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

George, Austin Tamuno-Opubo

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CHAPTER TWO

Ken Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain* and the Anxieties of Remembrance

"I am the biafran final truth"

– Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu[3]

"I was very much an observer (of the war)"

– Ken Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain*

One of the vexing questions in the discursive tussles between dominant and oppositional discourses is the politics of remembrance, of history – how to read it, interpret it and to claim a stake in its narrative territory. Thus while dominant discourses strive to construct and project an authorized version of history by arresting and de-substantializing all other shades of narratives; marginal narratives tend to mock and abrogate the totalizing claims of hegemonic narratives by projecting a fragmentary point of view which valorizes their distinctive experience. At stake in these tussles is the *power of telling*, of representation with history serving as the arena of struggle.

For the marginalized as Homi Bhabha (cited in Ghail, 1998:17) tells us: "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past in order to make sense

[3] See: "I am the Biafran final truth" – Ojukwu in *The Vanguard* Newspaper (Nigeria) November 17, 2003.

of the present". To remember, therefore, is to engage in an intentional process of historical retrieval. But it is also a vital discursive vector through which notions of domination and resistance to narrative subjugation may be processed and constructed by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives.

In these discursive tussles, social events, gestures, symbols and meanings are constantly created and recreated resulting in a multiple narrative directionality with each narrative frontier holding its meanings and significations, and then yielding these to any specific critical scrutiny. Within the structures of any given social text, then, we find a vast diversity of social meanings and representations; each urging different values, addressing different audiences in and out of the text, and each drawing from a different locality of knowledge. This is why rather than a single authorized version of events, we often find a rich cultural community of meanings originating from various fragmentary versions instigated by marginal narratives.

It is here, it seems, that the dominant narrative meets its greatest interpretive crisis. For in seeking to expel all other forms of representation, hegemonic narratives create alternative sites of power in the peripheries where a different type of narrative focus is mobilized and projected. Thus wherever dominant discourses advance their reading of history as the only valid version, minoritarian narratives encourage us to always recognize history as a contentious field replete with many

fragmentary versions. These discourses remind us, in other words, that unless we view and understand history's many fragments as carriers of distinct memories, we may never accurately hear history's polyphonic voices.

It is in these conflicting processes of representations of marginality in the words of Rutherford (1990:22) "that violence, antagonisms and aversions that are at the core of dominant discourses and identities becomes manifest". This is so because being authoritarian, hegemonic narratives tend to flatten differences and disallow contradiction. But as Leitch (1992: 94) has noted, the organizing concerns of minority writers and scholars are practices aimed at specifying:

> (1)The biological psychological, socio-economic, historical, political and/or linguistic shaping forces on literature, (2) to counter negative majoritarian suppositions, image, practices, canons and institutions and (3) to recover and scrutinize denigrated literary works, creating new cultural histories.

Here, following the critical trajectory as suggested by Leitch, I scrutinize how Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain* (1989) a narrative on the Nigerian civil war, straddles two basic discursive duties. First as a narrative specifically calibrated to destabilize dominant representations of the war, and as one which through a

nuanced and revelatory focus on inter-ethnic relations during the war advances a new cultural reading of that event. Using Saro-Wiwa's text, I examine how minority writers negotiate their relations with dominant modes of remembrance through the recuperation of what Foucault (1977:8) has called "subjugated knowledges".

According to Faucault, subjugated knowledges are those whose historical contents have been submerged and "disguised in functionalist coherence or formal systematization". These forms of knowledge include "… a whole set of knowledge that have been disqualified...a particular, local, regional knowledge… which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed to everything surrounding it". But the opposition inscribed by such repressed knowledges, Foucault says, permits us "to recover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle".

Throughout this chapter, I argue that Ken Saro-Wiwa's narrative achieves a ruptural impact on Nigeria's nationalist memory by excavating tidbits of histories which are submerged by dominant representations of history. By focusing his narrative on the sordid experiences of the oil-rich minority Niger Delta communities during the war, I claim that the writer not only dualizes our reading of that event, but also inscribes the logic of counter-memory so central to minority discourses.

War and the Mutiny of Memory:

Perhaps no historical event in Nigeria has inspired as much narrative and counter-narrative responses as much as the three-year civil war (1967-1970). In that war, the Ibos of South Eastern Nigeria under the leadership of Odumegwu Ojukwu, an army Colonel and military Administrator of that region had attempted to secede from the Nigerian Federation citing politically motivated massacres of Ibos in the Hausa-dominated Northern Nigeria as reason. In the events that followed, the Head of the central government Colonel Yakubu Gowon, himself from the politically dominant North, had declared "a police action" to force the secessionists back to the Federal Republic. A fratricidal civil war lasting three years and claiming an estimated one million lives had begun. The war ended in January, 1970, with the defeat of the secessionist forces.

But after the booming of the war guns, a battle of memory, of imaginative reconstruction of history has followed. For any people, this is important; for as stories meet or indeed collide with other narratives, history emerges as a patchwork of memories and social experience is led by hindsight. Thus Chinua Achebe is right when he says through the old man of Abazon in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), that:

> It is the story that outlives the sound of the war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, which saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence (124).

Although there are many narratives on the civil war, most of these narratives seem to be mainly concerned with recording the experiences of the dominant groups involved in the war, either on the Federal side or on the secessionist front.[4] Interestingly, while the minority ethnic communities in the seceding Eastern region witnessed some of the cruelest phases of the war, (see Watts, 1997: 33-65., St.Jorre. 1972:116-7), the experiences of these minorities are rarely discussed and documented in any detailed manner in dominant historiographic narratives on the war.

Ken Saro-wiwa was one of a few Nigerians who saw the war from close quarters. He was at the University of Ibadan in Western Nigeria at the beginning of the crisis; was in Eastern Nigeria (the Biafran enclave) during the hostilities, and escaped to the Federal Capital, Lagos, where he was eventually appointed Administrator for the strategic oil port of Bonny. He remained at the war front with the 3 Marine Commando Division in the war-torn oil port for the rest of the

[4] Dominant texts on the civil war do not treat *ethnic minority experience* during the war as a central concern. See for example: Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command* (1980) ,Ike Vincent, *Sunset At Dawn (*1976), Fredrick Forsyth, *The Biafran Story* (1969) , Arthur Nwankwo, *Nigeria: The Challenge Of Biafra* (1972) , Cyprian Ekwensi, *Divided We Stand: A Novel On The Nigerian Civil War* (1980) Odumegwu Ojukwu , *Because I am Involved*, among others. While, for instance, Obasanjo's *My Command* chronicles his personal reminiscences as a federal troop commander in the war, and tends to underline again and again the futility of rebellion and the awesomeness of the Federal might; dominant Ibo post-war narratives tend mainly to decry the victimization and putative placelessness of ethnic Ibos within the Nigerian national project. There are yet other narratives on the war which dwell on the plight of "ordinary" citizens – men, women and children caught in the vortex of hostilities. Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* (1986) and Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* are only a few examples of narratives in this mould, However, my view is that taken side by side with some of these texts, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain* occupies a seminal place among post-war discourses both for its treatment of ethnic minority experience during the war and its radically oppositional reading of the history of that unhappy episode.

hostilities. He later held Cabinet positions in the post-war Rivers State *(DarklingPlain,* l).

In his memoir, Saro-Wiwa who was strongly opposed to the secessionists offers a penetrating insight into inter-ethnic relations in the period before, but particularly during the war. Eastern Nigeria held other minority ethnic groups such as the peoples of Okrika, Engene, Belegete, Ogoni, Kalabari, Efik, and numerous others who were mainly against the war but felt implicated in it because of their geographical contiguity with the dominant Ibo country[5]. Although here and there some of the peoples of these and other communities pitched their tent with the rebels, their numbers were few and the general attitude was of firm opposition to the war.

Saro-Wiwa gives a vivid often disturbing account of the brutality suffered by the minority groups in the hands of their Ibo neighbours. He challenges dominant Ibo post-war claim of being the most oppressed group in Nigeria, arguing that the oil-bearing minority Delta communities torn as they were between the rebels and the federal forces, were the real victims of the war. In the "Author's Note" preceding the actual narrative, the writer articulates what is clearly the organizing thesis of his memoir. He says:

[5] See Appendix (1) for the map of Eastern Nigeria showing its ethnic composition. See also Appendix (2) for the map of Nigeria showing the three major regions.

> I have perforce to comment on the interaction of the Ibos and their neighbours before, during and after the war because the Ibos were at the very centre of the crisis. Most works on the war, both fictional and otherwise, have been produced by Ibos and have been concerned mainly with their suffering in the war. They have tended to support the argument so eloquently put before the world by Biafra propaganda that the Ibos were and are the oppressed of Nigeria. My account shows this to be far from the truth; the world and posterity have to know that the real victims of the war were the Eastern minorities who were in a no-win situation. They are the oppressed in Nigeria (P.10).

Saro-Wiwa cites the struggle among the dominant ethnic groups for the control of the oil resources of the Niger Delta minority communities as the actual, but often unstated, reason for the war. He therefore makes a clarion call to the oppressed minorities to "awaken to the real threat that is posed to their very existence by the politics of competitive ethnicity and involuted loyalties of the majority ethnic groups" in Nigeria (P.11).

Indeed, to read Saro-wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain* is to come into a direct and anxious contact with history as a contested narrative territory. As we follow his narrative, it is easy to detect the writer’s commitment to articulate not only a different historical point of view, but also his attempt to literally ‘speak’ to

posterity on an important historical question. This is why early in the narrative, the writer seems particularly concerned that "many of the children who were born during the war or shortly after are today in universities. They will soon be directing the affairs of the nation. It is in their particular interest that they be exposed to as many facets of the war as possible"(Author's Note, *Darkling Plain*). In thus directly addressing a new generation of citizens, the writer seems eager to save progeny from the missteps of the past.

A central issue raised by Saro-Wiwa in his narrative is the relationship between the minority ethnic communities and the dominant Ibo population in Eastern Nigeria. This relationship often complicated and unsavory before the war degenerated calamitously during the war with the persecution of the minority groups who did not support the secession. To be sure, in Nigeria as Poju Akinyanju (1998:124-143) points out, inter-ethnic acrimony runs deep frequently framing political and social behaviour. Long before Nigeria' independence from Britain, the country's minority communities whether they were the Tivs of Northern Nigeria, the Edos of the West or the many more smaller communities in the Eastern coasts of Nigeria; these communities strongly resented the domination of the more numerous groups such as the Hausa, Yoruba and the Ibos. The struggles of these minority communities for political autonomy continued even as the country gained independence in 1960. The first decade of Nigeria's independence (1960-70) proved to be a particularly turbulent time for the country. Politics continued to be marked by internecine

ethnic conflicts championed mainly by elite factions of Nigeria's three main ethnic groups who were locked in a bitter succession crisis. The extensive financial resources that accompanied the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in the 1950s only fuelled the tussles for power.

As a writer and particularly one from an exploited minority group, Ken Saro-Wiwa became keenly aware of the vicissitudes of minority existence quite early in life. At the impressionable age of fifteen, at the Government College Umuahia in the heart of Igbo country where he had his secondary education, the cooks and stewards in his school had scolded him in quite caustic terms and labeled the Ogoni people as "stupid" people for voting out the Igbo dominated party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), in favour of the Yoruba dominated party, the Action Group (AG), in the 1957 Eastern House Assembly elections. This incident and numerous others that were to follow, had forced an early awareness of ethnic difference on Ken Saro-Wiwa, and made him to recognize the centrality of the discourse of ethnicity in a multi-ethnic Nigeria.

As Saro-Wiwa recounts in *On a Darkling Plain*, at the end of term in Umuahia, he returned to his native Bori, Ogoni. But now, he viewed his community with a more critical and questioning eye. By repeatedly asking his father – how many Ogoni owned stalls in the market, enlisted in the police force, were clerks and tax

collectors, etc, Saro-Wiwa tried to find his people within the structures of society's material and discursive practices. As the writer recounts:

> When I got to Bori that day, things were not the same again. In the market (where Papa was in charge), I tried to find out from him how many stalls belonged to Ogoni people. At the police station where we went to play table tennis every afternoon, I asked how many policemen were from Ogoni. It appeared very odd to me that there were hardly any traders and policemen, clerks and tax collectors that were Ogoni. Perhaps Ogoni people were actually stupid? If they were not at Umuahia, Aba and Port Harcourt, could they not also be in Bori? And why did Papa and the rest of them who were in Bori town not own lorries which operated transport services to Port Harcourt and Aba as the Ibos did? (45).

Not finding the Ogoni in important centres of discursive relations in Eastern regional administrative cities such as Umuahia, Aba, Port Harcourt, and more significantly in his native Bori, it occurred to Saro-Wiwa that his society was ruled by a dominant discourse enacted by majority ethnic groups, and that minority ethnic nationalities such as the Ogoni were absent and repressed within that discourse.

But years later in the mid 1960s, when he was student at the University of Ibadan,

Saro-Wiwa was to experience an even worse discrimination and isolation. As the country teetered on the brink of disintegration after the 1966 coup killings, the University itself was gripped by conflicting ethnic passions. Key political figures of the north had been killed in a coup that was led mainly by Ibo officers of the Nigerian military. This sparks reprisal action in the north in which Easterners, Ibos as well as non-Ibos, are massacred in what is still considered to be one of Nigeria's worst pogroms. As the Eastern government contemplates secession from the Federation, calls are made on all Easterners in other parts of Nigeria to return to the region. Saro-Wiwa recalls that in all the flurry of activities, meetings and consultations that were held by the Ibo staff and students at the university, non-Ibo minorities of the East were excluded. As the writer notes:

> It is signal that although what they were thinking of was secession of Eastern Nigeria, when they gathered to discuss the matter, non-Ibos from Eastern Nigeria were carefully excluded. Again, this was symbolic of things to come. In the end, a memorandum went into circulation, was signed and was carried to Ojukwu (35).

As the war raged following the declaration of the Biafra Republic in 1967, the Delta minorities became endangered communities. In spite of the "together we fight" rhetoric of the secessionist hierarchy, Saro-Wiwa speaks of many incidents of persecution of non-lbo minorities by the Ibo rebels. He says:

> One incident brings this to mind. Following the capture of Bonny by the Federal forces, rebel troops were soon stationed in Bori. And they wreaked havoc on the local population, looking for food in farms and markets, behaving in a generally haughty and overbearing manner, and arbitrarily arresting and beating up respectable Ogoni citizens and leaders who showed signs of political consciousness. This hurt Ogoni sensibilities immensely… (100).

But just before we assume that the above reported conduct of the rebels was not inconsistent with the general anomie expected in a time of war, the writer provides an important piece of information: “In my journeys from Enugu, Umuahia, Aba and other places (in central Ibo country), I had never heard of such murderous beatings of husbands and fathers. But this was the order of the day in my own home" (113).

In his book *The Nigerian Civil War* (1972: 117), John de St Jorre a foreign war correspondent who closely covered the rebel sector of the war also records the massacres of non-lbo minorities when he notes that “... the Ibo-dominated police and army were always heavily deployed in the minority areas and some of the worst civilian-inspired massacres and counter-massacres took place there”.

Among the strategies used by minority writers in their attempt to crystalize the

contrasts between dominant and marginal experiences, is what we may call the *technique of splitting*. Splitting, defined here as the simultaneous representation of composite scenarios, experiences and realities in order to indicate their dissimilarities, may be used by writers to isolate a particular stock of experience with the intention of emphasizing its uniqueness. Through splitting the writer is able to project an alternative range of experience by dramatizing its critical insularity from dominant representations. Whether in thematic presentation or style of representation, minorities such as gays, lesbians, ethnic minorities, women, Orientals, blacks in the Diaspora, etc, use the technique of splitting to narrativize the distinctiveness of their experience from dominant experience, and to oppose their marginalization.

For instance, like other marginalized Black South African writers the poet Oswald Mtshali uses the technique of splitting to such telling effect in his poem "Sounds of a cowhide drum" (1972:71) where the "Boom! Boom! Boom!" of the African drum strikes us as a vital counterpoint to attempts by the "conqueror" to trample the African experience. Here, the poet's reference to "bear facts" indicates that there is indeed no single supervening "fact". And this coalesces with the onomatopoeic force of the African voice – the drum – to fragmentize the monolithic dogma of the conqueror.

In a different way, the Caribbean novelist George Lamming in his *In the Castle of my skin* (1953) employs the technique of splitting laced everywhere with biting irony as he depicts life in the colonial island of Barbados. In the narrative, for example, we are made to see the striking difference between the wretched living environment and conditions of the colonized black subjects, and the opulent serenity of the estate inhabited by their colonial overlords. The semiotic icons used by the writer to convey these existential dissimilarities in a colonial settlement are both effective and accurate. While the English landlords live on a *hill* in "a large brick building surrounded by a wood and a high stone wall that bore bits of broken bottles along the top", and "…amidst the trees within the walls"; the colonized subjects live *below* the hill in "flat unbroken monotony of small houses".(*Castle of My Skin*: 17-18). We find in the narrative too, that even the body of knowledge presented to colonial subjects in the village school is carefully processed to exclude black experience and civilization. Yet, remarkably, it takes a lowly but culturally astute character, the shoemaker, to literally *split* open the alien knowledge system and expose its inadequacy and chicanery (See: *Castle of My Skin*: 96).

Throughout his writings, as he tries to capture the experiential dissimilarities between minority and majority groups in Nigeria, Ken Saro-Wiwa also uses the technique of splitting as a strategy of representation. In *On a Darkling Plain*, we

have already seen to how the writer contrasts the wanton brutalization of Ogoni civilians by rebel soldiers, with the rather different experience of civilians based in the main Ibo towns of Umuahia, Aba and Enugu (P.113). But even besides the human carnage wrought by the war, Saro-Wiwa draws attention to what we must call the *ethnic axis* of underdevelopment: the gross underdevelopment of minority communities while the resources from these communities are transferred and used to develop the communities of dominant ethnic groups whose elite members control the structures of political power. Here, he contrasts the state of extreme neglect and squalor of the oil port of Bonny, a minority location which had no pipe-borne water, hospital or school; with the Ibo town of Umuahia which enjoyed a dramatic semi-industrial transformation following the emergence of Michael Okpara, a native, as premier of the Eastern region. Of Umuahia, he says:

> In 1954, Umuahia was an eyesore, boasting no more than a scraggy railway station, the headquarters of the Methodist church and an old dilapidated hospital. When Okpara, a native, became Premier of Eastern Nigeria, it bounced back to life and at the time of the crisis boasted a large number of secondary schools, a modern hospital, a brewery, a ceramic factory, a farm settlement, electricity, running water and a happy system of roads (P.135).

Saro-Wiwa concludes that "A comparison of Bonny and Umuahia, for example, was enough to make one realize that government in Nigeria is an instrument for managing

the affairs of the wielders of power" (P.135).

Indeed the significance of Saro-Wiwa's use of splitting as a representational tactic in his depiction of minority experience in *On a Darkling Plain* is that it affords his narrative a hauntingly revelatory force, and strengthens his thesis that majoritarian ethnocentrism is central to social and political crises in Nigeria. By using the state of infrastructure as his semiotic machinery, the writer is able to draw attention to the contradictory modernities dramatized in minority and dominant communities in Nigeria.

In his other writings such as his detention diary *A Month and a Day* (1995), for example, Saro-Wiwa again critiques and denounces a system which diminishes and dehumanizes its weak and minority citizens so remorselessly, denying them even the most basic of amenities such as schools, health centres and roads. Recalling his unduly tedious journey from his Ogoni community to Port Harcourt after a mass mobilization campaign, a short distance by any account, Saro-Wiwa again uses the state of infrastructure as a metaphorical moniker for oppression:

> Ordinarily, the ride to Port Harcourt should take no more than thirty minutes. There isn't a single hill on the way. But the road was in such terrible disrepair that going on it was like an obstacle course. The journey time tripled. It hurt sorely to think how much money Ogoni was belching and how such a short stretch of road could not be motorable. In Abuja, the new Nigerian capital, oil

> money is used to blast stones, break hills and build roads which were hardly in use (*A Month and a Day*: 123).

Indeed this concern, this incessant preoccupation with the imaginative tracking of the denuded lives of a subjugated people has lent Saro-Wiwa's narratives a palpably dystopian temper, a feeling of desperate anguish marched only by his determination to organize and canalize his best writerly and other discursive energies towards the creation of an alternative modernity in which decentred people can seize control of their destiny.

But how can a marginalized people confront the discursive practices that disempower and de-alphabeticalize them unless they have a precise psychological handle on the nature and stratagems of those practices? And what is the role of the writer in the people's search for this understanding? Here, different writers may respond differently to this challenge according to their cultural, ideological, and even geographical provenances. While some may take this role with levity, choosing to flee from the role which history has thrust upon them; others may choose to lead the people by marching right in front towards the barricades. Indeed for Saro-Wiwa, writers must not merely take a bemused, critical look at society, but as he says in his detention memoir cited earlier, "They must play an interventionist role" (*A Month and a Day*: P.81).

As Saro-Wiwa seems to demonstrate in *On a Darkling Plain*, this interventionist role

includes the search for marginalized experience in the dark mist of hegemonic representation of history. Indeed, it involves a careful engagement with dominant imaginaries of history and an attempt to redraw the cartographies of its power by introducing patches of memories generated through a different process of remembrance. This means that as Saro-Wiwa tries to assert the difference of minority experience in his narrative, he tries invariably to re-utter history; and as he seeks to retrieve tidbits of history lost in oblivion Saro-Wiwa seeks also to deflect dominant discourse's tyrannical hand on memory.

One of the major acts of denialism found in most dominant post-war narratives is their inability to acknowledge the tussle among the elite of the dominant ethnic groups for the control of the oil resources of the Delta minority communities, as the ultimate reason for the war. Although Ojukwu claims in the interview cited earlier that "my war aim was to ensure the survival of the biafran people from the former threat of genocide";[6] and the Federal side sloganized the war as a "war of unity", Ken Saro-wiwa contends in his narrative that beneath these rival claims lay a potent petrolic discourse shaping and framing every combat maneuver and political action before, during and after the war. Saro-Wiwa points out that the control of the oil in the Delta was a major motivating factor for the Eastern regional government's decision to secede from the federation. He says:

[6] See: Ojukwu, Ibid.

> The general feeling was that Eastern Nigeria, blessed as it was with oil wealth and "sophisticated" Ibo manpower, could make a success of nationhood. Such a nation would be even more successful if the drawback of the "North" was removed for all time (P.35).

One of the first acts of Ojukwu the rebel leader as soon as secession was declared was to decree that all oil royalties due to the federal government should be paid into the coffers of his government. When Shell the oil conglomerate could not comply with the rebel demand because their main operational base, the oil port of Bonny was still a federal territory, the reaction of the rebel government was a massive deployment of troops to seize the oil town. Thus Bonny became the most fiercely contested territory as federal and rebel forces fought to gain control of the strategic town. The loss of Bonny and other important towns like Port Harcourt by the rebels dealt a major blow to their ability to sustain the war in any meaningful way. As Saro-Wiwa notes:

> The capture of Bonny by the federal troops was fortunate in more ways than one, for Bonny was a real prize. Not only did it control the sea passage from the Atlantic Ocean into Port Harcourt, so-called Biafra's main port; it was also the main oil terminal for Nigeria's oil company, Shell-BP. It was the port of export for most of Nigeria's oil. Its capture also came at an opportune

moment: at a time when there was a tussle over oil royalty. (P.98)

In a brilliant study, Michael Watts (1997: 33-66) also identifies the organizing role of oil in framing political behavior even before the war by stating that although the decision of the Ibos to secede from the Federal union was not simply caused by the discovery of oil, it none the less became the ultimate factor. Watts contends that political tussles and competitions were organized all along within the context of oil as a power resource. He says: "Petroleum as a source of wealth, in other words, from its very inception was the medium through which deeply sedimented regionalisms and competitive federal politics were expressed and struggled over" (P: 41). Linking the pressures of oil on political and combat maneuvers before and during the civil war, Watts says:

> ...the control of oil revenues was the central issue which precipitated the crisis of February 1967. The governor of the Eastern Region, Colonel Ojukwu, passed the Revenue Collection Edict number 11 in 1967 by which all revenues collected by the federal government would be paid to the treasury of the Eastern government. The federal (Gowon) government in response created three new states within the Eastern Region in an effort to gain support the oil producing minorities who would be awarded new-found autonomy and a share of oil revenues. On May 30lh Ojukwu proclaimed

> Biafra (the old Eastern Region) independent and war was declared on July 6th, 1967 (P.41).

Similarly, St de Jorre cited earlier after noting that the war was at it's fiercest in the Delta areas in what he calls the muddled "oil war" (138-142), concludes as follows:

> With the Nigerians trying to 'dominate' the Ibos and the Ibos trying to dominate the Eastern minorities – in whose territory most of the Eastern oil lay – the war, it seemed, had little to do with the noble ideals of patriotism, security and freedom, and appeared to have descended to the base level of territorial conquest and economic aggrandizement (P: 375).

Indeed as Ken Saro-Wiwa records in *On a Darkling Plain,* the final testimony of this economic aggrandizement comes when the Federal government expropriates the oil wealth of the Mid-Western and Rivers states through a military decree; three months after Biafra's surrender in 1970. The decree disentitles the oil-producing communities of their natural rights in spite of the opposition of the affected state governments to this move, and the recommendations of the Dina Revenue Allocation committee rejecting such expropriations. For the Delta minority communities, the central government's oil seizures coming so swiftly after the war were not only an act of betrayal, as Ken Saro-wiwa puts it:

> We were to know that, far from being a war of unity, the war was being fought by the three old adversaries for the oil wealth of our areas and we were to be bruised, battered and bloodied and left to flounder helplessly on a darkling plain in an uncaring, ignorant country (238).

Perhaps the most signal achievement of *On a Darkling Plain* as a narrative of counter-memory is its ability to inscribe a critical footnote on the body of the representations of the war by dominant narratives. Through his narrative footnotes, Saro-Wiwa tries to bridge the gaps of amnesia left by nationalist historiographic narratives. But to achieve this, the writer has to forage the debris of dominant historical thought processes in search of tidbits of submerged counter-histories. These counter-histories embody the repressed experiences of minority ethnic communities and so constitute the alternative door through which Saro-wiwa seeks to re-enter the terrain of history.

Laura Mulrey (See: George, 1990: 233) seems to recognize the necessity of Saro-Wiwa's kind of discursive detour into history through opposition when she observes that often "It cannot be easy to move from oppression and its mythologies, to resistance in history; a detour through a no-man's land or threshold area of counter-myth and symbolism is necessary". In *On a Darkling*

Plain, Saro-Wiwa works within the structuration of the narrative terrain already set by dominant discourse but tries to demoralize and unseat its authority by inscribing elements of history alien to it. By beaming a sharp ideological light on ethnic relations within and outside the parameters of conflict, the writer leads us invariably to a land of counter-myth where forgotten fragments of history are recollected through a different process of remembrance.

In his discussion of *On a Darkling Plain*, Azubuike Iloeje (cited earlier in the previous chapter) strives mainly to diminish and demean the interruptive significance of Ken Saro-wiwa's narrative by contending that the writer is merely an "outsider" perpetually in search of inclusion into the national calculus of power. He laments the narrative's "adversarial language" (P.108) and "the capriciousness of the narrative voice", and suggests in effect that Ken Saro-wiwa seems only to contribute to national discord (P. 109).

But Ileoje's analysis dramatizes important conceptual weaknesses. For example, he characterizes *On a Darkling plain* as "a defiant document" (P.110), but fails altogether to view the narrative from the wider optic of a discourse intent on inscribing its difference from dominant narratives through the production of counter-histories. Beyond reactive defiance, counter-histories aim to dethrone the

authoritarian historicity of dominant discourses, and to restore the plurality of cognition and interpretation so inevitable to any response to social experience. By thematizing and injecting questions of ethnicity, identity and tussles over oil resource ownership and control into the discourse of war; Ken Saro-Wiwa not only reconfigures the prevailing hermeneutics of the war, but also enables us to unmask the hooded motivations behind Nigeria's incessant instabilities.

In his excellent book *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), Chinua Achebe makes the horrendous point that "Nigerians of all other ethnic groups will probably achieve consensus on no other matter than their common resentment of the Igbo" (P.45). Achebe goes on to say that "The rise of the Igbo in Nigerian affairs was due to the self-confidence engendered by their open society and their belief that one man is as good as another, that no condition is permanent" (P.47). But, again, a reading of Ken Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain* reveals that this fantastic egalitarian quality of the Ibos may have been in dire decline in their dealings with their non-Ibo minority neighbours in the Eastern region. Saro-Wiwa recalls that the Ibo political elite in the Eastern region were overweening and ethnocentric:

> To consolidate their hold over the Region, appointments to the civil service, government boards and corporations were manipulated in favour of the Ibos. The machinery of government was similarly manipulated in order to entrench

the Ibos in dominant positions (P.54).

Indeed Achebe himself confirms the political endangerment of Eastern minorities in his book, when he recounts the particular fate of one Prof Eyo Ita, an Efik minority politician. Prof Ita described by Achebe as "an urbane and detribalized humanist politician", was the Leader of Government Business in Enugu but had been maligned and forced out of office by the preeminent Ibo political demagogue, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe. Azikiwe had apparently returned to launch an ethnic vengeance on minority politicians in the East, after he lost the 1951 Regional Assembly elections in the Western Region. Achebe records that using his enormous resources, including his personal newspaper; Dr. Azikiwe runs Prof Eyo Ita out of office and personally takes up his position. And what effect has all this had on ethnic relations in the East? Achebe explains:

> Prof Eyo Ita was an Efik, and the brutally unfair treatment offered him in Enugu did not go unremarked in Calabar. It contributed in no small measure to the suspicion of the majority Igbo by their minority neighbours in Eastern Nigeria – a suspicion which far less attractive politicians than Eyo Ita fanned to red-hot virulence, and from which the Igbo have continued to reap enmity to this day (*Trouble with Nigeria*, P.59).

Ken Saro-Wiwa consistently uses the term "domestic" or "indigenous colonialism" to describe the relationship between minority communities and majority groups in Nigeria. A major feature of this relationship is the expropriation of the land and natural resources of minority communities by those who dominate the power structures of the state. In the "Authors Note" of *On a Darkling plain*, the writer laments that "Indigenous colonialism and the blind materialism of international capitalism which prospects for oil in the belly of the delta ring the death knell of these peoples" (P.11).

As Saro-Wiwa narrates it, the plight of these communities before and after the civil war shows a somewhat circuitous but clearly discernible pattern. The writer relays how the struggle by the Rivers people for a separate political unit outside of dominant Ibo administrative control was frustrated by the Ibo political elite through the Ibo State Union – their main elite body based in Port Harcourt, the present capital of the oil-rich Rivers state. Saro-Wiwa quotes directly the minutes of the meetings of the Ibo State Union in Port Harcourt as saying:

> It would be disastrous to allow any part of Ibo land to be carved into the Rivers State. Port Harcourt is looked upon to be in the Rivers state…. all Ibos should oppose any suggestion to include Port Harcourt in any State outside Ibo land (See: *Darkling Plain*. 178)

Although historically inhabited by ethnic Ikwerres and the Okrika-Ijaw to the south coastal fringes, the Ibos who arrived at the city only in 1937 came to numerically dominate and control the area from 1953 onwards (See: *Darkling Plain*, 174-186).

However, interestingly, in granting separate administrative status to the Rivers people away from dominant Ibo political control in May 1967, Federal government tries to strike a double entendre: it seeks to win the loyalty of these minorities, but more importantly, he seeks direct control of the Delta's oil reserves and the continuous flow of oil revenue to the central government. Immediately after the liberation of Port Harcourt by the federal forces, Harold Wilson, Lord Hunt and Lord Carrington – all British politicians and the face of international capitalism – visit the oil city. Saro-Wiwa recalls that on his arrival at the city, Lord Carrington was "suitably impressed by the fact that the oil-fields were safe in federal hands" (211). Again, this observation underlines the centrality of oil in the thoughts of both local and international actors in the conflict.

Indeed, side by side with competitive ethnicity, the control and distributive politics of oil wealth forms a central aspect of what is known in Nigeria as "The National Question". As the kernel of Nigeria's public discourse, the national question represents the various strains of citizenship frustrations in a multi-ethnic state. As

Felix Akpan notes,[7] oil occupies a primal place of in Nigeria's political life. He says:

> The truth of the matter is that politics in Nigeria cannot be divorced from oil. National and personal dreams, hopes and aspirations are built around oil. No doubt the intensity with which the local elite struggle for power is, in part, evidence of our failure to divorce politics from oil. Our leaders think oil, dream oil and act oil. The inability of our leaders to think beyond oil is the foremost problem of this country.

The national question, according to Ade Ajayi (1992), is "...the perennial debate as to how to order the relations between the different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groupings so that they have the same rights and privileges, access to power and equitable share of national resources". These acrimonious debates have led to numerous constitutional changes: 1922. 1944, 1951, 1960, 1960, 1963, 1979, 1989, 1995, and 1999 (see: Akinyanju, 1998:124-43), a spiral of bloody coups and counter-coups and, indeed, the civil war.

But as we have noted, the remembrance of these national events in historiographic narratives have itself been framed by the politics of memory and identity. Always, dominant representations of history tend to be totalizing and self-referential,

[7] See: Felix Akpan "Obasanjo and the Fuel Prices" in *The Guardian* Newspaper (Nigeria) 1 December, 2004.

pushing minority experiences into a somewhat deterritorialized discursive location where they remain unheard. Perhaps nothing exemplifies the self-referentiality of the dominant narrative than the former Biafran leader, Odumegwu Ojukwu's description of himself as "the Biafran final truth". But if Ojukwu's claim reflects the totalizing habits of dominant systems of knowledge, then Ken Saro-Wiwa's insistence that "I was very much an observer" of the civil war (*Darkling Plain* P.10) may be understood to represent the ruptural role played by minority discourses to fracture nationalist memory through the representation of histories produced from counter-memory.

George Lipsitz (See: John Lowney, 1998) clearly clarifies the logic of narratives of counter-memory when he says that "…counter-memories force revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past...counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience".

The particular power of Saro-wiwa's *On a Darkling plain* as a narrative of counter-memory, then, is that it focuses on the localized experiences of the minority communities of the Niger Delta and tries to introduce these into the gaps of amnesia left by nationalist historiographic narratives. By inscribing the story of their difference on the template of nationalist memory, marginal narratives

succeed in interrupting the successive seriality of hegemonic discourses.

Another important feature of *On a Darkling Plain* which has attracted the attention of critics is the style and polemical language of its narration. Clearly, this is a narrative that presents a rich harvest of literary devices ranging from anger and lament, humour and allusion, to irony and sarcasm. While the deployment and effectiveness of any of these devices is dictated mainly by the writer's mood at any particular point of his narration, the general tone of the narrative is decisive, forceful and accusatory.

Throughout his narrative, Saro-Wiwa forcefully and categorically accuses the elite factions of Nigeria's dominant groups and their minions for the sorry state in which the country has found itself. He accuses "Ibo leaders, and particularly Ojukwu, of exploiting Ibo suffering for their private purposes and of destroying the community that was Eastern Nigeria" (P.10); just as he indicts many other key personalities including Yakubu Gowon whom he says sat atop a "pyramid of mismanagement" after the war (P.242). But all this is done within the context of a rigorous and passionate analysis of the structure and superstructure of the Nigerian state. If therefore the narrative is forceful it is because it canvasses a different perspective long suppressed or simply unacknowledged by dominant narratives both of the war and of post-war Nigeria; and if it is accusatory it is precisely

because the memoir deals with the subject of the oppression and subjugation of minority peoples of which the writer is himself a part.

Viewed in the above context therefore, Ileoje's criticism (cited earlier) of the "adversarial language" of *On a Darkling plain* is again inaccurate and lacks contextual grounding. The apparent aggressivity of a marginal narrative such Saro-Wiwa's, or what Foucault calls the "harshness with which it is opposed to everything that surrounds it" is part of a vast miscellany of discursive strategies employed by a choir of minority writers as they engage with the over-riding discourses that seek so relentlessly to marginalize and repress them.

If as Pierre Macheray (1978:39,42) once observed a work of art "does not develop at random, in undiscriminating freedom," but is framed and determined at every level by a range of impulses and experiences, then it is easy to see Ken Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain* as a narrative of radical anger. This is so because for most minority writers art is not a mere rootless phantasmagorical journey. It is seen as an immutable mandate – a duty to imaginatively re-unite a people with the very particularities of their lives. This means, in other words, that all the aesthetic realia we find everywhere evident in the writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa are in fact imaginative refractions of the harsh discursive realities which confront his Ogoni and other minority peoples in Nigeria. Seen in this way, it becomes clear to us why the shrill narrative voice forms a part of the semiology of resistance linking those who are

forced to form the huge bottom heap of discourse and those who seek to oppress them from above.

Throughout his narrative, Saro-Wiwa writes the name of the breakaway country in a small letter – "biafra". This is a technique obviously used by the writer to demonstrate his strong rejection of the idea of the secession of Eastern Nigeria from the Federation. Ken Saro-Wiwa always accuses Eastern regional leaders of struggling for freedom from the perceived oppression of the rest of Nigeria, while denying freedom to the non-Ibo minority communities in the Eastern region. The de-alphabeticalization of "biafra" in his narrative may thus be interpreted as the writer's artistic vengeance, his attempt to deny political legitimacy and textual prominence to what he saw as a separatist enclave of unfreedom.

Further, because Saro-Wiwa neither supported the war nor the logics underlying the conflict, the story of *On a Darkling Plain* is a narrative conveyed in biting, Swiftian sarcasm. The target of this attack is invariably the Nigerian political elite, but particularly Ojukwu the biafran rebel leader whose role he lampoons pitilessly. We find such use of sarcasm by the writer in the passage below where he reports the prevailing mood in the East concerning proposed peace talks with the federal government, in Ghana:

> At the University Of Nigeria, to which I had relocated early in the New

> Year, opinion among the Ibo was divided. Some felt Ojukwu should not attend – he had nothing to discuss with the "brutes"; others thought that he should attend to talk sense into them – *Ojukwu being the sole repository of available wisdom at the time* (61, Italics, mine).

Throughout the narrative, Ojukwu is presented and derided as the ambitious, calculating but ultimately cowardly anti-hero of the war.

However, despite his opposition to the armed rebellion and its leaders, Saro-Wiwa demonstrates candour by acknowledging the great inventiveness and ingenuity shown by the rebel forces both in combat and in weapons-making, even in the most difficult of circumstances. We see evidence of the writer's sincere canduor as he narrates his impression on arriving at a scene of war, in the outskirts of Bonny:

> On the Coconut Estate were abandoned several home-made armoured cars – the so-called Red Devils – which, crude as they were, remained a tribute to the ingenuity and creativity of the rebels. If it was impressive that they had been able to fashion this crude monstrosity out of tractors, more so was the fact that they had been able to transport them from wherever it was they were made, through the marshes and swamps into the Coconut Estate where they constituted a menace to the defenders of Bonny (158).

The ocean-town of Bonny was Saro-Wiwa's first port of call en route to Lagos as a refugee when he fled his native town of Bori which was then under rebel control. It is a striking irony of fate that Saro-Wiwa who was a hapless refugee in the war-ravaged Bonny could return months later to the same town as its political administrator, helping to alleviate the refugee crisis there. Perhaps it is this personal experience of the writer as a refugee that affords his story that touchingly compassionate and humanitarian tone which we feel at those junctures of his narrative where he recounts the human toll of the war.

Throughout his narrative, in a manner consistent with marginal discourses, the writer expresses sympathy towards the ordinary people who are the victims of a war spawned by the anarchy of ambitions of military politicians. We are moved to share his concern and compassion when he reports that: "Traders had raised prices. A bag of salt which normally cost ten shillings had risen tenfold to five pounds or more. Hardship was being caused the common people" (99). If we sense a tone of positive despair towards the end of the narrative therefore it is because the writer observes that the lessons of such a monumental human tragedy appear to have gone unheeded.

Narratives such as Ken Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain* are important because

they not only represent a mutiny of marginal memory against hegemonic representation; but also because they re-authorize history by projecting versions of events submerged in time. For these narratives, the intention is never to foil history but to enrich it by aligning history's "main" parts with its fragments. By flinging wide the gates of memory to accommodate the many muted accounts of micro-narratives, minoritarian discourses enable us to overcome the pressures and dangers of amnesia.