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**Defying armies:  
Protesting military oppression in *Arrows of Rain***

**Abstract.** In undertaking a semiotic examination of any work of literature, primary consideration is given to the ways in which its author uses signs to convey his understanding of reality, and the way in which such understanding helps him to shape his ideas. It will be argued in this paper that the author of *Arrows of Rain*, Okey Ndibe, uses a comprehensive system of interlocking signs to express his ideas. These signs are memory, orature and national narrative.

The overt subscription to social concerns in *Arrows of Rain* reveals the extent of the determination of third-generation Nigerian writers to confront the social realities considered responsible for the failure of the country to live up to its widely-acknowledged potential. As Elerius points out, literature provides a specific form of social consciousness to which the artist and the critic cannot be indifferent:

In apprehending observable reality and reflecting the findings in his literary creation, the African writer is not unaware of the real nature and objective of good literature which he sees as being largely determined by the needs of the society. (195)

**Memory**

*Arrows of Rain* is imbued with the capacity to remember what has happened, which in itself is a form of protest given the fact that what is being remembered is subversive of the existing order. Negotiated history and defiant protest coalesce in the experiences of the central character Ogugua, whose occupation as a journalist enables him to straddle both.

Ogugua's narrative in *Arrows of Rain* echoes not only the ambivalence of a post-colonial Nigeria and the politics of remembering, but also the process of narrating and organising memories, and thus evaluating the role of the military in national development. Ogugua's narrative is a web of recollections from the distant past after it had undergone deliberate repression. His decision to narrate his turbulent past to his son Femi Adero comes with the conviction that it will help him come to grips with his altered personality, a personality that has been dismembered by General Bello:

I am here because many years ago I fooled myself that the counterfeit coin of silence was good enough to buy peace of mind. I forgot my grandmother's wisdom, that the mouth owes stories to the debt of speech. (245)

Ogugua's decision to break out of the silence of self-censorship clearly evaluates the power of narrating the brutality of the military in its assault on the collective sensibility of Nigerians. His memory is a motif of interrogating Nigeria's chequered history in its struggle against military decapitation of its social and political values. In some sense, Ogugua in his nightmarish re-telling of the past presents himself as a bridge between the past and the present of Nigeria's history; he feels his disrupted history will provide the missing link in the life of Adero, who becomes a victim of controversial parentage, orchestrated by the military culture of gratuitous repression.

The connection between Ogugua and post-colonial Nigeria is made more significant when his role in re-telling the historical past of Madia (Nigeria) is taken into consideration. His introspection not only empowers him as a chronicler of events and circumstances in post-colonial Nigeria, but also makes him a compass for navigating Nigeria's future history.

Ogugua's narrative of military preoccupation with torture and repression led to his alienation. This strikes a parallel in the narrative of biological dislocation of Adero. This

narrative was made to stand on its head, when Adero, in his quest to trace his biological roots, traded his narrative of controversial parenthood with Ogugua:

That is my story. I am a man searching for his lost pebble. I am a stream cut off from its source. Tell me if you know: where does such a stream go? (241)

This reveals the extent to which the military repression of the citizenry could fragment and damage the psyche of an individual and obliterate family roots in a post-colonial nation.

Ogugua and Adero are casualties of recollecting the past. In recalling the past, the duo stumbled on the incontrovertible truth that they are two individuals “linked, by a strange intersection of fate and probability” (245). However, the apprehension of the reality of their oneness throws up despair and unmitigated cynicism in Ogugua. Such cynicism is borne out of futility of existence to Ogugua, whose life had lost enthusiasm for the celebration of fatherhood because of the transcendental frustration imposed on him by the armed forces of Madia. Hence, to Ogugua, nothing matters anymore:

Every familiar thing has become strange. Still, are not all humans, at bottom, mirages and mirrors? Mirages of faces in constant transfiguration endlessly forming and reforming into multiple images. Mirrors of one another, reflecting now this stranger, now that, becoming one with every living thing. (245)

Ogugua’s reaction to Adero’s narrative betrays the fact that in re-telling the past, there is bound to be contradiction between factual or forensic truth and the other shades of personal and social truths which constitute its problematics. Ogugua is conveniently disposed to remember and articulate a story in which his vulnerability to the military campaign of terror is sufficiently substantiated, rather than one in which he is indicted as a father who abdicated his responsibility. This realisation contests any sacrosanct subscription to the power of story-telling as a balm for healing the wounds of the past. *Arrows of Rain* examines the potential

violence of both the processes and contexts of narration. This notion recalls the role of silence in the recollection of the past as explained by the anthropologist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance). (26)

Ogugua's narrative penetrates the silences, particularly in the construction of archives and narratives, suggesting that these are interrelated with "the making of history in the final instance."

In its form, *Arrows of Rain* evaluates the appurtenances of violence in recollection of the past, by indicating the silences in the narrative of Ogugua in parallel to the narrative of Adero. The narratives of Ogugua, Iyese and Adero are all intertwined. They interject into one another to indict the military in its torture and violence. The narratives therefore are woven around Ogugua who has the narrative authority to decipher which story should be told from the ones that should not be told, since certain types of stories are more difficult to tell than others. The novel aligns with Ogugua's need to talk about the rape, killing, torture, and dehumanisation of the generality of the citizenry by the military under the command of Bello, in order to portray the military as an institution which distils and perpetrates violence on its people in Third World countries.

Ogugua's narrative of self-isolation aligns its silences with narratives of Iyese's repeated rape by Bello as a systemic violence, which by extension reverberates a narration of subjugation of the state by the military. The novel's depiction of Ogugua's inability to recall and analyse certain parts of his past while deliberately shying away from others suggests that narrating the past also recalls violence which could disrupt the present. The end of the novel

submits that the exploitation of memory to recall the past is susceptible to the dispensation of violence by those who oppose such re-telling of the past for the purpose of avoiding indictment. Hence towards the end of the novel, Ogugua hangs himself to avoid being sentenced to life imprisonment by General Bello's obtrusion into the court trial whose entire processes have been subverted, with the compromise of Justice Kayode. Kayode, as an agent of the state, has to carry out the script of the military junta of Madia if he wishes to keep his job. The dilemma of Ogugua at the end of the novel is a symptom of self-hate caused by his delay in heeding the advice of his grandmother that "stories never forgive silence." His prolonged silence had created a lot of damage, and his regret knows no bounds:

My silence has no hope of redemption. It is too late in the day for me to look for grand insights. What I know are simple truths. I know that the fabric of memory is reinforced by stories, rent by silences. I know that power dreads memory. I know that memory outlasts power's viciousness. (248)

Ogugua's decision to take his own life is sufficient to save him from being traumatised afterwards by the nemesis of narrating the past when the relevance of such a narrative has become somewhat belated. His death is an affirmation of the consequences of his choice to recall and narrate his politically-disrupted past. Ogugua's narrative signifies that in some situations, the need for re-telling the past leaves in its wake its own kind of forgetting, not so much of violence perpetrated on an individual or community in the past, but of the violence that continues into the present.

### **Orature**

Ndibe's confrontation with the evils of military rule in the text is further reiterated in employment of the sign of orality, such as proverbs, anecdotes and folklore. The foregrounding of his novel's political theme on the frustration and dispossession of the Nigerian populace by successive military leaderships is explored against the backdrop of Igbo

mythical symbolism. Ndibe's exaltation of Igbo folklore and beliefs provides an enduring background for mediating literature, culture and social preoccupation in the novel to challenge the distortion of human values by the military leadership of General Bello.

Ndibe's appropriation of folklore material to discuss the military's flagrant abuse of power in *Arrows of Rain* has been articulately evaluated by Eldred Durosimi Jones:

Although African writers draw inspiration from their particular ethnic bases, their ultimate vision is national, even global. The ethnic background offers them the metaphor for their vision. What the writers see around them as they survey their political and social environment since independence is a recurring cycle of misrule, mismanagement, corruption, violent upheaval and general misery. (6)

Ndibe's subscription to African traditional world view through the specificity of Igbo orature is demonstrated in terms of character presentation. He uses irony to delineate the individuality of Bukuru, whose original name is Oguguamakwa, which literarily means in "the wiper of tears, a consoler, a vindicator and comforter." However, there is an ironic twist of the name in the novel. "Ogugua," as used in the novel, typifies a harbinger of ill luck and deep-seated misfortunes. This notion is underscored by the sudden death of Ogugua's (Bukuru's) mother at childbirth. The potency of the ironic twist of Ogugua as a name also repeated at the birth of Olufemi Adero, who is originally christened Ogugua by his biological mother, Iyese. Rather than consoling or being a comforter her, Ogugua (Junior) actually hastens the death of his mother, who is stabbed by her lover, General Bello.

In spite of the fact that in Africa, a name is the epitome of an individual, a compendium of an individual's prospects in life, Ndibe's subversion of Oguguamakwa to signify ill luck, misfortune, and loss of identity is done deliberately to present a metaphor of biological and social dislocation characteristic of military rule in post-independence African

states. Ndibe seems to assert that an individual's life can be negatively altered by a vicious military regime which mindlessly tortures, rapes, and kills its citizens at will.

Ndibe appropriates the elements of Igbo orature in *Arrows of Rain* in a subversive manner by exploiting the considerable power inherent in its onomastic exegesis to protest the military interventionist destruction of individuals and societal structures. Ogugua, by serving as a name to both Bukuru and Adero, reiterates a symbolic reminder of the ruination of cultural ethos by the military establishment in contemporary Nigeria. A lot of journalists, and scores of politicians and academics have been incarcerated and killed, thereby disrupting the lives of the family members they leave behind. Ogugua evinces a symbolic structure anchored on objects as an emerging post-colonial nation, an aborted hope and stultified growth. The Ogugua symbol, as subverted by Ndibe, goes beyond its onomastic essence to encompass other metaphoric significations. The latter includes meddlesomeness in an individual's life by the military regime. It also stands for the gradual erosion of the expectations and promises of independence, which in turn generates despair and self-doubt in the citizens, borne out of a political emasculation by the military regime.

The blending of the myth and symbolism of rain in *Arrows of Rain* employed creates an ambivalent image of the military. Rain can perform two paradoxical roles of being a "sustainer of the earth's plenitude, but also the harbinger of malaise" (195). Similarly, the military, is capable of ousting a corrupt civilian administration with ease, but also has the tendency to unleash unlimited terror and grief on the public.

The motif of rain becomes the controlling motif of the novel. The mythological contextualisation of rain underscores the image of the military in *Arrows of Rain*. Using a narrative framework drawn from the Igbo oral tradition, Ndibe satirically describes the adventure of the military into the political life of Nigeria couched as Madia in the novel. But such adventure, although overwhelmingly applauded at first because it marks an end to the

tyranny of civilian government of the debauched prime minister Askia Amin and his kleptomaniacal ministers, soon bares its fangs against the citizens, thereby justifying its condemnation as an aberration of democratic orderliness.

The military as paralleled against the rain can be seen within the context of two conflicting concepts of human development which are discernible throughout the novel: the one imagines the military as a rescue platform for liberating a depraved country from the grip of its civilian political elite; the other, typified by the gratuitous brutality and mass killing, imagines the military as representing a degeneration from human civilisation to the abyss of human degradation. In a military regime, the soldiers justify their rule with the explanation that it intervened in the political affairs of the country as to save it from the economic and political ruination caused by the corrupt civilian government. In contrast, Ndibe sees the military as a scavenger which has come to obliterate all pretence to human civilisation left behind by the displaced democratic government. Consequently, the military, like the metaphorical rain, “has two faces ... It can give life but its arrows can also cause death” (196).

### **National Narrative**

Ndibe examines Nigeria from the perspective of the kaleidoscope of political upheavals that it has undergone. Though Nigeria attained independence in 1960, its journey towards the attainment of self-development has been tortuous. It is a trajectory strewn with economic mismanagement, ethnicity, cultural devaluation, moral decrepitude, and political potholes which have claimed hundreds of lives.

The 1980s and the 1990s witnessed an unprecedented surge in writing about issues of power, prison and incarceration, and political resistance and confrontation with military regimes in Nigeria. As the Nigerian political landscape becomes more and more desperate, so also does it breed a strident reaction grounded in protest literature from a younger generation



of writers, among whom is Ndibe. Disillusioned by the pretentious benevolence associated with the military regime and its corresponding notoriety for human rights abuses, Ndibe employs varied imaginative techniques of satire, fiction, and political discourse to narrate Nigeria in relation to its military rulers. In these texts, Africa generally and Nigeria in particular, have been portrayed simultaneously as a failed continent and a failed country, betrayed by rulers who have mismanaged its economy and destroyed its political ethos in their bid to cling on to power at all cost. This has been vividly captured by Kenneth W.

Harrow:

The nation state in Africa today is in crisis. Misrule and corruption have danced across the land, provoking widespread scepticism towards the mechanisms of government and a sense of resignation over the inevitable indifference of the wealthy and powerful to the enormous social problems at hand. Globalisation and AIDS have spread their pandemic effects; war and anomy have gained the terrain, so that walking downtown or driving at night have become risky undertakings in many areas; one has merely to mention the words Southern Sudan or Eastern Congo to elicit a shrug of despair. (33)

Ndibe in *Arrows of Rain* depicts Nigeria as a country experiencing internal colonisation under the military ruler, Sani Abacha, who is grotesquely portrayed as General Bello, a vicious, psychotic military ruler whose preoccupation with brutality and repression leads inevitably to the killing of intellectuals, journalists and other watchdogs of society in the fictionalised country known as Madia. In his narrative of Nigeria from the time of independence in 1960, Ndibe goes beyond a conventional nationalist ideology towards the pressing problem of military rule. The nation as a pariah constitutes the focal point of Ndibe's analysis of the Nigerian state. The novel evolves from the experiences he encounters during the Abacha military regime, when he was a journalist in the country.

Ndibe also examines the role of the military in Nigerian politics and nation-building. His exploration of the issue of military brutality underscores the notion that Nigeria is a nebulous structure whose collective destiny can be determined by a particular military ruler who feels compelled to enforce artificial cohesion through coercion. This reiterates Nuruddin Farah's argument about a nation which he considers to be no more than "working hypotheses portals opening on assumption of allegiance to an idea." As he further explains:

At times, though, one's loyalty may be owed to another idea equally valid ...

During the long travel out of one hypothesis to another ... a refugee is born,  
who lives in a country too amorphous to be favoured with a name. (16-20)

Farah's idea of a nation provides a striking counterpoint to the explanation of the dilemma of Bukuru, the central character of the novel, who suffers internal alienation when he disguises himself as a mad man and lives on the beach during the repressive regime of General Bello. Bukuru's disguise as a mad man running away from the viciousness of Bello highlights the irony of an ostensibly independent nation where the very existence of its citizens is determined by the whims and caprices of its ruler.

National narratives in *Arrows of Rain* echo Benedict Anderson's concept of a nation in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, where he controversially describes a state as "an imagined political community" (15). It is imperative to state that the amorphousness of the Nigerian state is what creates Abacha and his military regime.

The characters in these texts are imbued with the consciousness of Anderson's concept of the state. Bukuru, Adero, Iyese, Dr. Mandi in *Arrows of Rain* and Lomba, Kela, Joshua, Brother and Alice in *Waiting for an Angel* are the victims of the amorphousness of the Nigerian state.

**Conclusion**

Okey Ndibe has tenuously articulated the narratives of military repression in *Arrows of Rain*. The social chaos stemming from the subjugation of civilians by the military fills practically every page of the novel. At the same time, the novel figures its condemnation of this social degeneration through the fates of Ogugua (Bukuru), Iyese and Tay. Repression in the text is a signification of a wave of the political apocalypse which engulfed Nigeria's socio-political landscape between 1994 and 1998, greedily fuelled by the military's penchant for power. The deaths of Bukuru, Iyese and the photo journalist in *Arrows of Rain* further allegorise the viciousness of the military. After decades of concentration on the physical reality of military oppression, Okey Ndibe proffers a new route into understanding its portrayal in literature: the simultaneous distance and familiarity of the sign, as seen in his notions of memory, oration and the Igbo language.

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