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Ken Saro-Wiwa's art and the aesthetics of non-silence

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CHAPTER THREE

Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and the Gamble of Anomaly

In his controversial civil war memoir *On a Darkling Plain* (1989), Ken Saro-Wiwa retells the story of the Nigerian civil war by excavating the submerged experiences of ethnic minority Niger Delta communities during the war, and projects these as vital shards of Nigeria's nationalist memory. Throughout his narrative, we find a certain relentless insistence that history is a patchwork of different memories and that unless we view history in its many-sidedness, admitting and examining its many fragments with sensitive and attentive care, we may miss history's scattered and incessant lessons. By recuperating and representing marginalized experiences in his narrative then, the writer strives to navigate the distance between oblivion and the vital cultural necessity to remember.

But in another text, *Sozaboy* (1985), Saro-Wiwa explores the effect of the civil war on one individual in a fictive mode. In the novel, Mene, the central character is presented as an apprentice-driver who joins the army following the outbreak of hostilities in a naive effort to prove his manhood to his would-be-wife, and to clinch a hero's welcome from his community. The tragic realities of war shatter his fantasies, however, and he is jolted into a new consciousness of his community and of himself.

In this chapter, I discuss Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and examine how the writer uses the trope of anomaly as a carrier of the value of subversion, and as a marker of narrative difference. As a narrative of war, *Sozaboy* projects an unusual universe of catastrophe, displacement and death. Its characters in peace and war are transgressive, unknowable, and they tend to defy our expectations of rational behaviour. The novel's language of narration is itself a triumphant retreat from the protocols of 'standard' English. What we find, indeed, is a stew of pidgin and primary level English – resulting in non-standard yet benignly accessible English which reflects the limited education of its narrator.

If anomaly presupposes the irregular, the strange and the uncommon, I will argue that it also provides the fulcrum around which minority writers may spin their narratives of resistance – resistance to dominant expectations and systems of knowledge. Using theme, character and language as critical access points into the universe of the novel then, I hope to theorize anomaly as the aesthetic strategy through which Saro-Wiwa destabilizes our notion of the 'normal'.

1

One prominent mark of narratives that operate from the margins of social experience is their tendency to subvert dominant expectations and knowledge by pointing to alternative ways of seeing and knowing. For such narratives, social experience is very much like a house with many doorways. Each doorway affords us a fresh view of the contours of the edifice, and so serves as an alternative

corridor of knowledge. One way, I suggest, in which minority writers seek to dethrone dominant rationality is to employ anomaly as an aesthetic implement of subversion.

Anomaly is the label we give to those narrative and representational aberrations which upset our rational orthodoxies and conventions, by introducing an irregular and quaint twist to the representation of social experience. By bypassing established trajectories of representation in narrative whether in plot structure, thematic treatment or character presentation, the presence of anomaly forces us to revisit and re-imagine our notion of the normal. If in the physical sciences an anomaly represents a strange, unusual phenomenon awaiting scientific investigation and validation; in the imaginative discourses the anomaly is a troubler, a veritable enemy to canonical authority. *Performative anomaly* is the term I use to designate a situation in which characters in a text actually talk and act in a way which undermines our familiarities and expectations.

In many ways, *Sozaboy* is both a quaint and compelling story. As a narrative of war the novel contains gory images of tragedy and anomie. But this is a confused and muddled war in which the meaning of ‘enemy’ seems unstable, contingent and situational. In this war, ignorant and eager recruits offer bribes to enroll in the army in order to fight and die for an unknown cause.

As the story opens, we get a hint that a corrupt and unpopular government has just been overthrown through a coup d`etat raising hopes of a moral rebirth, away from the venality of the *ancien regime*. Typically, however, these widespread expectations of national regeneration and good governance are dashed as the tussle for political control results in turmoil and war. Mene, the narrator, speaks of the war first as a rumour:

> So, although everyone was happy at first, after some time, everything begin spoil small by small and they were saying that there is trouble everywhere. Everywhere, the people were talking about it. In Pitakwa, in Bori. And in Dukana. Radio begin dey hala as e never hala before….(3)

But as the flow of human traffic in Pitakwa increases considerably in the form of refugees fleeing the mayhem and massacres of the troubled zones, the reality of the war begins to settle in. Soon enough, the government bans social activities including singing and drumming and in Dukana, Mene's village, movement is restricted as Chief Birabee the community head convenes an emergency communal meeting.

As events unfold, we are led deeper and deeper into the dark moral wasteland of the narrative, and our sense of reason is brought under constant siege. No one in

the narrative exemplifies the confused state of affairs than Mene himself; he is an ignorant and anomalous character. At the time we first meet Mene, he is an apprentice-driver who is driven by a rather simple ambition, namely, to obtain a license and become a lorry driver himself. His first hope of becoming a lawyer or doctor was truncated when his mother informed him of her inability to afford his school fees beyond the elementary school level. As he himself tells us:

> When I passed the elementary six exams, I wanted to go to secondary school but my mama told me that she cannot pay the fees. The thing pained me bad bad because I wanted to be big man like lawyer or doctor riding car and talking big big English… so when I see that I cannot go to secondary, I was not happy. However, that is my luck (11).

But Mene's attribution of his abbreviated education to "my luck" is pathetic and reflects his ignorance of the discourses which frame his life. Despite fictive disguises, we know that Dukana represents an Ogoni community in Nigeria's Delta area. School enrolment in the Niger Delta is the lowest in Nigeria due to poverty, deprivation and constant forced evacuation of entire communities due to oil exploration activities. The inability of Mene's mother to sponsor the education of her only child reflects one of the grimmest ironies of the lives of a people whose lands produce immense petro-wealth, while they themselves live out a harsh and penurious existence. Unknown to him then, Mene is trapped in the

middle of that tragic Fanonian paradox in which the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty.

But as Mene becomes an apprentice to the driver of "Progres" the only commercial lorry that plies the Dukana-Pitakwa route, we find that his progress as an individual is inextricably tied to the locomotive progress of the lorry. Thus as the vehicle develops some mechanical fault and is grounded, Mene's ambition of becoming a licensed driver is similarly grounded. The missing "s" in the spelling of "Progres", the name of the lorry, becomes a vital signifier of both individual and communal stasis. Through this misspelling and the eventual grounding of the lorry, the writer ironizes the existential immobility of Mene. Mene himself confirms this when he says:

> When the lorry spoils, we must send it to the garage. And when the lorry is in the garage, there is no work for my master and myself. Then I can do anything that I want. (12)

The synonymic connection between the ambition of man and the unreliable condition of a machine is striking, and is used by the writer to prepare our minds for the more calamitous turn which Mene's life is about to take.

In her brilliant essay "Characterization and meaning in *Sozaboy*" Helen Chukuma

(1992:39-52) analyzes how Saro-Wiwa employs the technique of pairing to achieve the systematic development of his main character. Using this technique, she says, the writer is able to pair off his naive character with more experienced characters who tend to guide him unto the next stage and task of his life. We find, however, that the technique of pairing rather than abate the pristine naivety of Mene, tends in fact to deepen it.

For instance, as the lorry is grounded Mene is made to wander off to the African Upwine Bar in an evening time out, where he meets Agnes, a young seductive lady for whom he develops instant feelings of lust. Through their conversation it emerges that Agnes is a Dukana girl on the run from Lagos because of the widespread crises and mayhem there. But she tells Mene that in the event of a full-blown war, she would want to marry a man that can protect her: “When trouble comes, I like strong, brave man who can fight and defend me” (19). These words uttered at first in jest, were to form the basis for an inexorable shift in Mene’s life and career. Back in Dukana, Mene is persuaded by Terr Kole, Duzia and particularly Zaza the war veteran who fought in Burma, to join the army and fight in the war.

Strangely, although Mene is frequently persuaded to fight in the war, “let the young people like Mene here go and fight” (34), no one seems to know the reasons for the war, who is fighting whom, nor for what purpose. When Mene finally

decides to join the army, despite his mother's advice to the contrary, a bribe had to be paid in order to ease his recruitment into the army (71). The rest of the narration from this point dwells on Mene's bitter experience during the war. Apparently, Mene had bribed his way into needless suffering and tragedy.

To all intents and purposes Mene is an anomalous character specifically created to mock dominant expectations and rationality. Most narratives of war as seen particularly through the eyes of warlords, troop commanders and field generals tend to valorize the gallantry, heroism and the courage of soldiers. Television documentaries and war manuals which celebrate the precision timing and destructive efficacy of weapons of war are all an important part of a prevailing rhetoric of war. But by projecting the meaninglessness and destructiveness of war in *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa inscribes an anti-war rhetoric which challenges dominant notions of war as a logical extension of politics. And by seeing the war through the eyes of a naive, unthinking and unreasonable army recruit, rather than an army general, the writer mocks the vaunted intelligence and heroism of soldiers.

Besides Mene, another character through which Saro-Wiwa presents the anomaly of war is Manmuwak. An extremely sly and opportunistic character, Manmuswak whose name literally means "man must eat" is Saro-Wiwa's most transgressive character in *Sozaboy.* As a cardinal principle of war, soldiers are trained to engage with a clearly identified enemy in combat. But Manmuswak is a soldier of fortune

and so fights on both sides of the war in turns, in his quest for personal advantage in a time of conflict. By refusing to identify strictly with any particular side in the conflict, Manmuswak destabilizes our notion of the enemy and transgresses dominant expectation of rational combat behaviour.

We first encounter Manmuswak as the "Tall man" in the African Upwine Bar (15), who in his discussion with his companion on the rumours of war expresses his readiness to fight. And when his friend asks him if war was necessarily a good thing, Manmuswak's reply reveals his amoral personality:

> Well, I don't think it is good thing or bad thing. Even sef I don't want to think. What they talk, we must do. Myself, if they say fight, I fight if they say no fight, I cannot fight. Finish (17).

By the next time we meet Manmuswak he is at the battle front at Iwoama where Mene, now a soldier already deployed to the front, meets him. But for Mene this was a most curious and ominous meeting. Manmuswak who was on the opposite side of the war had crossed the enemy line waving a white handkerchief, indicating a truce. He meets Bullet, Mene's group commander, and twice he shares cigarettes and drinks with enemy troops asking about their welfare at the front. From an enemy soldier, this was a most unusual gesture. Was Manmuswak on a reconnaissance mission or was this a cruel *ruse de guerre* staged to suck the

enemy into a false sense of security?

For Mene at first, Manmuswak and his cigarettes and drinks are a godsend, at a time when troop morale was low, soldiers having lived without food and drinks in cold trenches, under an insensitive and brutal commander. The commander had apparently kept all essential supplies to himself. To Mene and members of his troop then, Manmuswak was the friend who had come to save them from demoralization and starvation. And the man, who brutalizes members of his troop and on occasion forces Bullet to drink urine as punishment, becomes the enemy. Indeed, when Bullet kills his boss in an act of vengeance for mistreating him, all the members of the troop seemed to be in solidarity with him. Bullet himself feels the relief of one who has overcome a powerful enemy. This is how the narrator describes the Bullet's countenance after the killing:

> E no dey Bullet like anything happen as I see for him eye. But that wickedness way I dey see for him eye don disappear. Even 'e dey like say 'e happy. But you no go see happiness for him face only for him eye (109).

As the war progresses however, Bullet is killed in an air raid and Mene is found unconscious by Manmuswak and eventually forced into enemy service as a driver. This means that Mene is now on the same side with Manmuswak in the war. However Manmuswak again changes sides in combat and becomes Mene's worst

tormentor and enemy in the war. Baffled by Manmuswak's duplicity and inconsistency, Mene wonders:

> ..now this Manmuswak is again with our own Sozas and no longer with the enemy Soza or abi na which side the man dey? At first I could not believe my eyes because I cannot understand how this Manmuswak can be fighting on two sides of the same war. Is it possible...or is it his brother...is it ghost I am seeing? True true my eye cannot deceive me…I am telling you. This is Manmuswak (166).

By fighting on two sides of the same war, Manmuswak denaturalizes and negates the traditional binary between self and Other which is at the core of all adversarial discourses including, of course, the discourse of war. Here, there is a striking resemblance between Ken Saro-Wiwa's aesthetics of negation using anomalous characters and Derrida's theory of indecidability. "Indecidable" is Derrida's term for disidentificatory practices which refuse to succumb to the pressures of binary systems of knowledge (see: Jonathan Katz, 1998:49:68). As Katz explains, such practices are called "indecidables" because:

> …..they operate like ball bearings in a binary system, overturning and negating first in this direction, and then in that, so as to keep the binary itself from being re-established. What makes something an indecidable is

> that it cannot be fitted into the totalized oppositional economy of binarism (64).

Derrida's concept of indecidables converges with my notion of anomaly in the sense that anomalies are irregular, transgressive and tend always to subvert our expectations. As an aesthetic strategy, anomaly serves as a marker of narrative difference because it operates outside of the territory controlled by canonical thought and so refuses to be subservient to conceptual orthodoxy.

Indeed, at the level of characterization anomalies acquire performative impetus as characters act in a manner that simply baffles our rational hegemony. Much like Derrida's indecidables, Saro-Wiwa uses Manmuswak to frustrate the canonical binary of war discourses from being fully established, by disallowing his character from identifying permanently with any section of the war. In other words, by permitting Manmuswak to rove seamlessly from one section of the war to the other, Saro-Wiwa moves his character into what Frantz Fanon (1963:227) has called the "zone of occult instability", a zone, in our context, of rampant discursive intransigence and disobedience to canonicity.

Indeed for his duplicity and capriciousness, Manmuswak almost emerges in the narrative as the artistic ambassador of *Eshu-Elegbara* – that sinister mythical picaro of Yoruba cosmology known as a hawker of confusion and a master of

dissembling. Here, like *Eshu*, Manmuswak abandons us at the crossroads of cognition through his ambiguous and transgressive maneuvers.

But if Saro-Wiwa uses anomaly to denaturalize the binaries of war, he also uses anomalous characters to reflect the deep moral morass into which society has regrettably sunk. Through the actions and inactions of his characters, we see a society in moral retreat, a society weighed down by the tragic hubris of its own moral disjuncture. Among the characters used to represent this moral anomaly in *Sozaboy* is Okonkwo.

Unlike the pre-independence Okonkwo of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) who was known for his hard work, unmatched wrestling skill and his short-temper; the Okonkwo in *Sozaboy* is the archetype of institutional venality in the postcolony. Okonkwo is a traffic police sergeant, but so used is this character to corruption through the extortion of bribes from road users, particularly commercial cab drivers, that he openly weeps on learning of his promotion to the rank of inspector, a promotion that confines him to clerical duties in the office, away from his "lucrative" exploits on the road (2).

Those who pay him a congratulatory visit are surprised to see Okonkwo in tears over his promotion. But Okonkwo who has amassed vast unearned wealth explains the tragedy of his promotion in these words:

> Smog, how I no go cry? Look my house. Fridge, radiogram, carpet, four wives, better house for my village. You tink say na my salary I use for all these things? If I no stand for road dere to be traffic you tink say I for fit? Ah, dis promotion, na demotion. Make them take de inspector, give me my sarzent (2)

Okonkwo's perception of his promotion as a demotion indexes the grossest toll that unchecked corruption can exert on the psyche of an individual. It shows also that his is a society with highly involuted and shifty moral principles where individuals working in institutions set private and often anomalous parameters of moral conduct. Indeed, Okonkwo is to the police force what Chief Birabee is to the Dukana traditional Kingship institution: a moral blight.

As king of Dukana, Chief Birabee capitalizes on the rumours of war to hoodwink his people to make material and monetary donations for the rehabilitation of refugees – a veritable mass swindle (8, 9, and 22). He colludes with rampaging soldiers to extort money and belongings from his subjects and relishes in his duplicitous relationship with the corrupt government officials and soldiers. A cold and crafty character, Chief Birabee and Pastor Barika actually profit from the sufferings and starvation of thousands of Dukana refugees by appropriating and selling off food and other relief materials meant for the hapless population.

In an indirect reference to the venality of Chief Birabee and Pastor Barika, Terr Kole explains to Mene that although most of the Dukana refugees starve and die of malnutrition and diseases:

> ……there are people, few people who are eating very well. Three times a day. Those people and all their family. Those people are also having plenty money. I do not know what they will use all the money for. But they hide the money under the ground for the same place where they bury all those small small children who are dying because of hungry and kwashiorkor (156).

Mene discovers this allegation to be true, but Chief Birabee's final act of perfidy is to report Mene to the soldiers as a renegade. Mene is apprehended, tortured and put on death row as a prisoner of war, where he again meets the ubiquitous Manmuswak as executioner. But as Mene faces uncertain fate on death row, his friend Boms' earlier advice to him: "...be careful because everybody is an enemy in this our war. There is nobody to trust. Your friend today can be your enemy tomorrow" (137); takes on a new validity and resonance. Mene survives the war however, but could not survive the peace in Dukana where a more egregious and mythic death sentence awaits him.

The only character in *Sozaboy* who may be taken to represent the moral centre of

the narrative is Duzia. Talkative, playful and physically handicapped, Duzia is something of a village wag. But it is Duzia who provides critical insight at moments of communal confusion, and enables us to reach an understanding of people and events as they unfold in the narrative.

For instance, it is Duzia who critically and fearlessly questions Chief Birabee's motives for requesting material and monetary contribution from the poor people of Dukana, as donation to refugees. This, he argues, is the responsibility of government and not of the people who are themselves hostages of poverty. He asks rhetorically:

> How can porson like myself without house, without wife, without farm, without cloth to wear begin to give money, chop and cloth and money to person? Now person go begin give government chop? (7).

Duzia's reference to the particular material wretchedness of his condition and his use of rhetorical interrogation lend poignancy to his argument and exposes the moral weakness of Chief Birabee's scheme. Through Duzia's intervention, then, we are able to regain our sight in the dark moral universe of the narrative, and see through the crookedness of Chief Birabee's intentions. Chief Birabee's later open collusion with soldiers to exploit and terrorize his own people comes only as a confirmation of Duzia's original doubt about his personality. Little wonder, Mene

calls Duzia “the voice of Dukana” (177).

When after the war, Mene returns to Dukana amidst rumours and myths of his death in the war, it is again Duzia who meets him in the village church and for the first time informs Mene of the death of his mother and his wife, Agnes, in an air raid on the village. When a grieving Mene asks why he had not been informed of this tragedy despite having met several Dukana folks in his long search for his family, Duzia’s reply is instructive: “You know that in this town, nobody can tell you about dead people first. Nobody likes to carry bad news”(*179*). By telling the untellable, then, Duzia breaks a communal code of silence and brings the narrative to its inexorable catharsis. He advices Mene to stay away from Dukana as he is the target of ritual murder by a people who believe him to be a ghost who has come to afflict the community with a dreadful disease.

In varying degrees, other recognizable characters such as Agnes, Zaza and Terr Kole, perform the narrative’s logic of anomaly, and so help to quicken the development of the story. Agnes is the street-wise *femme fatale* who first throws the unusual and ultimately tragic challenge to Mene: join the army and prove your manhood. She marries Mene and encourages him to fight in the war, yet nowhere in the narrative do we find her contemplate the meaning, purpose or consequences of war. Mene’s long search for Agnes and his mother during the war is the narrative’s main source of kinetic dynamism and suspense. The death of Agnes in

an air raid on Dukana is a tragic irony for a lover of war, and serves to energize the anti-war rhetoric of the narrative.

Besides Agnes, Zaza exerts the most influence on Mene on the question of joining the army and fighting in the war. And like Agnes, he does not know or even bother to ponder on the purpose of the war. A garrulous world war veteran who fought in Burma, Zaza's most precious war memento is his photograph with his war-time European wife – a photograph he carries about in Dukana in his loin cloth. Curiously, he speaks more of his sexual adventures with this woman than of his actual combat experience. "Oh yes, I fuck am well well" Zaza tells his audience, drawing peels of laughter (33). Continuing, he says:

> Oh yes, I fuck am to nonsense. Not two weeks I spend there. Two months. Three months. The woman no gree go. She say I am the best fucker in the world. From soza to fucker (33).

As the community of Dukana is invaded in the war, Zaza becomes a refugee at the Nugwa camp where he laments to Mene, quite ironically, the anomalies and sufferings associated with war. Before Mene leaves the camp however, Zaza in a final act of repudiation of the logic war destroys Mene's gun (147).

Indeed, everywhere in the narrative, we find this subtle yet achingly perceptible presence of the counter-logic of peace; a reminder that whenever we make war, we war only to increase human misery. This is why in spite of its subversive and antithetical purposes throughout the narrative, anomaly manages to retain a tenuous kinship with reason. Right within the organic structure of the discourse of violence, we tend to find a moment of wise epiphany; that moment when the characters pull back from the brink of unreason to contemplate with interrogative wonder the forces and events that whirl around their lives. And it is at these moments, I argue, that the particular rigour of the counter-rhetorical strategy of the writer is most strikingly felt.

For instance, we find that despite her incessant challenge to Mene to prove his manhood by fighting in the war, Agnes, at the momentous hour when he actually leaves for the war, breaks down pathetically in tears:

> Early next morning when the motor was ready to go to Pitakwa I just woke up. All that night Agnes and myself were lying together. She was holding me very tight. When I told her that it is time for me to go away, she hold me tight more than, then she began to cry. I can feel the water from her eye as it was running on my shoulder (70).

Because we never get to meet her alive again in the narrative, Agnes's tears must

be interpreted as her last supreme act of contrition. Though she does not speak, through the symbolic osmosis of her tears she is able finally to exorcise her original rhetoric of war.

In his moment of decision, even Manmuswak, the narrative's most enigmatic and egregious character manages to stage a dastardly and anticlimactic escape from capture. Moments to the war's end, Manmuswak is still seen killing off defenseless people and prisoners of war until he runs short of ammunition. This is how Mene who was on death row narrates Manmuswak's final crimes of war:

> When we have all stood in straight line, he walked and stood in front of us. True true, I thought the man was joking. Then he pulled the gun and began to shoot. The prisoners were falling one after other. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. I close my eye and pray to God that he will take care of my Mama and my young wife Agnes. Still, Manmuswak was shooting. And the prisoner were falling. Plenty blood. Plenty shout then I heard Manmuswak say "Oh God no more ammo" … and I saw Manmuswak throw down his gun and then make sign of the cross and run away (167)

Here, of course, Manmuswak's 'sign of the cross', a gesture of holiness and religious piety, is an ugly sanctimonious ruse. By abandoning his weapon and running away into eternal anonymity, Manmuswak dramatizes the cowardice of all

warmongers.

But again, of all characters, it is Mene who in an ironic way comes finally to represent the apotheosis of the narrative's anti-war logic. Fascinated at first by smart and colourful military uniforms and fighter gears, Mene becomes obsessed with enlisting in the army. His experience during the war takes him through a steep learning curve and Mene is able to know the cruel consequences of war and soldiering. After a particularly gruesome air raid kills most of his armed colleagues, Mene now knows enough of the evils of war as to say:

> And now all my friends don die or sometimes Manmuswak don take some of them make prisoner of war. And I come say to myself that oh my God, war is very bad thing. War is to drink urine, to die and all that uniform that they are giving us to wear is just to deceive us. And anybody who think that uniform is fine thing is stupid man who does not know what is good or bad or not good at all or very bad at all. All those things that they have been telling us before is just stupid lie. All that one that Zaza is taking about is not true at all ….. Even, I no understand what I was doing until now (113 – 114).

But it is possible to argue that Mene's survival of the ferocious aerial attack is, on a closer look, a carefully authorized and purposive maneuver. This is because it

enables the writer to use his central character to narrativize once again the anomalies that frame human affairs. As we have already seen, when Mene was found unconscious by Manmuswak after the air raid, he was nursed back to life and conscripted into enemy military service as a driver. But here again, the mordant irony conveyed by the writer through the contradictory experiences of his central character in peace and war is strikingly accurate. Mene, who could not drive a car in a time of peace because he had not a license, saves his life in a time of war by demonstrating a driving skill found indispensable by his captors.

When Manmuswak puts Mene to the driving test, he warns Mene in unmistakable terms that his life as a prisoner of war depended on his ability to drive. As Manmuswak gives Mene the car keys, one of the narrative's greatest moments of dramatic anomaly confronts us. This is how Mene narrates the dramatic incident:

> So he gave me the key and he asked me to run inside the Land Rover that was in front of the dormitory hospital… I entered the land rover and I moved it as I am praying to God plenty so that I will not mess up my senior commando and Manmuswak begin take me make ye-ye. And you know, as something used to happen, I actually moved that Land Rover. I moved it. No trouble at all. I drove. I drove. I drove. No accident. I turned it into the compound. I entered the main road. I revised. I went front, anything I like, I just did. And I was prouding of myself because, before, before, my master

> will not even allow me to hold the steering wheel… But today, I know that water will pass garri if I just formfool. And God come help me, sha (125).

Suitably impressed by Mene's dexterity at the wheels, Manmuswak is left with no choice but to grudgingly concede Mene's existential transition from prisoner of war to a new role as a military driver. And Mene's life is thus narrowly saved. With a bitter, laconic laugh, Manmuswak tells Mene:

> "Sozaboy, you getu luck-uo! Sozaboy, you getu luck-uo! So na from prisoner of war to driver ehn? And I no go get chance to chop that your big big prick! God don butter your bread, Sozaboy" (126).

But even before all this, we find yet another ironic and dramatic self-reversal on the part of Mene as he tries desperately to save his life. As prisoner of war, Mene was subjected to interrogation by his captors in order to confirm his exact identity. Seeing that he could respond instinctively to military command, as a trained soldier would, Mene was asked if he was ever a soldier. But Mene flatly *denies* his combat identity and *reclaims* his civilian identity, as the following dialogue in the narrative shows:

> "Yes, you are a soza alright"
>
> "*I am not a soza*" is what I said

> "You are telling lies" is what the soza captain said
>
> "No Sah"
>
> "You are not? Then who are you"
>
> "*I am an apprentice driver*"(122. All italics, mine).

Here, as we can see, Mene juggles his personal and career identities according to the desperate demands of his situation, in a panicky bid to survive the war. But more importantly, through Mene's many desperate moves and frequent self-reversals, the writer also juggles the absurdities of war before the eyes of an ignorant and war-mongering world.

As he struggles to emerge from the magma of war and destruction, Mene finally underlines the anti-war rhetoric of the narrative, when he tells us that although he was originally desperate to join the army and call himself "sozaboy":

> "But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will run and run and run and run and run" (181).

As we have seen, Ken Saro-Wiwa narrativizes the perils of war by using anomaly as his main machinery of representation. Through his transgressive characters the writer attempts to topple dominant expectations and systems of knowledge; and through the drama of their errors, he generates an alternative syntax of knowledge.

11

Now, as we know, irregular characters tend sometimes to inhabit different imaginative geographies where they are governed by different regimes of truth, and also remain inaccessible to dominant modes of expression. Indeed, Raymond Williams (cited in Homi Bhabha, 1997: 299) refers precisely to this existential tangentiality of Other experiences when he notes:

> But in certain areas, there will be in certain periods, practices and meanings which are not reached for. There will be areas of practice and meaning which, almost by definition from its own limited character, or in its profound deformation, the dominant culture is unable in any real terms to recognize.

To grasp these marginal experiences then, a distinct yet recognizable language will have to be enlisted to convey their meanings. It is through this fairly defamiliarized idiom that it becomes possible to enter the remoter recesses of their liminal spaces.

In the author's note prefacing the narrative, Saro-wiwa explains his use of "rotten english" in the novel:

> Sozaboy's language is what I call "rotten English", a mixture of Nigerian

> pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English. This language is disordered and disorderly. Born of a mediocre education and severely limited opportunities, it borrows words, patterns and images freely from mother-tongue and finds expression in a very limited English vocabulary. To its speakers, it has the advantage of having no rules and no syntax. It thrives on lawlessness, and is part of the dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live, move and have not his being (Author's note, *Sozaboy*).

Ken Saro-Wiwa's deviationist pattern of language in *Sozaboy* has generated a lively debate among critics as regards its effectiveness as a mode of communication. In a useful way, Okere (1992:9:15) and Adegboyin (1992:30:38) have separately scrutinized the notional and grammatical dimensions of the writer's subaltern idiom, and they agree that its use enhances the narrator's credibility (See also: Doris Akekwe 1992:16:29).

But the particular significance of Saro-Wiwa's deviationist english lies in its decanonizing power, its ability to bypass the protocols of "standard" English and yet retain its comprehensibility as a medium of expression. According to Bill Ashcroft et al (1989: 57), one of the strategies enlisted by minority writers in their attempt to formulate a distinct emancipatory aesthetics is the abrogation of the "privileged centrality of English by using language to signify difference while

employing a sameness which allows to be understood"

In *Sozaboy,* Saro-Wiwa conducts this linguistic subversion partly through the introduction of a variety of local expressive elements into the formal structures of the English language. For instance, we find the specific use of local ideophonic words to convey sound-based meanings in the text. The writer uses different ideophonic sound beats of the narrator's heart to indicate different levels of fear – from slight apprehension to dreadful fear; and the meaning is further enhanced by the statement coming either before the ideophone or the statement after it.

For instance, when Mene first sights armed soldiers in Dukana, he tells us: "I was afraid small. My heart begin cut, *gbum, gbum, gbum, gbum*" (P.38). Here, the sound of his heart is used to signify the narrator's slight apprehension ("I was afraid small"). When, however, in his dream the soldiers attempt to conscript him into the army, Mene's fear is mixed with unwillingness and the sound of his heartbeat changes to *"Tam tum tum. Tam, tum tum. Tam tum tum."* This is because according to him, "I am afraid of the sozas. I do not want to join the sozas." The *Tam tum tum* of his heart signalizes that fearful unwillingness.

Again, when as prisoner of war Mene is taken by Manmuswak to a superior officer who would decide his fate, Mene says: "my heart was beating drum, *bam-bam-bam-bam- bam*", indicating mortal fear this time, because he says: "So true

true, they want to kill me, I wanted to cry, I cannot cry" (P.122). He survives his worst fear however, and begins a search for his wife and mother. But as he approaches the forest of Dukana, Mene is again seized by another form of fear, the monstrous fear of uncertainty, and again the beat of his heart changes. This time he tells us "my heart was beating drum – *dam dim dam dim dam dim dam dam dim.* Because I do not know what is waiting for me" (P.171).

Indeed, as the writer uses the ideophonic beats of the narrator's heart to suggest the varying levels of apprehension and fear experienced by his character, every heartbeat becomes a complex freighter of meaning. Other instances of ideophonic words in the text are: "…they begin to shoot their guns*: Tako, tako, tako, tako* (47). "…and all of us will move our right leg and stamp it on the ground *gbram* (71). "One time, the bullet just pass over my head. *Heeuun! Heeuun*! (P.105).

We have already referred to how the writer systematically weds standard and idiomatic English with a demotic variety of the language, and yet manages to achieve a meaningful communication. In the body of the text, this unity of "englishes" occurs dynamically in different guises and serves different purposes. For instance, it is through the agency of language that we are able to see the difference in the levels of formal education between Mene and his group commander, Bullet. While Mene uses a demotic variety of English throughout his narration and dialogues because of his limited formal schooling, Bullet's remarks

to Mene come dressed in the "standard" English form. We know from the narrator that Bullet "…have gone to school plenty…and have read plenty book" (91). The following sample dialogue between both characters demonstrates this point clearly:

> "Careful, be careful" Bullet said.
>
> "Whasmatter?" I asked
>
> "The enemy", Bullet answered. "The enemy is over there"
>
> "Is it the enemy that is shooting?" I asked.
>
> "Yes"
>
> "So he have already begin to formfool wey day never broke and we get new gun for our hand"
>
> "He was just greeting us."
>
> "Is that the way to greet people for Iwoama?"
>
> "That is a greeting at the front" And Bullet begin to laugh small small (P. 89).

However, the conversation takes an interesting and hilarious turn when Bullet tries to explain some basic principles of war to Mene in "standard" English, and Mene complains that he could not understand Bullet's "big grammar". In the sample dialogue below, Bullet tells Mene:

> Look, Sozaboy, we are in war front, ok. And in the war front, there are all sorts of people. Drunkards, thieves, idiots, wise men, foolish men. There is only one thing that binds them all. Death. And everyday they live, they are cheating death. That man came to celebrate the fact" (P.95).

But Mene replies, complaining about Bullet's 'high' code of expression:

> Bullet no vex, I said, I beg you, no make too much grammar for me. I beg you. Try talk the one that I will understand. No vex because I ask you this simple question (P.95).

Thus, the writer uses language to inscribe educational disparities between his characters.

But even beyond that, we are also able to notice the insurrectionary potential of Saro-Wiwa's demotic aesthetics. By instigating a rhetorical interface between two varieties of English dramatized through dialogue between his characters in the text, the writer subtly interrogates the assumed universality of "standard" English (While Bullet could perfectly understand Mene's suburban variety of English, Mene has difficulty comprehending Bullet's "standard" medium). But as Bullet quickly reverts to demotic English in order to maintain the communication chain with Mene, the writer effectively unseats the privileged status of "standard"

English as the only acceptable medium of communication.

We find, finally, that despite his obvious educational advantage over Mene, Bullet's expressive possibilities in the narrative are ultimately overruled by Mene's narratological authority. As far as the story goes it is to Mene, rather than Bullet, that we must turn if we are ever to make sense of the narrative's many turbulent dramas.

Another unique characteristic of Ken Saro-Wiwa's "rotten english" is his use of short, abrupt and repetitive sentences to indicate tense physical activity or moments involving his central character, and to create visual drama on the surface of the text. The sentence pattern changes and becomes longer and more "normalized" as the narrative tension dissipates. For example, when Mene was asked by Manmuswak to demonstrate his driving skill by actually driving a Land Rover car which was parked in the premises, Mene gets tense as he enters the car and begins gradually to move it. Here, the sentence pattern quickly changes and acquires a brisk, dramatic quality as we see in the following string of short sentences:

> I moved it. No trouble at all. I drove. I drove. I drove. No accident. I turned it into the compound. I entered the main road. I revised (P.125).

The repetition of the sentence “I drove” is grammatically unusual, of course, but is notionally and circumstantially accurate and is used here by the writer to underline the moment of tense progression experienced by his character. Even the prominent use of the first person pronoun “I” almost overflows its grammatical banks in the example above, and begins to function as a pointer to the particular actional capacity of the narrative’s main character.

There is also evidence that the writer uses language not only to humanize but also to sexualize non-living objects in the text. And we find that whenever this is done in the narrative, the aesthetic intention was to raise the relationship between man and object to a level of intimate conviviality normally noticed only between two human beings. We find for example that when a gun was assigned to Mene as a combatant, his love for the gun is strikingly reminiscent of his romantic passion for his wife, Agnes. Mene affectionately pets and speaks of the gun using a human and sexually charged idiom. He says:

> That morning they gave all of us gun. Every porson one gun. It is the second time that I hold gun for my hand. And I am telling you I was very very proud of myself. New uniform plus gun. Even sef that gun dey wonder me plenty. I look am for him mouth. I look am for belly. I look am for bottom. Just small and thin. And with plenty power… I carry the gun for my hand. I put am down. I clean am small small. I pull him tooth. ’e talk

> small small. I come proud well well. And I dey laugh for myself. …But I like this my new gun. It was like the time that I first married Agnes. I was prouding of myself plenty (P.88).

But, alas, Mene is not alone in treating the gun as though it were his wife. As he tells us: “Everybody was looking at his gun like new wife dem just marry for am” (P.88).

Similarly, when Mene was captured and turned over to enemy service, his relationship with his new gun even in his new unhappy circumstances remained ever more intimate and sexual:

> They also gave me one short thick riffle like this. Very fine rifle. I like it. I held it in my hand as I for hold Agnes my young wife with J.J.C. I told the riffle that him and me will sleep and wake together and if anybody come disturb us, we will just finish him one time (126).

Indeed, one of the remarkable achievements of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s experimental language in this novel is that despite its syncretic character, its syntactic sequence is unforced and words flow with a certain torrential originality. This is why no matter how deeply he sinks into the doldrums of war and misery, words never fail the narrator as he describes, explains and narrates his plight and the plights of

others. Consequently, the nearer we follow the narrator's story, the more we feel the peculiar linguistic heat of his narrative. Throughout the narrative, in fact, we experience the strong almost biotic ability of the writer's demotic English to not only communicate effectively, but also to capture the innermost forebodings as well as ecstasies of his characters.

Finally, a careful look at the narrative structure of *Sozaboy* shows a wedding of oral storytelling techniques with the countermanding protocols of the written novelistic form. In an incisive essay, Harry Garuba (1998: 229-239) is the first to draw attention to how the narrator "…consistently employs speakerly strategies to point to the oral nature of his narrative" (233). Following Garuba, I argue that these strategies become further points of disidentification with dominant writerly practice, and so serve as elemental sites of cultural rupture. The dimensions of orality of the text often take the form of direct reportage, as in: "But soza business is foolish nonsense" that is what my mother said. Then she went away. Imagine!" (P.56).

But it also takes the shape of direct addressive engagement with the reader (in oral performance, of course, it would be the listener): "I think you know as I was thinking when I entered army. The first time and wear sozaman uniform. You remember as I was prouding…"(P.104). Another example is: "My dear brothers and sisters, I will not try to tell u how I was moving from one camp to the other"

(148).The narrative actually ends with a statement by the narrator apparently asking the audience to “Believe me yours sincerely” (P.181).

As a medium of self expression, language has always been a crucial arena of cultural and ideological struggle. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) thinks of language as the site of two contending forces, namely, the centripetal and the centrifugal. The centripetal force of language tends to ‘reign over’, ‘enslave’ and ‘incorporate’ other languages. It strives to disallow language diversity and aims to impose a sort of homo-language of authority. As Bakhtin puts it, “a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization”(271).

But by contrast, the centrifugal force focuses on interrupting the totalitarian force of language by demoralizing its authority. It refuses incorporation and enslavement by advertising language diversity and plurality. The centrifugal force recognizes the cultural terrain as a manifold and heteroglossic field permitting not a single linguistic centre, but many different cultural and linguistic loci. Here, as Bakhtin correctly says, cultural expression is irreverently dialogized and “no language could claim to be an authentic and incontestable face” (273).

In opting for “rotten” English as his medium of narration in *Sozaboy*, then, Ken

Saro-Wiwa consciously pursues a centrifugal mandate of discourse thus dramatizing a preference for language diversity. But by retaining elements of standard and even idiomatic English in his narrative, the writer complicates the Baktinian binary of language and mangles all linguistic taxonomic neatness. The result of his gamble is an anomalous but fiduciary idiom appropriate for the uneasy universe of his narrative.