RESTRUCTURING NIGERIA FOR POSITIVE CHANGE: NOLLYWOOD AND THE BIAFRAN STORY

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Abstract
The Biafran/ Nigerian Civil War is a story of horror, of terror, of hunger, of valour and of so many other experiences that are associated with war and the struggle for survival and self-determination. Its hydra-headedness stems from the varied perspectives with which different factions involved in the war view the conflict. It is a truism that most civil wars and civil struggles of nations constitute invaluable sources of thematic materials for their narratives. Unfortunately, the story of Biafra continues to be neglected and side lined by the Nigerian film industry to the amazement of many pundits and theatre critics. The puzzle behind the negation of the potentials of the Biafra story for the evolving industry constitutes the problem of this study. It examines the potentials and trappings the Nigerian film industry can tap from this historic but enigmatic encounter. It also highlights numerous advantages the Nigerian society stands to gain if the story of Biafra finds its way into the mainstream media, especially at this time when Nigerians are clamouring for restructuring and change. The study adopts mixed method of research in sourcing and analysing its data. The conclusion reached is that the Biafra story has been underutilized and if adequately explored has the capacity to reposition not only the film industry of Nigeria but also the Nigerian socio-political narrative.

Introduction

> Like Banquo's ghost, the past haunts us today, again. Forty-nine years after the civil war, we are still fighting the war. Some think the war is over. They are wrong. The war is with us because we are a nation of self-deceit. We lie to and at ourselves. We say peace whereas tribulation lurks and detonates everywhere. (Omaseye, par. 1)

Film is a social art that embodies in it the lives of a people, their experiences and their socio-cosmic disposition to the universe. The social nature of film endears it to be yearned after and accessed by the masses. This nature makes film a communicative tool that can create, influence and link a people's ideological leaning. Thus, Mehraj, Bhat and Mehraj believe that by having access to film which is a component of mass media, "people's attitudes and habits can be changed" (56). Change is of primary interest to this research. The world is on the wheel of change and morphs continuously to affect lives in different dimensions. Nigeria has continued to dillydally on the wheels of change which mostly roves around the perimeters of economic difficulties, socio-religious crisis and other numerous viruses that unsettle its citizenry. Most importantly is the question of Biafra that has refused to take a long lasting sleep. This, in effect, is the motivation behind this work that seeks to aid psychological restructuring of the country's citizenry by the use of the film medium. The researchers seek to prove that the tactical application of film in telling the Biafra narrative can effect a positive change in attitude among the citizenry especially among the pro-Biafra agitators.

The choice of film for this task is not without its merits. This is because the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, has blossomed over the years. Nollywood has become one of the most influential film industries in the world and ranks second in the global rating for output. To this effect, Adesanya posits that "'Nollywood's appeal has reached far and beyond Nigeria, and its films are watched all over Africa and beyond" (qtd. in Fafiolu 22). Onuzulike corroborates this when he posits that Nigeria's material culture has become globally recognisable thanks to Nollywood (231). It is in this regard that this study seeks to show the endless advantages that Nigeria stands to gain if the story of Biafra is told variously from variegated perspectives by its foremost and most welcome film industry.

More so, events in recent times have begun to raise bold question marks on the continued existence and unification of the diverse nationalities that make up the civic giant termed Nigeria. Nigeria since independence has been badgered with crisis. Afegbua posits that:

> Nigeria, being a multi-religious and ethnic society, had experienced massive ethnic, sectional, religious and political violence that has led to grievous socio-economic and political consequences on the psyche of the nation. These conflicts have led to the destruction of lives and

> property and also brought untold sorrow on the people in the last fifty years of our nationhood. (13)

Udo reports that these crises are on the increase in recent times and that "lawless sects are raising the tempo of their campaign in various parts of the country" (3). These crises have continued to resurge time and after time. Odeyemi attributes these endless crises to the problem of ethnicity. He goes further to state that apart from the incessant crisis, "the ensuing complications of ethnicity have grossly impinged on the development of the country in all ramifications" (87). In recent times, these agitations have manifested in different forms of resistance and are manifesting in virtually every part of the country. Nwabueze reports that there is a proliferation of militia groups in the country along ethnic lines. He posits that "the Yoruba formed the OPC, the Igbo formed MASSOB, the Hausa/Fulani formed APC while the youths in the Niger Delta formed MEND, NDPVF and MOSOP, Bakassi Boys, Egbesu Boys, etc." (19). Amidst the ravaging effect of Boko Haram that has eaten deep into the material and human resources of this nation have arisen the herdsmen militia groups that operate in patches and pockets around the country killing innocent people and sacking survivors from their towns and villages. Governor Olusegun Mimiko of Ondo State posits that "Fulani herdsmen rampage had become a monster that is threatening the security and unity of the country" (qtd. in Oluwole, par. 2). He further warns that the activities of the Fulani Herdsmen sect are fast pushing the nation to the precipice (5).

All these are indications of a much deeper yearning for a restructuring, a renegotiation and an attitudinal polity change. However, change became the new mantra that enveloped the socio-political space of the Nigerian state in the wake of the merger that brought to life the All Progressives Congress (APC) that won the 2015 general elections. Onyeacholem posits that the change was a popular call "in the light of almost two decades of horrendous governance under the PDP administration" (par.1). The just concluded electioneering campaigns impaled in the minds and hearts of the people a lingering hope, a transformational expectancy and hope for revolutionised modus vivendi. Unfortunately, increased nose dive of the standard of living and political atmosphere seems to be re-injecting despair and renewed hopelessness in the minds of the citizens. In the words of Alabi, "what we have instead is a "cursed change" that has taken Nigerians back to pre-civilisation era when constant power supply was a miracle, when fuel queues were 10-kilometres long and civil servants were not paid for over a year" (par.

8). As a result, there has arisen majorly in the eastern part of the country a determined struggle for self-determination and governance. These struggles arguably have been underground since the early 1990s but have gained a humongous velocity and mass popularity since the assumption of office by president Buhari. Thus, Aribasala sums it "within months of Buhari's presidency, the Igbo demand for Biafra has become deafening." Ratifying the reasons for the increased and burgeoning agitation for self-determination, Aribasala opines that:

> …the Igbo have been hard done by. Since the civil war 45 years ago, they have been treated as if they were a minority ethnic group in Nigeria when in fact they are one of the majorities. No Igbo has been considered worthy of being head-of-state. The South East of Ndigbo is the only one of the six geopolitical zones of the country with five states. All other zones have six or more. Indeed, the number of local governments in the North-East is virtually double that of the South-East. As a result, the Ndigbo receive the smallest amount of revenue allocation among all the zones, in spite of the fact that some of the South-eastern states are among the oil-producing states. (par.8)

With this incendiary agitation for Biafra, the sovereignty and continued existence of Nigeria is threatened. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to address issues relating to Biafra and find ways to address it in order to forestall a repeat of the Nigerian civil war of 1967 -1970 or an eventual balkanization of the constituent units that makeup the federation. This however may not be very successful without going through the rubbles of history to review the events of the past so as to determine the major causes of the agitations and what best the country needs to do in order to mollify the aggrieved and restless spirit of Biafra which has continued to resurge since about forty years after the war. It is however unfortunate that the history of the Nigerian-Biafran war which is about the most serious dramatic event that has taken place in the country since independence has continued to be neglected and subjugated to a highly obscene background. Senator Ben Bruce bemoans the carefree attention with which the Nigeria civil war is meted with. He posits that part of the reason why the Biafra agitation is gaining momentum is because "we erase the civil war from our consciousness and so many generations do not know we fought a war and why we fought a war" (qtd.

Nwafor, par.11). Adichie also bemoans the neglect of this all important story and posits that she wasn't taught history in school. In her opinion, the Nigeria/Biafra war "is a part of our history that we like to pretend never existed, that we hide, as if hiding it will make it go away, which of course it doesn't. As if hiding it will make the legacies any easier" (par. 6). This therefore informs the bearing of this research on positioning Nollywood to play the all-important role of telling the Biafra narrative with the aim of achieving a psycho-social restructuring.

Biafra: An Overview

> ... Our struggle is a total and vehement rejection of all those evils which blighted Nigeria, evils which were bound to lead to the disintegration of that ill-fated federation. Our struggle is not a mere resistance – that would be purely negative. It is a positive commitment to build a healthy, dynamic and progressive state, such as would be the pride of black men world over. (Ojukwu 6)

The quotation above curled from Ahiara declaration sheds a summative light on the principles on which Biafra the not long stayed state of Biafra was built. The concept 'Biafra' gained prominence in the later years of the 1960s. After the independence of 1960, the Nigerian political system was fast deteriorating under the civilian rule. Nigeria was blighted by corruption, religious and tribal crisis. The situation was a morbid show of depletion occasioned by greed, corruption and inordinate ambition to cling to power by political leaders in certain regions of the country. Achebe, describing the situation, opines that:

> … Nigeria was a cesspit of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves freely to the nation's wealth. Elections were blatantly rigged. The subsequent national census was outrageously stage-managed; judges and magistrates were manipulated by the politicians in power. The politicians themselves were pawns of foreign business interest. (51)

As a result, the military amidst the discord waded in to save the young republic from implosion within a decade of its existence. In his narrative of the coup, Ademoyega cites the reasons for the military takeover to include the fact that "the politicians had failed the people. In effect there was nothing to

follow the political chaos except the disintegration of the country unless there were men of good will who would rally round to fight for the survival of their country" (100 -101).

The Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu-led coup set the background for the civil war as it was totally rejected by the other regions of the country. It was tagged an Igbo coup because according to Amaechi Mbazulike, the Prime minister and the premiers of the North and West were killed while that of the East was not. As a result, a counter coup was staged in which General Aguiyi Ironsi was killed in retaliation for the first coup that was perceived as an Igbo coup in July, 1966. In furtherance of this, myriads of the Igbo were killed in the northern and the western parts of the country (qtd. in Ujumadu par. 1). Uzoigwe reports the pogrom thus: "in four successive pogroms terrifying in their hatred, barbarity and periodicity – May 29th, July 29th, September 29th, and October 29th – 1966, over 30,000 Igbo people domiciled in northern Nigeria as well as Igbo military officers were systematically ethnically cleansed" (2).

The carnage led to a mass return of the millions of the Igbo scattered all around the country as the federal government seemed to have lost control of the situation. Attempts at a peaceful resolution of the crisis proved abortive as the Gowon-led federal government refused to honour the terms of the Aburi peace accord held in Ghana between Col. Ojukwu-led eastern region government and the Gen. Yakubu Gowon-led federal government. Frederick Forsyth posits that Aburi was Nigeria's last chance of averting the war (90). As a result, on the 26th of May 1967, the South eastern part of the country voted to leave the federal republic of Nigeria to become an independent nation. On the 30th of May 1967, Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu announced the Independent State of Biafra which according to map constituted all the eastern states and the Midwestern states. In reaction to this, General Gowon announced a 'police action' to quell the riot in the eastern region. This tottered to a full blown war which lasted for about two and half years. The war however came to halt in what the federal military government termed "no victor no vanquished". Biafra was reabsorbed into the Nigerian federation on the 15th of January 1970.

Film as a Bearer of Collective Memory

> No memory can preserve the past, what remains is only that which the society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference. (Assmann 130)

Collective memory is a shared memory of past events. It is how a group remembers past events and incidents that affect it. Memory is akin to man and so man must remember either as an individual or as a group. When a group remembers and recalls experiences of its history and cultural evolution, it bears a collective memory of its evolution. According to Roediger and DeSoto, "collective memory refers to how groups remember their past" (par. 2). Group histories are usually cultural treasures that are handed down from generation to generation. Most times the collective memory of a group affects the group's construction of its future. It also affects its worldview and determines its social relations both within and outside the group. It, therefore, becomes very pertinent to mind how a group remembers as its social outlook depends greatly on that. Espousing this, Sabnani opines that:

> A tale becomes all the more valuable through retelling. The past is seen from a present location and each present moment modifies the past memory. By telling and retelling the past is forever brought into the present which makes way for and shapes the future. It also allows for reinterpretation of the past to 'make sense' of events and our responses to those events. New meanings emerge and memory is wrested from time. (2)

Film is a viable medium for 'telling' and 'retelling'. It is a social medium that surreptitiously creeps into the psyche of its viewer. It is a propaganda medium and so can engender opinions and influence same on its adherents. Film, in effect, propagates ideas and influences policies across societies. Englehardt opines that "films of any genre, from documentary to drama, can have a dramatic impact on real life" (11). Films, therefore, have been used to propagate memories that embody group experience. Such films in themselves can have therapeutic effects as they help to open up such memories for discussion and understanding and possible remediation. Typical examples of such movies include *Sarafina* (1992) which deals with a narrative of the apartheid in South Africa, *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *Sometime in April* (2005) both of which treat the Rwandan genocide from different perspectives. Indeed, films that embody collective memories are used to achieve "reconstruction rather than recollection" knowing full well that the present and future are highly "dependable upon our knowledge of the past" (Chedraui 12).

The Biafra Story in Nollywood

Nollywood is one of Nigeria's most prized achievements in Africa. This is because of its geometric growth over the years. It has achieved in very short time what other sectors of the Nigerian economy find difficult to do. This feat has been possible because of its peculiar grasp of the African life and experience. Nollywood has traversed the bounds of geographical boundaries and has sold the Nigerian/African story to the global audience in the most outstanding of ways. In lauding Nollywood dominance, Haynes opines that "Nollywood is an example of Nigeria living up to its potential role as the leader of Africa" (par. 9). In a sense, this means that Nollywood has handled the African story and continues to tell the tales of Africa from the perspectives of the Africans. It has become the social prism, narcissistic mirror that appreciates not just the beauty and uniqueness of the African experience but also the hopelessness of its leadership, its failures and the desperation of its citizenry in the face of dwindling resources and low standard of living. This is exemplified in such movies as *Bloody Night* (2014) that exposes the humongous corruption and flagrant abuse of human rights by the Nigeria Police force. *Somewhere in Africa* (2011) is also a typical example as it exposes the sorry nature of leadership in Africa especially amongst the Heads of State who find it difficult to relinquish power. Nollywood has also explored and continues to explore the myriads of Nigeria's socio-religious orientations, the mystique of African metaphysics and the high dependency of the Nigerian populace in seeking solutions to issues in the metaphysical. This theme is best exemplified in films such as Ernest Obi's *Idemili* (2014) and *Calabash* (2015), Zeb Ejiro's *Nneka, the Pretty Serpent* (1992), Ifeanyi Ikpoenyi's *Karashika* (1996), Frank Rajah Arase's *Iyore* (2015), Kunle Afolayan's *Figurine* (2009), Obi Emelonye's *Mirror Boy* (2011), etc.

Nollywood has not also failed to tell about the Nigerian struggle, the daily struggle of the common man in the face of misrule and despotic leadership. It has not failed to tell the story of the ancient Africa before the eventual invasion by the Europeans. In fact, it has re-imaged the pre-colonial Nigeria and has coloured its story by keeping the memory alive amidst a fleeting history. These pre-colonial narratives are most apt in such films as *Igodo* (1999) by Andy Amenechi and Don Pedro Obaseki, *Izaga* (2004) by Andy Amenechi, *Egg of life* (2003) by Andy Amenechi, *Iyore* (2015) by Frank Rajah Arase, *Sango* (1997) by Obafemi Lasoede and numerous others. Nollywood has also aptly captured the recent upsurge in crime, terrorism and militancy that has characterized the new Nigerian experience in myriads of films such as *Isakkaba* (2001) by Lancelot Imaseun, *Murder at Prime Suite*

(2013) by Chris Eneng, *Most Wanted* (1996) by Bamishigbin Tunji, *Rattle Snake* (1995) by Amaka Igwe, *Glamour Girls* (1994) by Chika Onukwufor, etc. It has done a wonderful job of picturing the Nigerian living and engraving in its citizens a new consciousness. What is worrisome is that Biafra, which has been the most significant event and the most incendiary discourse in the Nigerian political space seems to be emasculated in Nollywood's narrative.

However, the boldest attempt at telling the story of Biafra by Nollywood has been Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013), a visual adaptation of Chimamanda Adichie's novel of the same name. The film was produced in 2013 and its release into the Nigerian film space was quite controversial because of its Biafra war thematisation. In his reaction to the repeated denial of approval for the screening of the movie by the Nigerian Film and Video Censor's Board, Biyi Bandele opines that: "One of the reasons Nigeria is more divided today – 40 years after the end of the war than it was before the war started, is because we have refused to talk about the elephant in the room" (par. 12). The elephant he talks about in this context is the Biafra-Nigeria war. Topics relating to this event have continued to remain extra sensitive in discourse circles around the country and so, it is avoided like a plague among the citizenry. Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a love story within the Biafra war setting. The film mirrors the travails of living, loving and building a home amidst a war torn humanity. *The Encounter* (2015) by Tolu Ajayi is another bold step at dusting the rubbles on the Biafran war experience. *The Encounter* is another bold attempt at resuscitating the Nigerian civil war narrative by Nollywood. The movie chronicles the event of the last discussion between General Emeka Ojukwu and Emmanuel Ifeajuna who was considered a traitor during the war. It is an attempt at giving a voice to Ifeajuna whose own account of what really transpired was never told.

Izu Ojukwu's *Across the Niger* (2004) is also an attempt at 'retelling' the story of the events of the Biafran war. In the film, contrary to the perceived hatred that existed between Biafra and Nigeria, Izu Ojukwu presents a controversial love affair between a Biafran soldier and a Hausa-Fulani woman. The two lovers defy hate and war to fight and be with each other against their people's opinion. The film is idealised to show the strength in diversity and love as the two lovers conquer the parochial hatred that exist between their tribes. These three films are exhaustive of Nollywood films themed on the Biafra war history. Considering the feat Nollywood has achieved in the international film space, it is pertinent to note that it is yet to take a swing in the right direction as it concerns the Biafra war experience.

Why should Nollywood Engage in the Narrative of Biafra?

1. **It will help preserve the collective memory of the Nigerian Civil War**

   Films are often being used to raise larger issues from the past or contemporary society that did not surface in text books and/or are difficult to broach (Stoddard and Marcus 85).

Film plays an all important role of historical-cultural preservation. It does not only entertain but also engraves in the minds of its audience images and pictures of very important facts of human existence. Film being a sociological art mostly builds on the socio-cultural environment of its maker and, therefore, is themed on the human happenings within its situational enclave. According to Rabb "film conveys certain kinds of information (especially atmospheres and feelings) that written texts cannot provide. It can stimulate inquiry (even reading!) and educate through visual memory in ways that words cannot" (par. 7). In effect, films can help immensely in preserving collective memory of events. Therefore, Nollywood being Nigeria's film industry has an all important role to play in the preservation and propagation of Nigeria's history. Biafra being a most important rung in the development of the Nigerian state should have a good representation in Nollywood to help preserve its memory for the future generations.

2. **It will enhance therapy and reconciliation**

   Film becomes not simply a witness or recorder but an interpreter, which transmits the acknowledged painful process of traumatization. This painful process is as necessary for film viewers as for the witnesses themselves. There is a need to actively engage and confront the horrors of these many historical settings in order for each viewer to move on. (Mhando and Tomaselli 31)

Forty years after the war, Biafra still remains a very sensitive topic and Nigerians shy away from discussing it. This is because the issue is yet to be dealt with; people are still hurting and so much anger still lies untended by the continued treatment of the Biafra topic with a passive wave. There is the need to open up discussions on the topic and let people pour out their feelings in order to purge the troubling emotions. Omatseye laments the shabby handling

of the Nigerian post-war settlement of Biafra: "We just wanted to move on, like a child who walks into a party from a bathroom without cleaning up. The smell and mess linger" (par. 10). It is therefore pertinent that Nollywood through its medium should delve into this area and embrace themes of Biafra in order to enhance discourses and achieve emotional purgation needed for the country to move on.

3. **It will help engender change and restructuring of Nigeria's political space**

Nollywood's thematisation of Biafra will bring about discussions of events that led to the war. There has been a continued call for a restructuring of the Nigerian system to achieve true federalism which was the major agreement of the Aburi Accord prior to the war in 1967. Thus Atiku Abubakar posits that "There is need, to review the structure of the Nigerian federation, preferably along the basis of the current six geopolitical zones as regions and the states as provinces. (qtd. in Olaleye par. 3). Abubakar is obviously not a lone voice in the wilderness; Akowe also reports that the "All Progressives Congress (APC) governors are backing restructuring and true federalism as a way out of the agitation for Nigeria's break-up" (par. 1). Many political scientists and social artisans have blamed Nigeria's problems on its structure and form. It is, therefore, necessary that a new consciousness be created towards engendering a revisit to the cause of the war that took the lives of millions of Nigerians. A narrative of Biafra through Nollywood will surely stimulate pertinent discussions towards change in the structure of Nigeria's political space.

Conclusion

Self-examination and appreciation is very necessary in the life of any nation. Nigeria, due to its multi-ethnic outlook, is faced with constant crisis bordering on political determinism. It is pertinent, therefore, to make concerted effort towards a continuous resolution and institutionalised system of maintaining its peace. Biafra has happened and its scars are still discernible in the life and political space of the country. Since Nollywood has become a giant whose strides are felt by the citizenry, it is apt that Nollywood be encouraged to delve into the narrative of the civil war in Nigeria so as to engender a psycho-social change.

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