation” exemplifies military expression; it refers to the detention of Chuka in the “special bunker” (46), which of course comes with violence and psychological trauma. The reader also encounters instances of military terms in the conversations between Madmajor and Corporal Gilbert; when Madmajor asks him about the recruits, Corporal Gilbert replies: “Receiving crash instructions as you dey call am, to make them ready for war any time” (38). “... crash instruction” is a military term, which is perhaps peculiar to Madmajor and his brigade. On another occasion, Madmajor tells Corporal Gibert: “Now, I shall send instruction through you to my 2i/c on what to do ...” (61); “... 2i/c in that context is a military linguistic nuance which means second in command. Other instances of the deployment of military language in the text include: “night operations” (18), “retreat” (41), “evacuate” (59), “At your service” (13), “Relax” (13, 15), “suicide assignment” (42), “Zero hour” (42), “rounds of ammunition” (26), “strike force”(45), “shore batteries” (29), “artilleries” (39), “ferret”(42), “court-martialled” (42), among others. The

cumulative effect of these expressions is that they imbue the work with unmistakable flavour of war and conscious military action. Though some of the expressions may be personal, they fall within our conception of military language given that they enabled the actors during the conflict to communicate their ideas and biases.

Apart from the use of exclusively military language, some civilian characters in Madmajor use Standard English to reflect on the war situation. Prominent among them are Ike, Chuka, the Dibias, the Red Cross superintendent uses the following formal English expression when he addresses the refugees: “...you needn't complain because you have shouted and your voice is hoarse and nobody seems to be listening. When you started complaining, there were few interested persons but their interest died in a whimper because they did not get converts, people who saw eye –to-eye with them as to be sufficiently interested...”(51).The reader notes the trauma associated with one shouting and no one listens to their plight. This address, which focuses on the plight of the refugees, is made by the Red Cross Superintendent at the refugee camp. He has just arrived in the company of his assistants bearing relief material (food items). He notices the hungry and angry looks on the faces of the refugees, which makes him instantly realize that the refugees are desperate to have something to eat. This is reminiscence of the prisoners (of war) in Christ Nwamuo's *The Prisoners* who are not given food for many days; when they receive any, the ration could hardly make a prisoner stand erect. It is in this respect that the Red Cross Superintendent chooses to appeal to the emotion of the refugees and to establish the significance of his selfless service. The Red Cross Superintendent, in his speech, portrays himself as the only person who “seems to be listening” 'to the shouts' of despair of the refugees where other people who are in a position to help them have allowed “their interest to die in a position to help them have allowed “their interest to die in whimper” due to their selfishness and exploitative tendencies which reduce the war victims (here, the refugees) to nothing.

As in Amadi's *The Road to Ibadan* in which Wigo and her mother are portrayed as victims of

contradiction occasioned by war when we meet them in the refuge encampment in the bush, Amaka and her mother (Madam Ndice) in *Madmajor* are presented as hapless and hopeless war victims. Through the instrument of the language of the text, the reader deciphers the agonies and misery of depraved and emaciated refugees as they gnash their teeth in pitiful hunger. The reader also feels sympathetic for the helpless civilians forcibly conscripted into the war and made to fight without adequate arms and military training.

It is the above situation that culminates in the use of pidgin, another variant of military language in the text, by one of the educated characters to register his dissatisfaction with the high handedness of corporal Gilbert. Although pidgin usage in the play seems to be associated more with corporal Gilbert, the reader notes that Ike, Chuka, private, A Soldier and Recruits I and II use pidgin at one time or the other. The atmosphere of war prevalent in the play does not always accommodate the use of formal English. Given the involvement of characters of diverse social positions and to ensure uninhibited communication with the recruits and other characters, Corporal Gilbert (who sometimes speaks formal English) uses pidgin. The use of pidgin by some of the other characters is necessitated by the need to ensure effective communication with Corporal Gilbert. For instance, when Ike sensed that his use of formal English might impair his effective communication with corporal Gilbert, he resorts to pidgin English.

IKE: You say you go into attack in four days' time?

CORP. GIL: I no say so. I no be Brigade commander

IKE: When the fight begin, no be gun we go use? (79).

A close examination of this conversation shows that IKE'S first question does not require the response given by Corporal Gilbert. Ike asks an ironical question. He questions the rationale behind drafting recruits to the war front without giving them training on the use of arms. This is misunderstood by Gilbert who quickly denies

ever mentioning a specific day for military action for that is the duty of the 'Brigade commander'. To ensure he is understood, Ike abandons his high brow English for pidgin. This is at once expressive and corporate Gilbert understands him. Corporal Gilbert's question: "why you dey ask?" and Ike's spontaneous response: "you never teach us how to shoot the gun" (79) confirm our position. From this, then, we may argue that pidgin occupies a special place in the language of the military during the war. This is because in such a volatile situation both the educated, the not well educated and the illiterate folk are drawn together. When this happens, the necessity for a language variety that can be understood easily arises; pidgin quickly comes handy in view of means of expressing solidarity among the 'soldiers'.

Furthermore, the reader also meets military actors in *Madmajor* who use a mixture of language varieties in one string of utterance. This manifests either as code-mixing or code-switching. Code-mixing is the infiltration of words from another language vocabulary into the language being used by a speaker while code-switching entails a change from one language variety to another in a piece of utterance. The following instances will suffice. Under code-mixing, we have Chuka's address to corporal Gilbert: "Na them too dey manufacture the ogbunigwe mines..." (26). In his discussion with Ike, corporal Gilbert illustrates, the character of codeswitching

Ike: Do you mean everyday must be a combatant soldier?

Corp. Gil: (Approaching Ike menacingly with his gun) shut up! Me I no day for your big grammar. I act on orders. I obey the last order finish. I am to conscript any able-bodies man I see for our brigade and that na my assignment. Now fall in and begin dey march...(25).

In the first instance, "ogbunigwe" which is an Igbo word (code) filters into the expression in pidgin. Thus, there is a mixture of informal English code and Igbo code to produce code-mixing "Ogbunigwe" as a code surely has an English equivalent but the clearly by the listener (in the play) especially when "Ogbunigwe" (mass

killer) was popular during the civil war. This therefore underlines the necessity for the codemixing above. Again, in the second instance, corporal Gilbert begins his response to Ike's question in pidgin apparently to make it clear that "big grammar" is not part of his brand of "military language". He switches to English to affirm his loyalty to the commandant "I act on orders; ... the last order". He goes on to give his main duty in the brigade as "to conscript any able –bodies man" and interestingly he adds an accent of determination and sense of duty when he switches to pidgin: "and that na my assignment". Continuing, to use a common place military expression, he commands chuks: "Now fall in". this is in English. Finally, corporal Gilbert switches back to pidgin and commands the conscripts to "begin dey march ..." we can say that codemixing and codeswitching are appropriated in the play by some characters in order to aid effective communication and to depict their varying conditions.

Conclusion

As Akpuda maintains, "...in spite of whatever incongruities there might be in the delineation of plot, setting, characterization and language, the Nigerian drama on the civil war vividly captures the essence of the literature of despair"(191). This critical assessment of the Nigeria civil war drama aptly sums developments in *Madmajor*. It is pertinent to note that the variation of language in *Madmajor* as in other plays on the war experience is predicated on the military and other characters' idiosyncrasies which define their varying degrees of education, background, individuality, profession and temperament. Constrained by changing situations occasioned by the civil war, the characters manipulate verbal language to suit their peculiarities. This gives rise to the deployment of language at various levels with military language dominating so much so that it decorates the play with a definite identity as one set in historic atmosphere of war, hostility and violence with attendant trauma. Thus, the worthwhile achievements of Ebeogu's *Madmajor* as a dramatic re-enactment of the war owes its impetus to artful utilization of language variants which make the characteristics of the war come alive before the play's audience.

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