

**Niyi Akingbe**

*Redeemer's University, Mowe, Nigeria*

**Narrating the past and constructing the present:  
The delineation of outrage in *Just before Dawn***

**Abstract.** As a so-called “faction,” that is, a combination of fact and fiction *Just before Dawn* engages the issue of protest in a way that is particularly relevant to Nigeria’s past. The mere combination of factual and fictional events and characters underlines the notion that history is far more fluid, contextual and negotiable than it ostensibly seems. As a text in which real historical personages and events are re-interpreted, it shows just how tenuous any claim to objectivity can be. Protest is implicated in the text’s multilayered approach to history itself: it deals with Nigerian history from the 1914 amalgamation to contemporary times, showing how arbitrary the process of “making history” is, and how those who purported to make history actually distort it. This paper examines the way history can be manipulated to shape the national narratives to suit those in power to the detriment of the ordinary Nigerian citizen. In the novel, Omotoso strives to chart a course of communal awareness and social reconstruction as he shows concern for the socio-political issues prevalent in Nigeria.

## Introduction

Protest is made up of four interrelated elements: the issue, the victim, the perpetrator and the protester. The relationship that obtains between these elements is symbiotic rather than adversarial because all are interdependent. The protester, however, occupies a unique position in that the other three elements relate to him in a way that they do not relate to one another. Thus, instead of the issues which incite protest being at the core of this dynamic, the protester is placed at the core of this study. The main concerns of the Nigerian writer Kole Omotoso's *Just before Dawn* are refracted through the perspectives of characters who protest, leading to a much more effective examination of protest, as opposed to merely depicting issues that cause protest.

Although these four elements which constitute the dynamic of protest are found in the novel, it does not feature a protesting central character through whose consciousness the story is told, although there is the instance of Chukwuemeka Ugokwu, an ex-soldier who attempts to assassinate a high-ranking colonial official. In spite of this, however, it can be argued with some conviction that Nigeria takes the place of the central characters of other novels. The novel focuses on the emergence and development of Nigeria in much the same way as a more conventional work of fiction would focus upon a central character. The country in the same way constitutes a centre of consciousness around which the events and situations that are depicted in the novel are portrayed.

When Omotoso recounts the errors of omission and commission perpetrated by the wide cast of characters whose actions he depicts, it is clear that the yardstick that he uses to assess the morality of their actions is its effect upon the country and its people. Thus, when the British scheme and plot to ensure that the country is denied the leadership that it needs to ensure political stability and economic growth, it is the country that is the victim of their manipulations. When

ruthlessly ambitious soldiers put their egos above consensus and thereby drag the nation into an avoidable war, it is the country that lies bleeding. As the central character in what is, after all, a national narrative, it is the country itself which fulfils the role of protester. As the common denominator in events spanning more than a century, Nigeria, in its very passiveness, condemns the actions of those whose power-lust have caused so much disappointment, frustration and suffering.

Nigeria is seen to protest these impositions through what may be called the ultimate act of silent protest: by doing nothing. Omotoso seems to be saying that, by merely surviving and outliving the petty scheming of a dishonourable *dramatis personae* of colonialists, politicians and soldiers, Nigeria is asserting its ability to endure. By remaining one nation, battered and unfulfilled as it is, the very existence of the country is a living indictment of those whose actions have threatened its peace and stability. Thus, Nigeria's birth in the novel is likened to the burdensome inconvenience of an illegitimate child; its inauspicious birth is symbolised in the cynical objectives outlined by its sire, Lord Frederick Lugard. The emergence of national consciousness during the heyday of colonial rule could be regarded as equivalent to growing pains, as the indigenous people slowly gain an awareness of the need to fight for independence. The uncertainties that surround the run-up to independence are indicative of an adolescent only slowly becoming aware of his enormous potential. Nigeria's stunted post-independence growth is, of course what gives Omotoso the greatest cause for concern, and his guarded optimism is clearly indicated in the hopeful optimism of the title of his work.

### ***Just before Dawn* and faction**

Due to its status as a work of faction, *Just before Dawn* uses facts as the underpinning for plots that trace the roots of the oppression perpetrated by the colonial authorities in Nigeria.

When Chukwuemeka Ugokwu was demobilised from the colonial army, he protested the maltreatment and injustice of the colonial rulers. Ugokwu planned to assassinate the governor, Mr. Macpherson in imitation of the protest culture of the courageous peoples of Sarawak, where the British governor had been stabbed to death by an ex-serviceman with a jack knife. Ugokwu's attempt fails, and he is apprehended and arraigned for trial.

The deep sense of injustice that motivated Ugokwu's is heightened in his trial, when he cross-examines the white colonial officials. Such cross examination is anchored on the binary opposition of the coloniser/colonised. This trial highlights the narrowness of the choices marginalized people have to make in order to survive a social context hostile to their values, and how marginality can bring out the worst in people who are affected. Ugokwu's action reflects the futility of idealism, and in the judgment of Justice B. Rhodes is inscribed self-loathing and self-debasement. Justice S. B. Rhodes in his dubious pronouncement on Ugokwu has acquiesced in the most basic of post-colonial self-subjugations: the necessity to define himself not only in the terms but in the image of the colonial master. Indeed, he becomes an apologist for the British colonial authority against his own African brother. Ugokwe's narrative counters the colonial discourse that linearises history.

Ugokwe catalyses Omotoso's depiction of colonial system in Nigeria's past. This failed assassin injects political consciousness into collective psyche of the complacent Nigerian elite. He provides the missing historical perspective for a barely literate, but idealistic rebel who could not understand a word of all the British colonial propaganda he has been made to believe, but which he needed to alter by demanding a better deal for the colonial subjects. The silence of recognition betrayed by the colonial authority as a response to Ugokwe's radical political demands during the trial is symptomatic of Frantz Fanon's "colonial violence." Fanon asserts that

the very first encounter between native and settler was a violent one, and that their existence together was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and canons (36). In many respects, Fanon's thesis on decolonisation and its attendant violence has greatly influenced representations of colonialism and its aftermath in the Nigeria of *Just Before Dawn*.

In the novel, history as protest can be seen in the juxtaposition of the narratives of the Nigerian civil war from the differing perspectives of the Hausa-Fulani and Igbo ethnic groups in the novel. A major historical consequence of the Nzeogwu's counter-coup of 29th July 1966 is the decision of the coup's actors who are predominantly Hausa-Fulani, to secede from Nigeria. This decision is given prominence when a flight scheduled to leave for London at 11.30 am on the morning of 29th July was delayed by the commandant of the airport. The purpose was to persuade the captain of a BOAC VC-10 plane to airlift women and children of Northern Nigerian army officers to Kano, because the officers no longer believe in oneness of Nigeria as a nation; and they believe the longer they stay in Lagos, the stronger their vulnerability to reprisal attacks from the Igbo army officers:

"There is trouble and we need your help," the commandant told the captain. He was polite, he did not bully the white pilot. The captain felt that he had to listen to him at least.

"We have some women and children who have to leave to get out of Lagos now."

"Kano. Just to Kano and back and then you can go to London." The captain considered but the commandant did not wait for him. "Of course the airport is closed and may not be back to work until maybe next week."

"I can fly out as soon as I get back?"

"Special consideration, yes." (255)

The narrative of the bid by the Hausa-Fulani officers to secede from Nigeria, until they were persuaded to do otherwise by the British government is juxtaposed with the determination of the people of Igbo extraction to secede from Nigeria as a reaction to the pogrom in which a lot

of people of Igbo extraction were killed in the Northern Nigeria in the aftermath of the Nzeogwu's coup in which the Sardauna, Balewa and other prominent politicians were killed. Irony is evident in the way General Yakubu Gowon, a northerner, prosecuted the Nigerian civil war, with the refrain, "to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be achieved." The Igbos wish for an identity that has its signification in the Republic of Biafra, even if it is purely psychological and political, is an antidote to their sense of "otherness" in Nigeria.

Omotoso's protest is clearly visible in his condemnation of the belated patriotic zeal of Gowon and other Hausa-Fulani military officers who were ready to secede when it appeared to suit them, but are now at the vanguard of "keeping Nigeria one," to the detriment of a persecuted and marginalized people's desire to move out of Nigeria into a safe enclave where their lives and properties will be secure.

The novel's re-creation of the narrative of the civil war, the spatial markers between the ethnic borders and the larger Nigerian landscape are constantly blurred but not erased. Acknowledgments are made of the tensions generated by the Nzeogwu's coup. Yet the narrative moves beyond a clear identification of aggressor-victim polarities by upsetting a hitherto unproblematic linearity. The past haunts the present, even as the timidity of Gowon and the youthful exuberance of Ojukwu did not prevent the country from being plunged into a civil war, which has been described by many critics including Omotoso himself as wanton, reckless and unnecessary.

The present revisits the past even as characters cross and re-cross geographical terrains through physical and mental journeys. There is an expose of the trauma and debilitations created by the civil war which can be seen in the narrative of the life of Sebastian Okoro, who was displaced from Lagos to his village in Biafra, but who refused to respond to the call for

enlistment into the Biafran army. In Okoro is situated a robust protest against the senseless war:

But here he was now almost in tears, feeling that all the deaths would be in vain at the end of it all.  
 “Biafra, *na bia afufu!*” He stood up and threw away the stick with which he had been scrawling on the earth. “Biafra means come and suffer!”  
 (292)

The refusal of Sebastian Okoro to enlist in the Biafran army, is perceptively evaluated in the words of John Cruikshank:

Human life cannot be represented in a fully or truthful manner without taking account of the pressures brought to bear upon the individual by his milieu, by the particularity of social situation and historical circumstances.  
 (36)

Okoro’s misgivings typify the important disjunction that has come to characterise the contemporary narrative of war: a willingness to articulate the disastrous effects of the conflict on its casualties as well as the demonstration of the reservations about the inflamed passions and other causal elements that have precipitated the civil war. In narrative of the civil war is invoked the extent to which history can accurately recover and represent the past through the form of the narrative.

M. C. Lemon considers that the “very logic” of history as a discipline revolves “around the rationale of the narrative structure” (131). In respect of what peculiarly constitutes historical explanation, Lemon argues that its essence lies in the manner in which historians account “for occurrences in terms of the reasons individuals have for their conduct.” In other words, history can be legitimately defined as the narrative interpretation and explanation of human agency and intention (144). The special character of narrative that makes it so useful to historians is, as Lemon points out, its “this happened, then that” structure which also, of course, is the essence of historical change. It is a process that saturates lived experience. In other words, the past existed and will exist as knowledge transmitted to us according to the basic principles of narrative form.

*Just before Dawn* is replete with precise presentations of dates of events, such as the 29th of July 1966; the Aburi meeting in Ghana, the names and ranks of military officers; the names of places. Such overwhelming specificity is deliberate: it is designed to underscore the significance of the interaction between history and literature in the novel. Such interaction becomes necessary, if the aesthetics shaping the narration of complex situations such as the Nigerian civil war are to be realised. Paul Ricoeur sees the relationship between history and literature as

Belonging to the category of symbolic discourses and share a single “ultimate referent” while freely granting that history and literature differ from one another in terms of their immediate referents ... he stresses that insofar as both produce emplotted stories, their ultimate referent (*sinn*) is the human experience of time or “the structures of temporality.” (140)

Hayden White, quoting Ricoeur, insists that history and literature share a common “ultimate referent.” This represents a considerable advancement over previous discussions of the relations between history and literature based on the supposed opposition of “factual” to “fictional” discourse (64). Simply by virtue of its narrative form, historical discourse represents such literary fictions as epics, novels and short stories. But instead of regarding this as a sign of narrative history’s weakness, Ricoeur interprets it as a strength. If histories resemble novels, he points out, this may be because both are speaking indirectly figuratively, or, what amounts to the same thing, “symbolically,” about the same “ultimate referent.” Speaking indirectly arises because that about which both history and literature speak, the aporias of temporality, cannot be spoken about directly without contradiction. The aporias of temporality must be spoken about in the idiom of symbolic discourse rather than in that of logical and technical discourse. Ricoeur says further, that “history and literature” speak indirectly about the aporetic experiences of temporality by means of and through signifiers that belong to different orders of being, “real events on the one side, imaginary events on the other.” (175)



In Ricoeur's view, then, narrative discourse does not simply reflect or passively register a world already made; it works up the material given in perception and reflection, fashions it, and creates something new, in precisely the same way that human agents by their actions fashion distinctive forms of historical life out of the world they inherit as their past (178). The working up of the historical materials of Nigeria's past, albeit in the shape of "faction," is what has engendered the relevance and necessity of history and literature as a literary strategy for contemporary Nigerian writers as they attempt to mediate the past and present.

*Just before Dawn* consequently in conformity with the submission of Hayden White on the nature of historical narrative, emphasises that in an attempt at narrating the past, has demonstrated that, a historical narrative is not only an icon of the events, past or present, of which it speaks; it is also an index of the kind of actions that produce the kinds of events in the novel which could be called historical. It is this indexical nature of historical narrative that assures the adequacy of its symbolic representations to the real events about which they speak. (178) Historical events in *Just before Dawn* can be distinguished from natural events by virtue of the fact that they are products of the actions of human agents seeking, more or less self-consciously, to endow the world in which they live with symbolic meaning. The historical events in the novel therefore, have been represented realistically in symbolic discourse, because such events are themselves symbolic in nature. So it is with the historian's composition of a narrative account of historical events: the narrativisation of the processes by which human life is endowed with symbolic meaning.

The manipulation of actions, events and characters in *Just before Dawn*, through the motif of historical narrative, examines events created by human actions as its immediate subject, and does much more than merely describing those events; it also initiates them, that is, performs the

same kind of creative act as those performed by historical agents. History has meaning because human actions produce meanings. These meanings are continuous over the generations of human time. This continuity, in turn, is felt in the human experience of time organised as future past, and present rather than as mere serial consecution.

This notion reverberates in Hayden White's thesis of history and the past, which is explained in fiction. "To understand what the past was about we must impose a narrative upon it;" hence our knowledge of the past is "through a poetic act." (85) White insists that the past as history is not the story – it is the fictional invention of historians as we try to recount what the past was about.

Now, although the level of understanding to which narratives aim is for Mink a primary act of mind, he draws back from the final logic of Hardy's position, and here White agrees with his conclusion that:

Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles or ends: there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles and ideas, but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive and ideas seminal. Only in the story is it America which Colombus discovers, and only in the story is the kingdom lost for want of a nail ... So it seems truer to say that narrative qualities are transferred from art to life. We could learn to tell stories of our lives from nursery rhymes, or from culture-myths if we had any, but it is from history and fiction that we learn how to tell and to understand complex stories and how it is stories answers questions. (557-558)

The relevance of the past for contemporary African artists is a persistent concern that Omotoso explores in *Just before Dawn* by providing a total picture of society in motion which proffers significant insights into the potentialities of a fictional treatment of historical materials. The novel as a national narrative mediates between history and literary imagination, allowing the novelist to look back. In looking back, Omotoso projects certain fictional figures through a

carefully-patterned historical framework. He shows the personal destinies of these characters, and by so doing, attempts to portray the kind of individual paths that can directly express the problems and contradictions of the turbulent periods Nigeria has passed through from the time of colonialism to the period of independence. By contrasting the nature of these various individual paths, Omotoso posits a search for authentic national values as part of a consideration of the way forward out of the quagmire of socio-political conflict.

Omotoso articulates a complex understanding of the role of art in confronting history, offering a vision of national re-orientation in the distant future. He seems to be describing the past as a resource that could inform a renewed and politically engaged future. However, the tone of the future in the novel is bleak and apocalyptic. The future is replete with ambivalence. The picture of the future is cynically reiterated in the careful generalisations of the military *coup d'état's* broadcast at the end of the novel:

Fellow country men and women, I Brigadier Sani Abacha of the Nigeria Army, address you this morning on behalf of the Nigerian Armed Forces. You are all witnesses to the grave economic predicament and uncertainty, which an inept and corrupt leadership has imposed on our beloved nation for the past four years .... (344)

The displacement of the politicians by the self-seeking soldiers at the end of the novel raises an important observation in Omotoso's juxtaposition of the relationship between the personal and the national, the particular and the typical, the time-conditioned and the timeless in the conduct of the ruling elite. The soldiers' incursion into governance at the end of the novel might have generated hope for political rejuvenation if it had been anchored on altruism and national interest, but unfortunately, the *coup d'état* is designed to perpetrate the selfish interests of a clique in the Nigeria Army. This is shockingly revealed by Sam Ikoku, a politician and "veteran of many political upheavals in the country" (344). His cynicism serves as a barometer

for gauging the collective pessimism of Nigerians, who monitored the follow-up broadcast of the December 1983 military *coup d'état*:

In pursuance of the primary objectives of saving our great country from total collapse, I, Major-General Muhammadu Buhari ... Sam Ikoku turned to his wife chuckling. His mind had already taken leave of the present. He said simply, "There is no coup. Let's go and sleep my dear."  
(345)

### **Conclusion**

Omotoso uses the motif of military coups in the novel to protest military adventurism in Nigerian politics. He further uses the motif to interrogate the role of the military in post-independent Nigeria. The military is seen in the novel as rapacious interlopers who have done more harm than good since Nigeria got independence. In the novel, the military typifies agent of social destabilisation in the Third World.

*Just before Dawn* repeatedly typifies the irony of apprehending the future through a representation of the past in the present. Omotoso has demonstrated in the novel that national narrative must draw on rigorous historical research that is mediated by the literary imagination.

Omotoso sought new ways to protest the decline of a country whose initial promise of glory has been perverted. He describes the process by which Nigeria came to this sorry pass: Omotoso prefers a bird's-eye view of the nation's history, setting, events and occurrences in a fictional context which transcends the adherence to mere fact so that their true implications might be better understood. By bringing fact and fiction together in an attempt to better understand the Nigerian project, Omotoso shows that progress can only be made when art transforms history into a means of enlightenment rather than a weapon of war.

### Works Cited

- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove, 1963.
- Lemon, M. C. *The Discipline of History and the History of Thought*. London: Routledge, 1995: 131.
- Mink, Louis. "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension" *New Literary History*, Vol. 1, 1970: 541-558.
- Omotoso, Kole, *Just Before Dawn*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., 1988: 1. London. Merlin Press, 1970, p. 21.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "The Fictive Experience of Time." *Time and Narrative*, 2: 100-101.
- White, Hayden. "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978: 85.