

CHAPTER 7

Death, Martyrdom and the Logic of Non-Silence.

All changed, changed utterly...

A terrible beauty is born.

– W. B Yeats, “Easter 1916”.²⁶

Conclusion:

As our discussion throughout this work makes clear, Ken Saro-Wiwa always operated within a dark episteme of strife, tribulation and death; he was a writer in the words of Garuba, “fashioned in the very crucible of minority discourse; and thus scared by history” (1998: 238). In his struggles against dominant discourses of power then, Ken Saro-Wiwa clearly understood the power of representation and so deployed his best writerly energies in the articulation of a different point of view.

In his most intensely imagined narratives such as those under study, we see a writer in an almost desperate quest for *another* world; a world in which equity, justice and cultural freedom emerge as the organizing tenets of discursive relations. Further, because his writings constantly bear the imprint and mandate of

²⁶ Source: *Selected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Macmillan, 1989.

identitarian redefinition and reconstitution, we tend to find a writer constantly locked in an aesthetic wrestle with the discourses of authority and convention.

In *On a Darkling Plain*, as we have already seen, the writer redrafts and repudiates the homological representation by dominant narratives of the Nigerian Civil War by projecting minoritarian knowledges on the war through his narrative. Since dominant post-war narratives do not focus particularly on the plight of ethnic minority communities during the war, Saro-Wiwa's narrative becomes an attempt at historical retrieval, a way of refocusing attention on marginal experiences. I contend that narratives such as Saro-Wiwa's are important because they encourage us to view social experience in its many-sidedness, recognizing its many fragmentary versions as carriers of neglected truths. In other words, by advancing an account of the war which highlights the experiences of minority communities caught in the conflict, Saro-Wiwa underlines the logic of narrative heterogeneity which is central to marginal discourses.

But just as the writer uses revision and repudiation as strategies to re-authorize history, he also employs the technique of anomaly to mock and cancel out dominant rationality of war in his novel, *Sozaboy*. Here, as our analysis shows, the writer consciously creates a domain of unreason; a territory where characters are propelled by a triumphant but dangerous naivety to fight in a corrupt and muddled war. However, as the novel's characters brace for war, the writer seems to brace us

for peace by subtly warning us of the perils of war. In the end, the lessons of war are conveyed through the ghastly idiom of pain and destruction. I argue that *Sozaboy* is a narrative of uncommon decanonizing power: first for the manner the writer uses the strategy of unreason to overturn the dominant logic of war as an extension of politics; and through the deviant linguistic behaviour of the narrative's eponymous character. In *Sozaboy*, the demotic language of narration works to unseat the universal authority of the 'standard' English mode.

In short, everywhere in his creative oeuvre whether in *Lemonas Tale* where he uses situational irony among other representational tactics to expose and critique the ravages of patriarchal practices, or in the Jebesian narratives where he creates idealistic and insurgent characters to confront the hegemony of corruption; Ken Saro-Wiwa tries to organize a differentiated praxis through which man could regain his dignity and humanity.

Throughout his literary and other agitational involvements, Ken Saro-Wiwa tries to demonstrate a commitment to non-silence in the face of persecution and oppression. This was why when it seemed clear to him that his literary and other imaginative arguments for a new grammar of citizenship had proved insufficient to alter the scale of dominant morality, the writer reterritorializes his narrative to a wider field of opposition – the community – in an attempt to collectivize and galvanize communal support and participation. Here, through boycotts,

demonstrations, mass rallies, carnivals and other forms of communal refusal such as we have seen, the community itself emerges as a counter-narrative echelon through which Saro-Wiwa and other leaders could raise the decibel of opposition and to demand restitution.

In fact, the particular mettle of Ken Saro-Wiwa's activism lay not merely in its ability to straddle the false chasm between theoretical dissidence and practical resistance. By mobilizing a small peasant community against a national and transnational technology of oppression, Ken Saro-Wiwa reminds us that everywhere the common people constitute the authentic residue of popular sovereignty.

But ultimately as Ato Quayson (1998: 57-79) notes, it is through his death and self-sacrifice that Ken Saro-Wiwa raises his art and activism "above the ordinary", and so compels our most visceral fervour as we try to examine the logic enacted by his practices. It is tragedy, among other things, that invests his narrative with a unique aesthetic and ethical intensity difficult to ignore. Thus Quayson is right when he concludes that "It is a tribute to this act of rising above the ordinary that I think his life, activism and death should be discussed with the same emotional and philosophical fervour that we use in discussing our greatest tragedies" (77).

Here, then, it seems that even the venture of dying is a performance of power possessing its unique dramaturgic character. In torturing and killing his victim, the oppressor tries to dramatize his power over the body and life of his victim, yet in dying for his beliefs the victim also instigates our identification and moral comradeship with the content of his conviction.

This is why it is possible to theorize martyrdom, the willing sacrifice of one's life in the pursuit of a belief, as a powerful counter-narrative act because it strikes at the heart of our humanity and compels us to ask the same questions posed by the martyr, and to demand answers. Steve Biko, himself a martyr of the South African anti-Apartheid struggle, puts it aptly when he says that even one's "method of death can itself be a politicizing thing" (Biko, 1978:152). This means that for the activist death itself can be transformed into an argument, a kind of final triumphant refutation of the dominant point of view.

Following Biko, I argue that Ken Saro-Wiwa's death may be understood as the highest intensification of his aesthetics of non-silence because it serves as a kind of metasite where historians, lawyers, literary scholars, environmentalists, scientists, rights activists and other cultural workers converge to enter into a crucial dialogue, each in their own way, with the ideas and vision of the writer. As the dialogue rages so to speak, his death is carefully and consciously reshaped into a counter-

narrative idiom through which the terms of a new Nigerian peoplehood may be negotiated.

Surely, to participate in this dialogue is to partake in something of a tragic and terrible beauty; but it is also one that demands that we take an ethical position. This is precisely what the writer Salman Rushdie means when he says that because Saro-Wiwa and his other compatriots died in their fight against injustice and oppression, “that fight must now become the world’s fight”²⁷. To “fight” in this context is to assume and pursue an alternative ethical imaginary.

The authoritarian as well as de-valorizing gestures of hegemonic discourses have unleashed antiphonal responses from dissident groups and communities who challenge and reject the textual and material exclusion of their unique experiences from the canvas of dominant representation. Everywhere, these groups and communities are organizing a detour into the narrative terrain of history through modalities and processes either neglected or even unimagined by dominant thought.

Before the emergence of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni on the arena of identity politics in Nigeria, the sphere of cultural and identitarian assertion had been too

²⁷ Salmon Rushdie quoted in *A Month and a Day & Letters*, (2005) Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, P. 204

constrained to reflect the prevailing ethos of the nation or the region, leaving little space for the recognition of the non-authoritative community or even the individual as the final bastion of cultural existence. The supreme achievement of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni was their attempt to challenge and revise this centralized notion of identity formation by pointing to the unrepresented community as a differentiated yet important nucleus of citizenship.

Another signal contribution of Ken Saro-Wiwa to dissident culturalist politics in Africa was his ability to reconstruct the often neglected connection between the state of the human ecology and the health of a community's cultural life. While there was always an awareness and recognition of the sanctity of nature in all societies, including African communities, the degradation of the environment have always elicited varying degrees of responses from different groups and communities. Ken Saro-Wiwa's relevance in the domain of ecological discourse lies in his deliberate effort to elevate environmental consciousness into a literary and cultural manifesto. In weaving his activist practices around the question of environmental sanctity, Saro-Wiwa provides fresh impetus to the declining state of ecological criticism in Nigeria and beyond.

But yet another important aspect of Saro-Wiwa's cultural politics that has attracted little attention from critics of postcolonial African literature was his ability to recognize the act of publishing, particularly self-publishing, as a vital and

necessary step in the propagation and circulation of a cultural ideology. Throughout his literary career, most of Saro-Wiwa's literary production (including his most respected novel, *Sozaboy*) were either ignored or rejected by mainstream publishers for being too political, or for straying too far away from universal literary conventions. However, we know that publishing was never simply a value-free business practice, and that publishers also ideologize. We know too that publishing is at the core of representational politics, and that ultimately the decision not to publish could be a critical form of cultural censorship.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was himself always aware that because he operated critically outside the parameters of dominant ideology, a different cultural infrastructure would have to be found to produce and disseminate his radical cultural ideology. The result, after his frustrations with major publishing houses, was the formation of his own publishing outfit – Saros International Publishers, with offices in Nigeria and England. Through this outfit which was to become a cardinal touchstone of his aesthetics of non-silence, Saro-Wiwa edited, published, promoted and distributed his own books throughout Nigeria and overseas. Besides gaining wide critical acclaim, some of these books have since been reproduced by such major publishers as Spectrum Books and Penguin Publishers.

But more importantly, Saros International Publishers was to play a key role in the Ogoni struggle itself, as it came to be used in the production and distribution of all

documentary and informational materials meant for the mobilization of a mass audience. The famous Ogoni Bill of Rights and other landmark ‘struggle’ documents such as manifestoes, petitions, placards, handbills, speeches, etc., were all products of this important alternative cultural facility. This is undoubtedly a major contribution in the arena of popular culture and identity politics in Africa because it points to an alternative medium of ideological expression, unfettered by the ideological and commercialist considerations of neo-imperial publishing conglomerates.

If therefore our particular effort throughout this work has been to identify, interpret and scrutinize the counter-narrative and aesthetic practices of Ken Saro-Wiwa, it is because it is important that we cognize as well as clarify how dissident communities and writers working within the libertarian tradition redraw the cartographies of dominant power in their arduous quest for a more egalitarian imaginary. I suggest that for their demotic, revolutionary and counter-canonical fervour, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s narratives are emblematic and are among the finest of those discourses pushing for a broad and de-totalized discursive space in which the case for the freedom and dignity of man may be canvassed.

Often bold, courageous and skillfully handled, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s narratives know how to confront even the most banal depression with transcendental humour and

hope. It is no wonder that in spite of the overhang of the discourses of death and oppression, these narratives retain their ringingly optimistic tone.

The critical synthesis that imposes itself upon me then, as I examine the imaginative and oppositional practices of this writer, is that although Ken Saro-Wiwa sets out to tell the tale of his oppressed Ogoni people, he succeeds finally in constructing an important kind of fiduciary narrative, usable and relevant to all oppressed people around the world. Through his art and activism, Ken Saro-Wiwa enriches our understanding of narratives committed to non-silence in the face of oppression