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The Military in Nigeria's Postcolonial Literature: An Overview

Adeoti Gbemisola

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The Military in Nigeria's Postcolonial Literature: An Overview

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Abstract

The paper is a survey of Nigeria's postcolonial literature with a view to highlighting how writers through diverse ideological persuasions and aesthetic modes have captured people's experience under military rule (from January 15, 1966 to May 29, 1999). The paper observes that the military is not only a dominant political force in the country's postcolonial governance but also a recurrent subject in its narrative fiction, poetry and drama. In the works of Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Ben Okri etc, one is confronted with tropes of power abuse, economic mismanagement and poverty among other legacies of military regimes. Their art also capture the twist in public perception of soldiers. Whereas, the soldiers

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were celebrated initially as *messiahs* who rescued the polity from corrupt politicians, they became *vampires* in the 1980s and 1990s after plunging the nation into political turmoil and economic tribulation. In its conclusion, the paper contends that Nigerian literature in post-military dispensation will continue to be topical and relevant. Indeed, it has a crucial role to play in the task of nation-building and democratic development necessitated by years of military (mis) rule.

1. Introduction

So repulsive is the sectarian and self-seeking politicking that passes for democracy in the universe of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. The author's contempt for the misdeeds of politicians in the first republic as depicted in the novel is unmistakable. Attempts by the hero-narrator, Odili Samalu and other idealistic stalwarts of Common People's Convention to upset the decadent status quo through the ballot box are met with brutal suppression. The election marked as it were by fraud, violence, arson and looting, ends in favour of the Prime Minister -Chief Koko- and the great Honourable Minister -Chief Dr. M.A. Nanga. Amidst despair already stirred in the people, Odili's supreme wish is for a "Voice of thunder" to blow up the avaricious clan of politicians (Achebe, 1966: 2). The "thunder" eventually comes at the end of the novel in the form of a military coup d'etat. The coup as several critics have observed, provides a dues-ex-machine,

a timely resolution to conflicts that seemingly defy logical human resolution. (note 1)

The “thunder” as a trope for change also features in Christopher Okigbo’s *Labyrinths*. Soldiers’ booming guns have silenced the politicians’ ecstatic drums of misrule and the poet declares “Hurray for Thunder”. “Hurray for Thunder” is therefore, Okigbo’s gleeful celebration of the arrival of the military in national politics following the collapse of the first democratic experiment in 1966. However, he warns the victorious hunters (soldiers) not to be carried away by the euphoria of their triumph so that they will not be smeared with the rot of their civilian predecessors: “If they share the meat let them remember the thunder” (1971: 67). The inability of the new men of power whom Okigbo calls “the New Stars of Iron dawn” to heed the lyrical premonitions of the poet led to civil war, prolonged military rule and instability which Okigbo has rightly described as “a going and coming that goes on forever...” (1971: 72).

Shortly after, it became increasingly clear that the military had no solution to the myriad of problems that it intervened to tackle such as a parlous economy, decayed infrastructure, poverty, corruption, ethno-religious conflicts and nepotism among other ills. It is not surprising to perceive similar twist of fate in the discourse of postcolonial Nigerian literature. Whether in

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verse, drama or narrative fiction, one deciphers the reversal of fortune (in terms of public esteem) suffered by the military in real life. From the celebrative ardour of Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Okigbo's "Hurray For Thunder", to the denunciatory cries of Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day*, Femi Osofisan's *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, Frank Uche Mowah's *Eating by the Flesh* and Akin Adesokan's "Mr. Johnson Finds Works" among other texts, quite evident is the trajectory of an institution that slips from approbation to declamation. Writers often draw attention with threnodic feelings, to shattered expectation of democracy and frustrated aspirations of nationhood. As such, one is confronted with the phenomenal cascading of the erstwhile *Saviours* into the realm of *Vampires*, and whose total exit from power became mandatory if the country was to make progress.

It should be remarked that the dominance of the military as subject in Nigeria's postcolonial literature does not imply the absence of other engagements. Some writers have explored the crucial issue of gender in social formation. The contention is that colonialism merely exacerbated gender imbalance in indigenous cultures as men were obviously privileged in the operation of the colonial machinery. Political independence

had not washed off the splodge of patriarchy. Consequently, male and female writers who are sympathetic to women's putative marginality use literature to re create a literary space where women are pushed to the centre of discourse. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* are novels that depict traditional beliefs and practices that inhibit women empowerment. In plays like Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* and Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*, women occupy the centre of political power configuration the periphery of which they have been operating from in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial setting. The works show women of Erhuwaren and Ilaa respectively as valorous women who are imbued with an awareness of their sexuality and become outstanding by challenging the patriarchal *status quo*.

Besides, love features prominently in the writings of this era. In many instances, it has served as plane from where writers address other pressing issues like inter-group relationships in a highly stratified, multi-ethnic and multicultural society like Nigeria. Elechi Amadi's *Pepper soup*, Femi Osofisan's *Chattering and the Song*, and Zaynab Alkali's *The Still Born* are relevant examples. In another vein, the contradiction, hypocrisy and abuse that have crept into the practice of religions in

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recent times have equally received the attention of writers. One of them is Sony Oti with his *Evangelist Jeremiah*.

It is interesting to note that since 1999, new writings have been pre occupied with a kind of post mortem. Writers have been casting a backward glance to find out how and why the nation squandered the profits of independence so soon. They have also been engaging the challenges of state re-construction and the imperative of democratic development in the post military years. These are the common concerns of J.P. Clark in his play - *All For Oil* and Wole Soyinka in his new collection of poems - *Samarkand and Other Markets I have known*.

Nonetheless, the aim of this paper is to examine various attempts by Nigerian writers to grapple with the issue of military governance. In this wise, several questions become undoubtedly pertinent: How have Nigerian writers perceived the military as an institution and as a political force in the postcolonial contest for power? How has the military been inscribed or how has it inscribed itself into Nigerian letters? What are the aesthetic modes and trends observable in the various reflections of the deeds and misdeeds of soldiers in politics?

Taking cognisance of the age-long dialectical affinity between politics and poetics, the paper contends that the trajectory of a people's socio-political development finds enduring records

not only in history and political treaties, but quite importantly, in the gamut of their literary and performing arts. The practices of literature across ages show a close link between social temper and the tenor of literary discourse. As Andrew Delbanco observes “the use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it” (1999: 34). Through literature, a society can, in the words of Rotimi, question “the prevailing credos and practice of authority with a view to opening up its monopolies to the beneficial generality” (1999: 20). In the particular case of Nigeria, the utilitarian value of literature is undeniable as it more often than not, yields a greater insight into socio-political events. To this end, Nigerian literature presents a poignant engagement with historical realities in a manner that is rewarding, not only to literary scholarship, but also to the study of politics in the postcolonial state.

The paper begins by examining Nigerian writers’ responses to the first coup of 1966 and the performances of soldiers in governance after the coup until 1979 when a transition to civilian rule was concluded. The reactions range from euphoric approval to cautious optimism. Beside, the civil war fought between 1967 and 1970 generated a significant body of writing, which is discussed under the section: “Words on War”. The

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return of military rule in 1983 brought about a more turbulent polity and by implication a more socially engaged literature. The latter is the focus of "The Second Coming" while the paper's overall concerns are summed up in the "Conclusion".

2. When They Struck

Quite understandably, military leaders were initially associated with supererogation charisma and magical potentials. This is the same frame in which the so-called 'native Africans' cast past colonial rulers, who in the words of Ekeh were "perceived by most Africans in magico-religion terms, to dispense good life and to introduce what Africans could not produce" (1978: 327). Thus, the military was seen as succour to the failings of politicians who took over power from the imperialists. However, the military intervention that Ademoyega describes as a "painless surgical operation designed to heal a sick Nigeria" (1981: 126) turned out to be a lethal injection.

One writer who early enough has held in suspicion the military's corrective missions in politics is Ola Rotimi. In *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* -a comedy premiered in 1966 at Yale University- Rotimi shows as incongruous, the attempt to foist a culture of authoritarianism on Africa's emergent democracy. The predictable product of such incongruity is failed

democracy as witnessed in Nigeria and some other sub-Saharan African nations where that tendency thrived.

J.P. Clark-Bekederemo likens soldiers to the legendary Phaemon's dog ([note 2](#)) in his collection of poems on contemporary political issues - *State of the Union*. Through the metaphor of the Phaemon's dog, Clark calls attention to the relentless hemorrhaging of national resources under military regimes. Ironically, the interventions of these regimes are premised on the lack of accountability and transparency under civil rule. Revelations of corrupt enrichment of prominent members of Gowon's regime after its deposition in 1975 readily come to mind. The sour reality of soldiers locked in a fierce race to amass wealth as if to outface civilians is captured with notable clarity by Clark:

These days, the whistle has not gone
But the pack is off rushing for short cuts,
And nobody bothers when they return
With so much meat in their mouths (1985: 13).

In "The Cleaners", Clark queries the notion of ethical purification ascribed to the military. Soldiers are depicted as "cleaners" who seize the public sphere in order to wash it and clear the state of rot generated by politicians in the course of their "disastrous race" in power. In a characteristically ironic tone,

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Clark contends that “the cleaners” themselves are drenched in the rot of the state that they set out to clean:

They are themselves so full
Of muck nobody can see
The bottom of the pool
For the mud they carry
And cast so freely at a few (1985: 5).

The trope of cleansing is also explored in Ochia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied*. Soldiers, according to the poet, are “The Brooms” who arrived the political scene few years earlier to clear the streets and highways of governance, already “clogged with garbage”. As far back as the early 1970s when many of the poems in the section titled “The New brooms” were written, disillusionment was rife in the polity. By 1974, the Gowon regime had squandered the remaining bob of public confidence and sympathy especially when it reneged on its promise to restore democratic rule by 1976. Yet, all that was wrong with Nigeria's socio-political formation in 1966 when politicians were chased out of power still persisted, perhaps worse now than ever before. In a poetic rhapsody shot through with hints of subverted aspirations which the reigning order presented, Ofeimun shows as a mark of the regime's incompetence, its shifting and unsteady promises of handing-over. Undoubtedly,

Ofeimun is a poet with admiration for wounding but soothing verses.

The idea of messiahism - gone - awry is treated with similarly biting irony in “The Messiahs” (10) and “their Excellencies” (18-19). Here, the reader is confronted through a cluster of metaphors with betrayal of expectations. Here are “messiahs” who prefer:

... feeding the hungry
with 21-gun salutes
for victories that are yet to be won (1989: 10).

The poet paints a palpable picture of poverty, starvation and disease, which successive military regimes could not successfully tackle, even as they contentedly “move in their merry-go-rounds” (1989: 18).

As an inherently conservative institution set up to preserve the establishment, the military is quite suspicious of change and it frowns at the quarters where such a change is emanating from, especially if its authority is going to be at the losing end of the change. Perhaps, this accounts not only for the familiar reluctance to yield power to civilians, but also for the ruthlessness with which coups are executed, resisted and punished - if unsuccessful. Niyi Osundare in *Songs of the Marketplace* attempts a portrait of the post-First Republic military rulers

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“ruling by boot and butt”. In their customary preference for instant conformity without dissension, they stock “dissidents throats/with bullets from foreign friends”

(1983: 14). That this is a widespread perception of military rule among the people is attested by the fact that the opinions are presented as dominant in the marketplace - the parliament of the masses.

The blood bath that usually follows an unsuccessful coup in Nigeria engages the attention of Clark in “Easter 76” (*State of the Union*, 7-8). He specifically takes on the public execution of the plotters of February 13, 1976 coup which claimed the life of the Head of State, General Murtala Muhammed. Through a subtle ironic distancing, Clark jolts the public and the State that condone the spectacle of public execution into another segment of reality that has hitherto eluded them. Clark’s reservation is directed at a system of contest for power that dispatches “thirty odd men” hurriedly to their graves. He also indicts members of the public who find satisfaction in this spectacle of death. Such a system that is pivoted on forceful seizure of power carries with it a great risk. Unfortunately, civilians and innocent by-standers are sometimes caught in the throes of orchestrated rage after an unsuccessful coup. People have been arrested under excuses as curi-

ous as playing polo or ludo or sharing a bottle of beer with an alleged coupist, shortly before or after the coup. This reality reached its shocking height under General Babangida (during the 1986 and 1990 coup attempts) and General Abacha (in the 1995 and 1997 alleged coup attempts).

Here, Clark questions the fundamentals of the military concept of justice and penology, which are not aimed at reformation but anchored on *scapegoatism*. The goal of martial justice is to eliminate forces threatening the establishment at the moment, using them to dissuade future traitors. Meanwhile, the tendency for miscarriage of justice is high with the arbitrariness that attends the investigation and trial of suspects. It deals with effects instead of digging deep down to the root of the crime. Consequently, the execution of coup plotters since 1976 has never stopped coups d'état, just as violent robbery continues unabated in spite of public execution of armed robbers under the Armed Robberies and Fire Arms Decree, (1971). (note 3)

One important development in the aftermath of the civil war was the upsurge in the wave of violence and crime. The war facilitated easier access to firearms by combatants on both sides and even members of the civil society. Many of the combatants discharged after the war had to contend with unem-

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ployment and poverty in the absence of a sustainable programme to integrate them into the civil society, thus, resorting to robbery. Apart from this, there was also a sudden increase in oil revenue as a result of the Middle East crisis in the mid 1970s. This led to the famous *oil boom* and its attendant recklessness in public spending. The boom also strengthened corruption and people's taste for foreign goods. However, it could not bridge the wide gap between the rich and the poor. It only created an elite of stupendously wealthy citizens and a comfortable middle class. Amidst the overt economic imbalance, corruption presented opportunities for instant wealth and social mobility as demonstrated in Kole Omotoso's novel - *Memories of Our Recent Boom* and Osofisan's satiric comedy - *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* In the alternative, violence offered a means to the same end, as dramatised in Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*.

From a dialectical materialist viewpoint, Osofisan engages the menace of armed robbery against the background of political authoritarianism and economic inequality in *Once Upon Four Robbers*. He contends, like Clark, that visiting violence on armed robbers through public execution would not curtail robbery but breed greater violence. A solution to the problem lies in recognition by the state that the menace is a direct con-

sequence of its predatory economic system, founded on unequal access to opportunities and resources within the social strata. The play is, therefore, an indictment of the post-civil war economic policies of the military government that widen the gulf between the few haves and the majority have-nots. In a somewhat related development, Soyinka adopts what in theatre history has become the most opulent of all theatrical forms - the opera - to capture the opulence and corruption of this era in *Opera Wonyosi (Six Plays)*.

Given the palpable feeling of unfulfilled expectation by the populace toward the army as evident from the foregoing, the tide of public opinion was increasingly hostile to martial rule and turned in favour of a transition to democracy. The popular sentiment became *Òrisà, bí o kò le gbè mí, se mí bí o se bá mí*, ("Divinity, if you cannot rescue me from my present predicament, restore me to the *status quo ante*"). This much was clear to a Murtala/Obasanjo regime. However, given the enormous import of political power in accessing national wealth, among other alluring opportunities, and given the fact that the military institution had become a major force in the power configuration, it was not unconcerned about its civilian successor. **(note 4)** It became an interested umpire.

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This reality was not lost on Nigerian writers as reflected in "Handing over" the second chapter of Omotosho's *Just Before Dawn*. Also, Clark-Bekederemo in "Election Report" *State of the Union*, 17-18) describes the 1979 General Election as "a numbers game from the start". He captures the manipulation as well as the legal disputation that attended the election hall-marked in the famous mathematical quandary: What constitutes the two-third (2/3) of 19 states - 13 Or 12 two third states? Osundare dismisses the willfully courted confusion as "Rithmetic of ruse" in *Songs of the Marketplace*. In his words:

Theirs is the rithmetic of deceit
power hunters wallowing through circles
to a minus throwing
Cooking numbers for gullible mass (1983: 19).

To the poet, the whole exercise (1979 General Election) was a hoax as the military on its departure had determined its successor. The legitimacy of the civilian regime produced by the disputed election was somewhat vitiated *ab initio*. This among other reasons might have led to a quick return of full-blown military autocracy on December 31, 1983.

3. Words on War

The Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970 and its attendant dislocations in people's lives actively generated a size-

able canon. Writers have captured in various artistic modes, their experience of the war either as direct participants or as concerned by-standers. But the common aims are to achieve a true understanding of socio-political dynamics that caused the war, to truly heal the wounds of war and to face the challenges of national development. One finds in these texts, useful documentation of the intricacies of war and indices of communal catharsis in the process of healing the wounds of the war. Though they are essentially fictional, the works complement various reports already contained in historical/biographical writings like Wale Ademoyega's *Why we struck*, Raphael Alade's *The Broken Bridge*, Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra*, Olusegun Obasanjo's *My Command*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain* etc.

During the war, Soyinka's bid to play the "third force" in mediating between the Nigerian and Biafran sides brought him into confrontation with the Gowon regime. He was consequently detained for most part of the war. *The Man Died* is his prison memoirs in which he relives the experience of detention. Its tone is acerbic and vitriolic against his gaolers. Besides, Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists (Six Plays)* - presents the tragedy of a post-war nation. The society emerging from the war is at the mercy of brutal and depraved human beings like

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Dr. Bero, the Old Man and his acolytes of AS philosophy - the Mendicants.

Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* is a dramatisation of the Ijaye war in Yoruba history. The tragic resolution of the conflict in the play demonstrates the futility of war as a solution to political disagreements. The playwright flaws the hubristic commitment of Aare Kurunmi - the Generalissimo of Oyo army - to what he calls "tradition". Rotimi indicts the failure of dialogue and the resort to shedding kins' blood in a way that points at the parties involved in the Nigerian-Biafran war.

In poetry, J.P. Clark's "The Casualties" in *Casualties: Poems 19966/68* re-defines the general notion of "casualties" of the war. It goes beyond the detained, wounded and dead people. The entire nation is the victim, the casualty, fighting a war that is "not just our war" (1970: 38). Other poems in the collection reflect the horror of this period of disaster.

Gabriel Okara, easily the patriarch of modern Nigeria poetry discusses the war in *The Fishermen's Invocation*. "Suddenly Air Cracks" is an example. The poet tragically paints the devastation wreaked by an air bomb. The bomb leaves in its trail, a gory and gruesome spectacle:

The sadless hearts, the mangled
bodies stacked in the morgue
become memorials of this day (1979: 38).

“The Silent Guns” bemoans the violation of peace and serenity of a village. The war-ravaged village is now ruled by “sounds of exploding shells and / rattling guns and raucous laughter of death” (1979: 44).

To Odia Ofeimum, the war has turned the nation into “senseless abattoirs”. In “Where Bullets have Spoken” (*The Poet Lied*) Ofeimum portrays the tragedy of a nation locked in a fratricidal war. Dialogue in such a theatre of violence is conducted only in the language of bullets, leaving death and destruction as harvests of understanding. The war and its politics is like “a plague rolled by madmen to feed the eighty millions” (1989: 32).

A first-hand experience -fictionalised though- by soldiers of the Nigerian Army who participated in the war can be found in a collection of poems titled: *Voices From the Trench*. Maman Jiya Vatsa, the famous soldier-poet edited the anthology. Other literary responses to the war include Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn*, Chinua Achebe’s *Girls at War*, Rashed Gbadamosi’s *Echoes From the Lagoon*, Isidore Okpe-who’s *The Last Duty* and Festus Iyayi’s *Heroes*.

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In *Sunset at Dawn* Ike captures the fury and storm of battles. The mechanism of survival, the desperation and deprivation during the war are also presented. Through characters like Dr. Amilo Kanu, Professor Ezenwa, Barrister Ifeji, Mr. Onukaegbe and Duke Bassey, the reader is taken through severe dislocation in the rhythm of life of the people. Equally evident is the author's skeptical attitude to the war that has claimed thousands of lives of enthusiastic supporters on both sides including those who never participated in decisions that led to the war. Ike's polemics is encapsulated in Mazi Kanu Onwubiko's pessimistic admonition: "the dispute between Nigeria and Biafra could not be settled by war.... As for the soldiers, they cannot find the answer: the only answer they know is the gun. We never had any war of this magnitude until they seized power" (1976: 240-241).

Okpewho fictionalises the war in *The Last Duty* from the viewpoint of six characters - Ali, Toje, Odibo, Aku, Oghenovo and Oshevire. This is a unique experiment in style, somewhat unprecedented in Nigerian fiction. Against the backdrop of the characters' ineluctable interactions, Okpewho shows the war as being powered by greed, opportunism and acquisitive predilections of privileged individuals. Chief Toje Onovwakpo who belongs to this category uses the war not only to keep

his rival in rubber business (Oshevire) in detention, but also to use the latter's wife to re-activate his waned virility. Hence, the war in a sense is a gratification of ego longings of its promoters. It is also a means of settling personal animosity rather than pursuing a patriotic end. The victims are usually the less privileged like Aku, Oshevire and Odibo.

Festus Iyayi is more incisive in the evaluation of the civil war in *Heroes*. The novel is a re-definition of the authentic heroes of the war beyond the common notion. Iyayi contends that there is no difference between the inhumanity and brutality of the Federal troops and that of Biafran Soldiers. Thus, he punctures the illusion among civilians that Federal soldiers are "good, virtuous and humane" while Biafran soldiers are "liberators". Soldiers on both sides are depicted as "murderers, rapists and killers" (1986: 71). Iyayi sees the war as the proverbial fight between two elephants where by the grasses (masses) are the victims. He argues that the war is not that of the masses, rural poor, urban workers, but that of army generals, politicians, businessmen, clerics and bureaucrats. It is more of an intra-elite competition for national resources as encapsulated in the experience of Osime Iyere, the protagonist of the novel. "This is an investment in blood and de-

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struction by those at the helm of affairs with the expectation of profit" (1986: 64) Osime concludes.

In all ramifications, *Heroes* is a departure from the triumphalist accounts of the same historical event in autobiographical work like Obasanjo's *My Command*. Iyayi offers a sharp re-construction of the civil war from a Marxist ideological perspective. To him, history is not the making of only great men or great events. From time to time, the ordinary people are part of events that shape and constitute history. Thus, he contends that when the authentic history of the war is written, the true heroes would not be the leaders of Nigeria and Biafra - Yakubu Gowon and Odumegwu Ojukwu respectively. They would not be their lieutenants and field commanders. Rather, the real heroes would be ordinary soldiers on both sides at the battlefield, used by the ruling class as expendable objects of combat. They were the ones bearing all assaults of rifles, grenades, bombs and mortars. The list would also include ordinary citizens who were forced by the hostility to contend with psycho-social dislocation arising from hunger, disease, poverty anxiety and fear.

From the foregoing, it had been adequately depicted in Nigeria's literary arts that the civil war is one important event that underscores the failure of governance under army rule.

Though the seeds of the war had been sown long before 1967 in the divisive and sectarian politics traceable to the colonial period, the military indeed accentuated the problem.

4. The Second Coming

The second coming of military rule was premised on failure of democracy indexed by breach of law and order, inept and corrupt leadership, collapse of social utilities, unemployment, parlous economy etc. However, the noose of autocracy became tighter between 1984 and 1999. From General Muhammadu Buhari to General Abdul Salaam Abubakar, repression was more brazen. Power, and by extension resources of the state, became increasingly personalised. Corruption still persisted and hopes for poverty eradication dimmed in spite of several anti-poverty programmes of each military administration.

If writers were detained or exiled in the previous era, they were haunted and killed for offences ranging from plotting coups to engaging in minority rights activism. (note 5) And like the proverbial bird that has learnt to fly without perching because men have learnt to shoot without missing, Nigerian writers became more daring in their engagement with the ills of military rule. This is evident in such works like Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen also Die*, Frank Uche Mowah's *Eating by the Flesh*,

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Akin Adesokan's "Mr. Johnson Finds Works", Tayo Olafioye's *A Carnival of Looters* and Ogaga Ifowodo's *Homeland and Other Poems* among others. The greatest historic challenge faced by the nation and its writers was how to permanently terminate military rule and install democratic governance. In view of this, Nigerian writers joined the global opposition to dictatorship, which became strident in the post-cold war era.

Soyinka's *From Zia With Love*, for instance, is an unequivocal censor of military dictatorship as manifested in the Buhari/Idiagbon regime. It is set in a Maximum Security Prison. In spite of the playwright's denial of "any correlation with actuality" (1992: 9), the dramatic action evokes in the audience a feeling of *déjà vu*. The characters' incongruity, the exaggerated actions and the ridiculous costume - all portray military incursion into politics as virulent and inimical to the growth of a democratic culture. The play's attack however, goes beyond General Buhari and Idiagbon to embrace other military dictators. The playwright pursues a demystification of the *uniform*, which in Nigeria has become a metonymic icon of coercion, regimentation, disdain for dissent and other anti-democratic tendencies (Adeoti: 2002, 57).

The prison is used as a metaphor for Nigeria in some other plays. Rather than being a site for moral rehabilitation, the

prison becomes a veritable setting to capture the myriad of deprivation occasioned by the reigning absolutist order as explored in Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju's *Awaiting Trouble*.

Aside from drama, the second coming of absolutism features in Osundare's *Moonsongs*. Amidst the aura of mystique and complexity of masks worn for the moon and the poet's engagement with the intricate patterning of nature, one deciphers in the collection an abiding concern with the intrigues of governance under the military. The same poet further reinforces this point in *Waiting Laughters*. Subtitled "a long song in many voices", some of these voices sing about the nation's moment of "iron clad" rule'. For instance, the poet through a Biblical allusion draws an analogy between the repression suffered by Israelites under King Pharaoh of Egypt and that experienced by Nigerians under the post-second republic military rulers. He describes the latter as "green gods" under whom:

Ordinances tumble down like iron showers
decrees strut the streets like swaggering emperors
hangmen hug the noose like a delicate baby
and those who die thank Death for
his infinite mercies (1990: 46).

The promise of an early return to democracy and respect for fundamental human rights earned Babangida's regime public

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confidence at its inception. But a wide gap sooner developed between this promise and the regime's deeds and policies. Several instances of brutal suppression of public protests by law enforcement agents, arbitrary arrests and detention of the regime's critics, indefinite closure of media houses and seizure of their publications have been documented. **(note 6)** A transition programme that began in 1986 actually ended in a stalemate after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election. The programme was distinguished by singular disingenuousness and it became evident that it was aimed at anything but a successful transition to genuine democracy. In his drama *Awaiting Trouble*, Oloruntoba-Oju ostensibly anticipates the manipulations and chaos that marred the programme. He however, recommends violent revolution as the solution to tyranny as enunciated in the agitation of Alege - the jailed revolutionary. Alege has been detained unjustly by the martial order.

The botched transition also inspired Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods*. But unlike Olorutoba-Oju who sees a solution to the crises of democratisation in a popular revolution, Yerimah recommends a generational and gender shift in the locus of power. The power that has generated so much acrimony and division in Ilu Oja is handed over to a virgin at the end of the

play. Youth and womenfolk hold the key to a new order in view of unending disappointments from the older generation and men folk. The latter have been dominating power especially in the military order.

Perhaps, the transition programme could not have fared better. This is because the “New Breed politicians” on whom it was anchored were an embodiment of vices associated with their predecessors as well as the shortcomings of members of the regime in power. Remi-Raji gibbets the kind of politics and politicians thrown up during that era in *A Harvest of Laughters*. Both are distinguished by deceit, subterfuge, tricks and whimsical manipulation of popular will for a pre-planned goal. In “Here They Lie”, the “New Breed” politicians are cast off as “newly bred tricksters” who like their military mentors invent alluring promises in order to win votes:

Every fool is a new politician
who promises each homestead
its own rain in full glare of drought...
In this orchestra of poli-tricksters
even the compere is a blessed smiling liar
whose endings are beginnings of new tunes (1997: 55).

The culture of “rented crowd of solidarity message bearers” developed from the June 12, 1993 election crises. Desperately in need of a basis for legitimacy that it lacked, the Ba-

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bangida regime turned to the civil society for support - traditional rulers, market women, students, religious organisations etc. The need of the government bred a crowd of professional loyalty mongers in State and Federal capitals. It assumed a more cynical dimension under the Abacha regime. (note 7) Sycophancy turned out to be a lucrative enterprise as implied in Raji's "The Rally Rats". According to the poet, the fulsome praises by these paid supporters for the reigning dictator are "shaped by the smell of minted money" (1997: 57) and they will also be readily available for his successors.

On a general note, the reality of militarism has engendered its own aesthetics. Hence, the predominance of drama of rage, fiction of protest and poetry of indignation. Indeed, literature of "anger and protest" flourished during the period. These writings are remarkable for deliberate violation of hallowed conventions of literary compositions without necessarily impeding significations. After all, military rule itself thrives on violation and subversion of rules. Through their arts, writers participated in the general struggle to end military dictatorship. While some sympathise with victims of harsh politico-economic policies of military government (e.g. Structural Adjustment Programme), some depict the reality in its grimness. Some seek to stir resentment in the people against the mili-

tary, goad them into a possible confrontation with a view to liberating them. Worthy of note here are Sesan Ajayi's *Burst of Fireflies*, Tanure Ojaide's *Fate of Vultures*, Nduka Otiono's *Voices in the Rainbow*, Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Osofisan's *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* and Bode Sowande's *Flamingo* among other works.

In the realm of narrative prose, "faction" is a conscious artistic legacy of the era. Through it, writers blend raw data of history with matrices of imagination and rhetoric. Omotoso's *Just Before Dawn*, Adebayo Williams' *The Remains of the Last Emperor*, Sowaribi Tolofari's *The Black Minister* and Frank Uche-Mowah's *Eating by the Flesh* also interrogate military dictatorship through the artistry of "faction".

In *The Black Minister* for example, Tolofari reflects the trajectory of Nigeria's postcolonial history as the country hops from one military rule to another. There is a striking similarity between the Atamgba republic of the novel and Nigeria especially after the Second Republic. Specifically, the novel is the author's critical response to Babangida's eight years in office. An Army General, Ahmed, who leads a guerilla struggle for Atamgba's liberation, becomes its leader after the struggle. But his cabinet is his Achilles heel, as it is made up of people who often don't share his vision and ideology. Dr. Alabo Halli-

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day - the Minister for Coal and a University don is an exception. The consequent clash of interests leads to a palace coup that overthrows Ahmed and replaces him with Lieutenant-General Ango Buba. Unfortunately, the latter's deliberate revisionism destroys most of the progressive gains of his predecessor. Doomed in the process is the dream of a free democratic and economically emancipated Atamgba.

Dr. Halliday, the minister for Coal is at the centre of the conflict. He is convicted and jailed for twenty years by a special Military Tribunal for alleged "abuse of office and causing financial hardship to the country". Dr. Halliday's trial here recalls that of Professor Tan David West, the former Petroleum Minister in 1990. However, there are echoes of other socio-political events like the murder of Dele Giwa - a journalist - in 1986, the Gideon Orka's coup of April 22, 1990, the frequent fuel price hike and consequent mass protest, religious and ethnic conflicts and the North-South dichotomy among others events that lend the novel its contemporaneity and *factional* credentials.

5. Concluding Remarks

The inauguration of another civilian administration in Nigeria on May 29, 1999 is a significant event in the nation's post-colonial history. The pervasive disenchantment of the people

with military rule in the 1980s and 1990s made the transition a crucial political turn that calls for deep reflections on peoples' experience under the military and how soldiers while in power erect new realities.

The paper has focused on the military as an institution and as a political force inscribed by creative writers into the fabric of Nigerian Literature. Of particular and major interest are works that address the phenomenon of military rule between 1966 when the first military coup took place and 1999 when another attempt at civilian democracy was launched. The control of the instrument of coercion and political power has conferred on the army a significant control of the economy as well. As such, it has become a central factor in Nigeria's postcolonial politics. Its leviathan bearing in politics correlates with its remarkable recurrence as a subject in literature, even though it is treated with more hostility.

The paper has shown that postcolonial Nigerian Literature has explored the inherent contradictions in military governance. Quite clearly established is the betrayal of citizens' expectations by soldiers while in government. The soldiers perpetuated the crises of leadership, just as corruption, hunger, unemployment and poverty defied several autocratic measures. Nigerian writers have responded to this reality with di-

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verse aesthetic temper, ranging from cautious optimism to outright despair; from satiric indignation to tragic ennui. But what comes out broadly from the studied texts is a threnodic lamentation of castrated hopes of democratisation, good governance and national development. With the exit of the military from power, however, the challenges before writers at the dawn of another attempt at civilian rule are quite enormous. But the most important of them for now is how to lend their voices to the general ditty in the civil society that - *The time is up. Never again shall iron boots (soldiers) trudge through our blooming plantation of democracy. Never again!*

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1. Though the coup at the end of *A Man of the People* has been described by Adebayo Williams as an “ingenious contrivance”, it is a contrivance that has gone sour. An admission of this fact accounts for Achebe’s re-negotiation of military dictatorship and its impact on Africa’s political process in *Anthills of the Savannah*, among other literary attempts by other writers to demystify the putative *messiahs*.
2. The Phaemon’s dog is a clever and strong dog of the philosopher-Phaemon. It was trained to procure meat from the butcher daily and safely deliver it to its owner. The dog was doing this until one day when a pack of mongrel seized the meat from him and began to eat. He could not rescue the meat from them. Helpless, Phaemon’s dog joined the greedy mongrels in devouring the meat. But because Phaemon’s dog was braver and stronger, it ate the best and fattest chunk of the meat (Clark, *State of the Union*, 13).
3. Soyinka in *Jero’s Metamorphosis* and *Opera Wonyosi* ridicules this practice of public execution of robbers “which provided outing occasion for families, complete with cool drinks, ice-cream, akara, sandwiches and other picnickers’ delight” at the Bar Beach, Lagos. (See Soyinka *Six Plays*, 298).
4. Critics of the Obasanjo regime’s transition have tried to establish the regime’s partisanship in the 1979 General Elections, in spite of the latter’s denial. See for instance, Ebenezer Babatope *Hot His Will*.
5. In 1986, Major General Mamman Vatsa, the author of *A Bird that Sings For Rain and Other Poems* and former Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) was executed after his conviction by a Special Military Tribunal for his alleged involvement in the December 1985 foiled coup

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attempt. Pleas by fellow writers - Achebe, Clark and Soyinka - could not earn him an amnesty from Babangida's regime. Soyinka himself had to live in exile for a good part of Abacha's regime, after escaping the barriers of state security in November 1994. His *Open Sore of A Continent* and *The Beatification of Area Boy*, written during this period could neither be published nor circulated in Nigeria. Also, men of the State Security Service stopped a performance of Soyinka's comedy, *The Trials of Brother Jero (Six Plays)* slated for the National Theatre, Lagos in March 1996. Not even a change of venue of the performance to a nearby secondary school could avert the State Security's bid to prevent the staging of this comedy written over two decades before.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, environmental activist and leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) was hanged on November 10, 1995 along with eight others for the alleged murder of four Ogoni chiefs. Akin Adesokan and Ogaga Ifowodo, two young writers, were arrested and detained by the security apparatus of the Abacha regime in October 1997 while returning to Nigeria from the United States of America. Adesokan and Ifowodo are the authors of *Roots in the Sky* (a novel) and *Homeland and Other Poems* respectively.

6. See for instance Adejumobi and Momoh (eds) (1995): *The Political Economy of Nigeria Under Military Rule: 1984- 1993*. Harare: Space Books.

7. The practice culminated in the Two million-man-march on 2nd of March, 1998 at Abuja. The march was in support of the yet undeclared presidential ambition of Late General Sani Abacha, the then Military ruler.