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

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CHAPTER ONE

Ken Saro-Wiwa, Petro-Politics and the Grammar of Minority Citizenship in Nigeria

"Nationalism is an infantile sickness. It is the measles of the human race"

– Albert Einstein, *The World as I see it*, 1934.

Introduction:

One humid afternoon on May 21, 1994 in the community of Giokoo, Ogoni, in the South Eastern coast of Nigeria, four prominent Ogoni elders – Albert Badey, Edward Kobani, Samuel Orage and Theophilus Orage were seized in a riotous public rally and killed by an irate mob who accused them of consorting with the Nigerian Military Government against the interests of the Ogoni community.

Hours later, Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa (known popularly as Ken Saro-Wiwa), minority rights activist, dramatist and respected writer, was arrested by the General Abacha military junta and charged with incitement to murder, and murder**.** Saro-Wiwa was many miles away from the scene of the crime and was heading in the opposite direction in his car, having been barred at a military roadblock from attending the rally.

After over a year of detention during which he was tortured and held in leg chains, a special tribunal was convened by the junta to try Ken Saro-Wiwa and fifteen other Ogoni compatriots. Decree No.2, the special military law under which the accused persons were tried, permitted no appeal. During the trial itself, Ken Saro-Wiwa's 91year old father who had come to see his son was assaulted; the defense lawyers were similarly repeatedly assaulted by security operatives forcing them to withdraw from the trial in protest (Femi Falana and Jiti Ogunye, 1998:251-298).

Thus without legal representation, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others were sentenced to death on November 2nd 1995. Despite unprecedented local and international outrage over the sham trials, at 11.30am, November 10, 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa, John Kpuinen, Barine Kiobel, Baribor Bera, Nordu Eawo, Paul Levura, Daniel Gbookoo, Saturday Doobee and Felix Nuate, were hanged in a local prison on the orders of General Sani Abacha.

International reactions to the executions were spontaneous. Countries recalled their ambassadors from Nigeria, the country was suspended from The Commonwealth of Nations; John Major, the British Prime Minister at the time, described the executions as "judicial murder" and the military tribunal as "a fraudulent trial, a bad verdict, an unjust sentence". (Ken Wiwa, 2002:2). South Africa's President Nelson Mandela condemned it as "a cruel and callous

execution…"[1] Other world leaders including President Clinton and the Queen of England declared the hangings as illegal. All around the world, candlelit vigils were held at Nigerian embassies and at Shell offices and oil stations, in protest.

Ken Saro-Wiwa had been a tireless campaigner against Royal Dutch Shell, the transnational oil conglomerate, for its devastation of the Ogoni ecology while prospecting for oil, and against the Nigerian State for denying oil bearing minority communities their rights to equity and justice.

In order to ease administrative and financial control, the British colonialists had from 1898-1914 created the Nigerian state by forcing historically autonomous ethnic nationalities into a unified administrative entity without any form of cooperative consent (Tekena Tamuno, 1992). The disparate cultures, religions, languages, and geographical sizes of the federating ethnic identities within the nation have sparked vicious rivalries between the three largest ethnic groups namely, the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo, in a triangular contest for power. The discovery of oil in the minority Niger Delta wetlands in the 1950s by Shell, leads to the emergence of a petrolic discourse (Michael Watts, 1997: 33-67) and the menacing hegemony of a State entirely dependent on petrodollar rents. Together, both discourses move to scuttle the identitarian and libertarian tussles by

[1] Nelson Mandela quoted in *A Month and a Day & Letters*, (2005) Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, P.192.

oil-bearing minority ethnic communities for political autonomy, resource and ecological control.

The oppositional discourses enacted by Ken Saro-Wiwa on behalf of the Ogoni people tend mainly to transgress and rupture these despotic discourses by creating differentiated sites of power, where ethnic minority communities valorize equity, freedom and difference. Often, as Femi Osofisan (1997:2) tells us, the articulateness of art is "a dual and problematic mandate". Art has either to collude or collide with hegemony. By constructing a disidentificatory narrative through which he inscribes a new community of values and meanings, Ken Saro-Wiwa's art collides with power. And even as the State tries finally to shackle his narrative, in his last letter smuggled out of prison to his friend the British writer, William Boyd (William Boyd, 1995: xiiv), Saro-Wiwa had said: "…the most important thing for me is that I've used my talents as a writer to enable the Ogoni people to confront their tormentors. I was not able to do it as a politician or as a businessman. My writing did it…I think I have the moral victory".

Until his gruesome execution by the military authorities in Nigeria in November 1995, the writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa represented something of a discursive scourge on the tyranny of power. In text after text, Saro-Wiwa had sought to expose and undercut those dominant structures of power which decentre and nominalize the weak, and those who live their lives in forced margins.

Since dominant discursive practice denies and excludes marginalized experience from its scope of representation, Ken Saro-Wiwa has had to inscribe his difference as a minority by plotting a distinctive narrative map which gives voice and representational impetus to minority plight. Throughout his works, we find a certain serial intentionality in the manner he handles his narrative matter in order to express a distinctive experience. From the way he moulds and psychologizes his characters to the manner he distorts orthodox linguistic protocols in order to capture their experience, Saro-Wiwa's writings seek to free minority experience from a discursive bondage.

In this work, therefore, I intend to establish and explore the synonymic affinities between Ken Saro-Wiwa's narrative strategies and the minority experience that he strives to express. In particular, I propose to deconstruct those organizing structures of concern namely, the political and physical decimation of minorities by despotic regimes and oil interests in Nigeria, the retrenchment of egalitarian values in society, the subjugation of women by dominant patriarchal cultures, etc, which engage the writer, and to examine the artistic responses inscribed in his pages.

Finally, using Saro-Wiwa's works, we shall examine the power of discourse to challenge political marginalization and textual erasure of minority experience.

Among others, there are three basic justifications for this study. The denial of the distinctive identity and experience of minorities by hegemonic discourses is both a repressive act and a de-historicizing gesture. If dominant discourse is programmatically subversive of cultural pluralism, the materiality of history and an integrative representation of diverse human experiences, then we are justified to look beyond the resulting culturalist sclerosis by examining the alternative aesthetic possibilities charted by a counter-discourse – minority discourse – which focuses on diversity, resistance, repudiation and cultural freedom.

And in doing so, it is important that we scrutinize how minority writers are negotiating their relations with dominant thought by re-territorializing their narrative in a manner which valorizes their own experience and history. In a sense then, this critical inquiry is very much like rowing into the tributaries and creeks of narrative in order to hear and find the vigorous and insistent voices which could not be found in the open sea of dominant poetics.

But there is an even more compelling reason for the present work. After the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight other compatriots, there were widespread reports, undenied reports, that acid was spilled on their corpses in order to accelerate their decomposition. Their unmarked graves at the Port Harcourt cemetery were thereafter also guarded by armed military troops for nearly a year.

Barely a month after the hangings Ken Saro-Wiwa's books were also removed from the reading lists of all schools in Nigeria (Falana and Ogunye: 294).

These symbolic and decisive acts of the junta to deface and inter dissent have sparked humanitarian outrage worldwide. But they have also created a discursive site where historians, lawyers, environmentalists, rights activists, scientists, literary scholars and other culture workers converge to enter into a crucial dialogue, each in their own way, with the ideas and vision of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

I intend through this work to intervene in this dialogue, by examining how the writings and other discursive practices of Ken Saro-Wiwa transgress hegemonic regimes of power by constructing an alternative logic of discourse, which valorize equity, freedom and difference.

Further, throughout the twists and turns of his life as a minority rights activist and a writer against terror, Ken Saro-Wiwa trudged often on harm's way and felt the close presence of death. But never relenting, shunning exile, Saro-Wiwa chooses instead to allegorize and even appropriate death itself as his final narrative act. In the final sections of this work, therefore, I theorize that the spectre and premonitions of death as are found everywhere in his writings serve as creative fire, stoking and energizing Ken Saro-Wiwa's discourse and the righteousness of his vision till the final hour. Through his death and the manner of it, I argue, Ken

Saro-Wiwa succeeds in foisting upon us something of a hypertext to which we must return again and again, as we try to comprehend the logic enacted by his practices.

My aim throughout this work, will be to reach the critical synthesis that although Ken Saro-Wiwa sets out to tell the tale of his oppressed Ogoni people, he succeeds finally in constructing an important kind of fiduciary narrative, usable and relevant to all oppressed people around the world.

Narration and the Debris of Marginality:

Because of the important identitarian dimension and the centrality of ethnic experience and history in the writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the minority discourse theory will provide the critical scaffold for framing our analysis. The minority discursive space is, as we shall see, a multi-stranded one. It embraces ethnic minority, gay, lesbian, oriental, Black, postcolonial and feminist discursive practices. All of these discursive strands are, in spite of their internal particularities, ultimately aligned by a critical cardinal energy: resistance to domination and a strident valorization of difference.

Although heterogeneous and polyvocal, most intensely imagined minority discursive practices enlist a vast range of formal strategies such as rejection of totalizing discourses, the interrogation of subjugative systems of knowledge, the

valorization of history and the materiality of experience; and the recognition of these as important sites of narrative contest. We also find in minoritarian discourses suspicion of the protocols of 'standard' linguistic forms and a demonstrated preference for deviationist forms of language. But even where 'standard' linguistic forms are used, we sometimes find an unhidden syntax of opposition and subversion within the linguistic structures of usage. Chinua Achebe (1988:50) captures the spirit of this subversive aesthetic tactic in his memorable cautionary quip: "And let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it".

Another important tenet of minoritarian discourses is their discursive sensitivity to exclusion and the textual erasure of minority experience (Vincent B. Leitch, 1992). To write as a minority, then, is to interrupt and disturb this process of textual exclusion found in hegemonic discourses, by inscribing alternative imaginative sites of representation where they attempt to reclaim their identity and valorize their difference. As Simon Gikandi (1992:305) notes, for the marginalized "to write is to claim a text of one's own; textuality is an instrument of territorial possession".

This is so because always, narrative bears the freight of power. To narrate is to tell a story, but since stories compel belief in the myths, histories, worldviews, habits and suppositions which they enact, stories become inexorable sites both for the

inscription of power and the contest for power. Among social groups in society, then, narrative is an intensely contested terrain for to be outside of story is to be thrown discursively outside the pale of history, and to be representationally subjugated.

So pervasive and powerful, in fact, is the essence of narrative that every human social activity: from those banal quibbles over marriage and divorce, sex and impotence, order and disorder in society, quarrels over land, to notions of superiority and inferiority, and even invasion and resistance – all these are instigated and then supported by the imaginative structures of narrative. For example, Edward Said (1993: xiii) in commenting on the centrality of narrative in the European colonial invasion of foreign lands and peoples and the resistance which followed, observes that although the battle of imperialism was over land, "…but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back and who now plans it's future – these issues are reflected, contested and even for a time decided in narrative".

To dominate weaker groups and construct a social and cultural milieu reflective and appropriate to their own interests, dominant groups formulate perceptions, institutions, codes and conventions, which while affirming their putative superiority, simultaneously inferiorizes the Other. Indeed following and modifying Richard Terdiman (1985), I will argue that of all totalizing discourses the 'nation'

is the most dominant both as a ‘naturalized’ locus of identity formulation and as a narrated artifact. Here, then, I propose to interrogate how a nation’s – in this case Nigeria’s – dominant rhetoric of cultural and identitarian homology masks and subjugates the differences within, and how the libertarian counter-discourses enacted by the Ogoni transgress and unsettle those dominant notions. The broad range of processes by which perceptions of power are discursively constructed is what Michel Foucault (1977:200) describes as “discursive practices”.

According to Foucault “ discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse, they are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns of general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which at once impose and maintain them.” As discourses of power, hegemonic narratives tend to construct a dichotomous universe of opposites: of self and Other, majority and minority, speech and silence, civilization and barbarism, good and evil, light and night; and seeks always to project it’s perceptions as naturalized and yet repressive of the Other.

This explains why Abdul Jan Mohammed (1985: 59-87) following Frantz Fanon (1968), in his study of the strategic interstices of colonialist discourse, harps repeatedly on its oppressive and Manichaean character as a discourse which thrives on the creation of binary images. As Jan Mohammed puts it “the fetishizing strategy and the allegorical mechanism not only permit a rapid

exchange of denigrating images which can be used to maintain a sense of moral difference, they also allow the writer to transform social and historical dissimilarities into universal, metaphysical differences”(68). The seeming irremediable difference between the self and the Other, justifies the negation of the Other.

The phenomenon of marginality is thus a cultural construct enacted by dominant groups to achieve two simultaneous purposes: to differentiate the unfamiliar, and to negate it. The former is always a justification for the latter. Once differentiated, the unfamiliar identity becomes in dominant thought the marginal Other which is at once strange, inferior, and oppressed.

Elleke Boehmer (1995) in explaining the crucial binarism between the dominant and the Other, defines the Other as signifying that which is strange to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which authority is often measured. At the core of the phenomenon of *otherness* then is its seemingly irrevocable tangentiality to the main imaginative canvas of hegemonic thought processes. Indeed, the process of *Othering* may take myriad forms: racial, sexual, cultural, numerical, linguistic, military, economic, ethnic, religious, etc. But frequently, it takes quite a string of forms all at once in order to forge a solidly integrated basis for perception of difference and the exclusion of the Other.

For Europe, for example, the basic organizing difference between it and other peoples of the world is its racial superiority over them. Driven by this feeling of its own superiority, Europe evolves perceptions which demean and inferiorize others. In cognizing Africa and its peoples for instance, classical European thought sees the African as only slightly higher than animals, but definitely lower than human beings. The eighteenth century philosopher, Immanuel Kant's popular taxonomy of the races, (quoted in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze 1997: 103-140), clearly typifies this European racist attitudinizing.

To be sure, the notion of European racial superiority over other races long predates Kant, and was one of the important fundaments on which rested the whole historical venture of European colonization of other lands, peoples and cultures. As in colonial material practices, colonialist imaginative discourses also have myths of racial superiority embedded in them. In his influential reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe (1988:2) speaks of the need in Western psychology "to set Africa up as a foil to Europe…a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked in triumphant bestiality". In his *Orientalism* (1978) and later in the more radical "Orientalism Reconsidered" (1986), Edward Said has also offered penetrating insights into the totalizing discourses of the West and of its misrepresentation of Arabs and the religion of Islam.

However, as counter-narrative forms, the broad range of postcolonial discourses have aimed to interrogate Europe's self-representations and of its representation of Others. These discourses tend to re-imagine the colonialist dialectic and to, crucially, resubjectivize the Other. Indeed we shall examine closely in this study how the sustained and pitiless environmental war waged by Royal Dutch Shell on the people and land of the Ogoni, may be understood as a part of an intricate plethora of its racial Othering of the land of indigenous peoples, and how the myriad discursive practices of Ken Saro-Wiwa on behalf of the Ogoni people may be interpreted as counter-narrative acts.

Indeed, if minority discourses emerge as an attempt by subjugated groups and individuals to challenge and overcome their discursive silencing, then Ken Saro-Wiwa's literary and other activist interventions constitute such a discourse because they are articulated on behalf of non-authoritative groups inhabiting subjugated locations within Nigeria's political and cultural polity. In the context of Nigeria's representational and distributive politics the Ogonis and other Delta communities suffer clear numeric, economic, cultural and political disadvantages in relation to such dominant groups as the Hausa, Igbo and the Yoruba who control all meaningful structures of power.

Even where there is a 'democratization of oppression' – when the common peoples from every section of Nigeria suffer from generalized oppression, poverty

and misrule – the minority oil-bearing communities still face the unique plight of environmental degradation arising from the prospecting and drilling activities of oil companies. Consequently, special military and supernumerary crack teams hardly used in other parts of Nigeria are regularly deployed to quell the various forms of resistance that are organized by these communities. Ken Saro-Wiwa's counter-narrative practices are important because they stand in opposition to errant power, challenging hegemonic thought to accommodate the reality as well as the promise of life in the margins.

The basis for Othering, when rooted in gender difference, leads to the subjugative notion of the woman as the "weaker sex". Most cultures of the world are patriachally arranged in a manner which hold women in perpetual servitude, and make them the target of phallocentric violence. Be it in politics, religion, and commerce or in other material practices, women are bracketed from assuming responsibilities or roles considered only "appropriate" for men. From the ancient philosopher Aristotle (quoted in Oshadi Mangena, 2000: 173-195), who once posited that women are biologically inferior to men because they lack the force from which life originates, to the dehumanizing cultural practice of mutilating female genitalia in order to control the purported excess of sexual passion of the female person, dominant male discursive practices tend to construct a relegative reality in which women are projected as sub-human and inferior to men. This male sexist attitudinizing is central to the tension that characterizes the material and

discursive contest in which men and women are involved in society. At stake, is the power of representation, of identity construction, with culture serving as always as the location of struggle.

Women in recognizing that there is, in fact, nothing in their *difference* that inherently inferiorizes them, challenge their marginalization by interrogating dominant male suppositions and treatment of women as Others. In reconstructing the historical origins of women domination in the world, for instance, Donna Harraway (see Christina Crosby, 1992:138) has observed that "there is nothing about 'being' a female that naturally binds women", she identifies patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism as the social practices energizing female subordination in society. The struggle against patriarchy begun with the formulation of the feminist philosophy since the 17th century in Europe became a watershed in the early 20th century with the appearance on the scene of women rights and liberation movements in Europe, Africa and other lands around the world.

As a counter-discourse, feminism has many facets namely, radical feminism, eco-feminism, femalism, womanism, motherism, Gynysm, etc., depending on the critical temper and cultural location of its proponents. But its organizing aim is to undercut male dominance by asserting the humanity and worth of the female person. Since dominant patriarchal discourse tends to silence and bracket-off female experience to the margins of narrative, most feminist narratives reverse this

tactic by valorizing difference and giving voice and centrality to female experience. As an imaginative way of re-ordering perception and constructing a positive female identity, feminist writers accord leadership roles to women characters such as we find in works like Tess Onwueme's *The Reign Of Wazobia* (1988), in which women are placed in vantage positions in order to inaugurate a just and gender-equal society. But in Flora Nwapa's *Women Are Different* (1986), and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero* (1992) among a host of others, we have also seen instances of feminist artistic revenge against the male, of reverse attitudinizing in which male representations have been chauvinistic and demeaning. The appearance in 1990 of Chinweizu's controversial book: *The Anatomy of Female Power: a Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy* has further complicated the gender debate and demonstrated the resilience of patriarchy as a hegemonic discourse.

As has been noted, hegemonic discourses are at once self-centred and hostile to experiences outside their own frame of reference. Indeed wherever we find a massive hierachizing of experience, we also almost inevitably find silence, absence, darkness, wilderness or other such narratological ellipsis used as tropes of substitution wherever minority experience should be.

But, paradoxically, by subjugating Others, dominant discourse opens up spaces of vulnerability in its narrative territory which are invaded by the transgressive

practices of counter-narratives. It is within this vulnerable opening that minoritarian discourses actualize that need to overcome their silence and to inscribe a different story. Thus, as silence is a cardinal narrative strategy against the Other in dominant discourses, so is non-silence a strategic discursive maneuver against domination in minority discourses.

It is possible, I think, to theorize minority discourse as something of a discursive nemesis to dominant discourse itself. If hegemonic practice is a painful discursive boil on the body of an afflicted but potentially liberating discourse, the surgical aim of minority discourses is to tenderize and lance that boil and let the afflicted free. Usually present in the surgical toolbox of minoritarian discourses are such artistic denizens as metaphor, revision, humour, satire, substitution, repudiation, sarcasm, repetition, subversion, shrillness of narrative voice and "other relations too numerous to mention", to quote a popular Nigerian obituary cliché. Since dominant discourse operates mainly in the night of its oppressive logic, minority discourses cannot but conduct their "surgical operation" in the blinding beam of history.

Homi Bhabha (1990: 305) likens the strategy of intervention of minority discourses to the supplementary question in a parliamentary procedure. It is a question that comes 'after' or 'in addition to' what is put down on the order paper and thus introduces a sense of 'secondariness' to the structure of the original.

According to Bhabha, “the supplementary strategy interrupts the successive seriality of the narrative of plurals and pluralities by radically changing their mode of articulation”.

One of the most dominant structures of subjugation is the “nation-state”. Through its vast structures of power, namely, its educational institutions, parliaments, constitution, judiciary, the armed forces, etc, and its other symbolic maneuvers – the national anthem, notions of nationalism and patriotism – the state imposes uniformity of perception around practices agreeable and in harmony with dominant groups which hold and exercise power within it. (See: Richard Terdiman1985, Hein Marais 2001). Its dominance over other weaker fragmentary dissenting groups in society is what Antonio Gramsci (1971) calls hegemony – a very pervasive and oppressive discourse.

As Noam Choamsky (2002:313-317) notes, what characterizes the nation-state, is the concentration of power within specific dominant groups who deploy it often oppressively in relation to weaker oppositional groups wherever they may be located within the national space. The ability of a discourse to persuade or coarse fragmentary groups across vast swathes of territory “where practices would otherwise be conditioned by narratives, discourses and theories deriving from greatly different interpretive tradition to diverse regional experience” is what Richard Peet calls a narrative’s *hegemonic extent* (2002:28-54).

In Africa, the State as a dominant entity is encountered by the ordinary people and minority groups as a malevolent force. Its purposes are to oppress, disempower and to demean the weak. As Achille Mbembe (2001:103) has observed, in the African postcolony the state creates around its administrative and other practices, "… a world of meanings all its own – a master code which, while in the process of becoming the society's primary central code, ends by governing … the various logics that underlie all other meanings within that society".

Indeed as the travails of oil-bearing communities such as the Ogoni in Nigeria clearly dramatize; liberty, cultural freedom, self-determination and justice are still unused even forbidden terms in the vocabulary of social and discursive relations in the Nigerian postcolony. Here, the state seems to spin only on the calculus of power and its totalizing logic tends to aggress any form of plurality of thought. In Nigeria, the state is an insufferable deadweight on the aspirations of the different ethnic and cultural identities within it. And predictably, this has led to the emergence of ethnic oppositional struggles for freedom such as are enacted by Ken Saro-Wiwa on behalf of the Ogoni people.

The organizing relevance of Ken Saro-Wiwa's discourse, lies in its attempt to inaugurate a liberating 'secondariness' to the oppressive logic of the state, by rupturing the 'nation's' imagined homology and offering a fragmentary point of

view. This strategy resonates with the view of Gyanendra Pandey who in his “In defense of fragments” (cited in Parther Chatterjee, 1993), says:

> Part of the importance of the “fragmentary” point of view lies in this, that it resists the drive for a shallow homogenization and struggles for other, potentially richer definitions of the “ nation” and the future political community (P. x)

This is so because once a nation seeks to repress the heterogeneous tendencies that exist within it, it ceases to be a nation but becomes what Wole Soyinka (1996) calls a mere cameo of personalities, with individuals and groups caught in tussles of self-definition.

By emphasizing a new grammar of discourse which de-normalizes the state’s basic nationalist historiography, Ken Saro-Wiwa creates a different discursive territory in which an alternative rhetoric of nationhood is *thinkable*. This rhetoric is anchored on the hinges of ethnic difference and liberty *within* the ‘nation’. Indeed, it is necessary to emphasize the ‘withinness’ of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s discourse for ultimately, no discourse can stand alone in unaffected isolation but must relate and interact with other narratives. In its complicated negotiation with dominant discourse, then, Saro-Wiwa’s discursive practices tend to pick between

delicate beaks, to paraphrase Achebe, tidbits from hegemonic practice itself and strive to mediate these with the equally urgent necessity for discursive difference.

This, it seems, is the discursive quagmire and challenge faced by all minoritarian narratives, namely, the contradictory task of dredging out a fresh notion of difference from the oppressive sludge of narrative sameness. Chatterjee in his book *A Nation and its Fragments* (1993) appears to be hinting at this discursive quagmire when he observes that after subverting the totalizing claims of nationalist hegemony:

> Now the task is to trace in their mutually conditioned historicities the specific forms that have appeared, on the one hand, in the domain defined by the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity, and on the other, in the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing project. (P13).

On Ken Saro–Wiwa, the Ogoni and the Death of Culture:

Ken Saro-Wiwa was born in October, 1941 in Ogoni, Rivers State, Nigeria. The Ogoni are a distinct ethnic group with a population of about half a million people, and they inhabit the coastal plains north of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Ogoni are made up of the following kingdoms, namely: Babbe, Gokanna, Ken-khanna, Nyo-khanna and Tai and Eleme.

Oil was discovered in Ogoni in 1958, by Royal Dutch Shell-known in Nigeria as Shell Petroleum Development Company, (SPDC). There are in Ogoni alone, ninety six (96) oil wells connected to five oil fields where oil has been mined since 1958 fetching the multinational oil firm, Shell, and the Nigerian state revenue in excess of thirty billion US dollars[2]. This is exclusive of oil resources exploited from hundreds of other communities spread across the Niger Delta wetlands. The exploitation of oil, has led to continuous gas flares and oil spills and blow-outs, extensively degrading and devastating the environment of the indigenous people. Plants, aquatic and other life forms have been affected effectively destroying the source of sustenance and livelihood of the local people who are mainly subsistent farmers and fisher-folks.

According to Claude Ake (1996: 40) in his article "Shelling Nigeria Ablaze" at temperatures "1,300 to 1,400 degree centigrade, the multitude of flares in the Delta heat up everything causing noise pollution and producing $S0_2$, VO_C, carbon dioxide and Nox and particulates around the clock". With 12 million tons of methane released a year from flaring, Ake contends that "Nigerian oil fields contribute more in global warming than the rest of the world put together". There are innumerable well-documented reports on the ecological damage done to the oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta, by Shell and a host of oil concerns

[2] See Ken Saro-Wiwa's interview "We will defend Our Oil with our Blood" in *Tell* magazine (Nigeria) 8 February 1993.

prospecting for oil in the area (See for instance: Patrick Fregene, 2000: 111-121, Linus Nwauzi, 2000: 133-143, Festus Iyayi, 2000: 151-178, Odia Ofemun, 2000: 66-72, Concerned Ilaje citizens, 2000: 144-149, Ike Osadebe Onyenwenwa, 2000: 122-132). And although rich in mineral resources, most of these communities including those of Ogoni lack even the most basic amenities such as pipe borne water, electricity, health centres and schools. Indeed as whole communities are frequently evacuated or invariably migrate to other places due to oil blowouts and slicks, cultural life in the Niger Delta is the most disrupted and school enrolment the lowest in Nigeria.

In effect, the Ogoni are caught between two hegemonic structures of power, namely first: Shell and Chevron and other companies which reap huge profits prospecting for oil and gas in the area without conducting any environmental or social impact assessment for the past forty (50) years, turning the area into a wasteland. And their petro-dollar ally, a subjugative Nigerian state which representationally excludes the Ogoni from its administrative and bureaucratic practices, deploys armed troops to violently quell protests, legislates against its interests and desecrates its sacred places. The lives and charred ecology of the Ogoni document the pitiless exploitation of a people by what Andrew Apter (1998: 121-160) has called the “vampire state”.

It were precisely these discourses, of the suppression of minorities, of the brazen corruption among the ruling elite, the erosion of egalitarian values, the environmental degradation by Shell's oil practices, etc, that the writings and other discursive practices of Ken Saro-Wiwa sought to engage and challenge.

In all, Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote over 20 books in all genres of literature, and created, produced and directed Nigeria's most-loved and much-praised television comedy series, "Basi and Company", which was watched by over 30 million viewers, and ran for a record period of five years between 1985 and 1990. In his tribute on behalf of the selection jury of the Fonlon-Nichol Prize, Bernth Lindfors (1998: 195-197) describes Ken Saro-Wiwa as a "Literary Dynamo" who pleaded the cause of the oppressed in the most conspicuous arenas (196). And Abiola Irele (1998: 255-267) has called Ken Saro-Wiwa "…a major new figure of our (Nigerian) national literature" (267). As more and more critics acknowledge after his death, Ken Saro-Wiwa's contribution to world literature has been phenomenal. In some of his books such as *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (1989), *Prisoners of Jebs* (1989), *Pita Dumbrooks Prison* (1991), *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1986), *Lemona's Tale* (1994) and others, including his journalistic writings collected in *Similia: Essays on Anomic Nigeria* (1991) and *Nigeria: The Brink of Disaster* (1991), we shall examine how Ken Saro-Wiwa engages with the politics of representation of minority experience, the retrenchment of moral and egalitarian values in society, the specter of political

corruption in the post-colony, the place of history in discourse and the politics of English language use, among other concerns.

Although most of Saro-Wiwa's narratives deal with issues of domination and marginalization in their various discursive forms, we focus on the above texts because we believe them to be most representative of the writer's treatment of these concerns. It is in these narratives that Saro-Wiwa's responses as a writer and activist are perhaps also most clearly defined and articulated.

For example, in *On a Darkling Plain*, his memoir on the Nigerian civil war, Saro-Wiwa relives the events of what is perhaps the darkest chapter in Nigeria's history, paying particular attention to the plight of oil-bearing minority communities during the war. Saro-Wiwa challenges dominant representations of the war by producing counter-factual histories which lead us to a fuller understanding of that unhappy event. In studying this text, then, my interest will be to examine how history serves as a contested terrain, and how the writer ruptures hegemonic systems of knowledge by gazing at history through the prism of marginality.

Iloeje (2000: 107-122) has complained about "the capriciousness of the narrative voice" in *On Darkling a Plain*, and the "…vehemence and trenchance of Saro-Wiwa's views…"(P.108-9), in spite of what he considers the period of reconciliation and forgiveness. But I will argue that the shrillness of the narrative

voice is indeed a part of the plethora of discursive strategies associated with minoritarian discourses as they try to engage with the discursively "deaf" structures of power, which marginalize and decentre them. Ken Saro-Wiwa himself once hinted at the appropriateness of this technique to his kind of oppositional discourse when he said elsewhere (1994:6), that "The Ogoni are so far down the well that only by shouting loudly can they be heard by those at the surface of the soil". The images invoked by Ken Saro-Wiwa's metaphors: "down the well" and "surface of the soil" have interesting semiotic link with the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discursive practices which form the focus of our work, and will be examined accordingly.

In *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa' fictional narrative on the Nigerian civil war, the writer tells the story of a young army recruit who volunteers to fight in the war in a dangerous bid to prove his bravery to his friends, and to win the respect of his community. The massive human carnage and social dislocation associated with war are processed and concretized by the writer mainly through the bitter experiences of Mene, the narrative's eponymous character.

Because of its engaging storyline and well-paced execution, *Sozaboy* has won widespread critical acclaim. The British critic and writer William Boyd (1995: ix) has said *Sozaboy* is "among the very best of the twentieth century" (see also: Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1992: 53-63, Helen Chukwuma, 1992: 39-52, Adetayo Alabi,

1998: 307-318). But what has attracted the attention of critics the most is the novel's language of narration. Subtitled "A Novel in Rotten English", Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* is narrated in surburban variety of English which reflects the limited education of Mene, the narrator. In a useful way, Augustine Okere, 1992: 9-15, Asonwam Adagboyin, 1992: 30-38, and Doris Akekue 1992:16-29, among others, have dwelt on the notional and grammatical interstices of Saro-Wiwa's experimental language.

But in studying this text, I focus attention on how the writer narrativizes the perils of war by using what I call "Anomaly" as his main aesthetic machinery of representation. I argue that by deliberately creating a catatonic narrative with irregular and transgressive characters emerging as anti-heroes, the writer strives to underrate the dominant notion of war as a logical facet of politics. Since irregular characters often operate in territories outside the control of dominant signs and practices, I examine how even deviationist patterns of language are pressed into useful artistic service in the anomalous world of war.

In *Lemona'*s *Tale*, Ken Saro-Wiwa engages with the phenomenon of female subjugation in society, through the bitter experiences of Lemona the central female character of the novel. Most cultures in the world are patriachally arranged in a manner which silence and dehumanize women. Our particular concern here, then, would be to examine how the writer abrogates the trope of silence and absence by

narrativizing the marginality of women through the eyes and voices of women themselves.

In his two political satires *Prisoners of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrooks Prison*, Ken Saro-Wiwa satirizes political corruption and the apparent moral normlessness prevalent in most African states, but with particular focus on Nigeria. Here, what makes Ken Saro-Wiwa's representation of corruption in the *Prisoners of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrook's prison* markedly striking is that the writer transcends general thematic declarations of this debilitating malaise, by revealing its inner specificities such as the phenomenon of ethnic cronyism which is one of the vital touchstones of political corruption in Nigeria. It seems that just as the contest and control of political power reflects dominant ethnic identities, so too does the eventual sharing of the spoils of office. Since there are many artistic projections of majority ethnic triumphalism and minority subjugation in these novels, I will explore this dialectic in greater detail as an index of power relations among the groups; and then examine its place within the larger corpus of the Saro-Wiwan aesthetics. Moreover, we shall see how the writer uses insurgent characters to challenge what I shall term "the hegemony of corruption" in the world of these novels.

As a writer with a commitment to equity and minority people's rights, Ken Saro-Wiwa canvasses his views in the most conspicuous domains, particularly in the

popular press. This made him one of Nigeria's best-known political journalists. He retained regular columns in such reputable Newspapers as the *Sunday Times* and *The Vanguard,* and his journalism appeared in many other newspapers in Nigeria. For his views (particularly on the ethnic nationality question) and the courageous directness with which he expressed them, Ken Saro-Wiwa became one of Nigeria's most controversial political commentators. His journalistic essays are collected in two volumes under two different titles, namely: *Similia: Essays on Anomic Nigeria* and *Nigeria: The Brink of Disaster*. Thirty three (33) out of fifty-six (56) essays in *Similia* and eighteen (18) in thirty-four (34) essays in *Brink of Disaster,* center on the ethnic nationality question and reflect his perspectives on the vexing debate on ethnic minority oppression and resistance in Nigeria. Saro-Wiwa's journalism, though not directly part of our focus here, forms an important part of his disidentificatory discourse against dominant thought. But readerly responses to the writer's ideas on the "nation" are sometimes entangled in the notches of identity politics in Nigeria.

For example, Femi Ojo-Ade's (1999:231-257) commentary on the *Similia* essays is too generalized and does not dwell particularly on the question of subjugation of ethnic minorities by dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria. Even where he does, his critique is, in this instance, short in analytic rigour but long in emotionalism as he accuses Saro-Wiwa of "mean ignorance and repugnant conservatism." (P.248). Here, as he tries to defend dominant Yoruba position in the power equation in

Nigeria, Ojo-Ade's criticism reflects that characteristic auto-defensiveness associated with the protection of hegemonic self-interest.

Using the ruling class theory, scholars like Oladipo Fashina (1998: 86-123) have discounted the centrality of ethnicity in Nigerian politics, blaming the oppression of the oil-bearing communities on the greed of a ruling class the members of which, he says, are drawn from all ethnic groups in Nigeria, including those of the oppressed groups themselves. I will argue that this view is unhelpful at the very least, and is not supported by Nigerian political reality. As sites of discourse, class, ethnicity and the state are fluid, protean and mutually interacting constructs. The preeminence of any of these as an interpretive paradigm in discursive relations depends on the particular moment and context of discourse (See Michael Schatzberg, 1991). Schatzberg has shown how adverse economic situation in Zaire undermines workers reliance on organizational initiatives and structures, as they resort to ethnic networks in their struggle for survival. Often, economic crisis in the words of Schatzberg, "results in continued reliance on ethnic networks which, in many circumstances, vitiate urban-class consciousness" (P.14).

In most African nation-states, scholars increasingly acknowledge the centrality of ethnicity as the fulcrum of socio-political and cultural assertion. In Kenya, as James Ogude (2002: 205-207) tells us, ethnicity is perceived as the domain of opposition politics, an alternative arena for identity construction. In Nigeria, Poju

Akinyanju (1998: 124- 143), has rightly observed that of the three major pulls, namely, national, ethnic and religious pulls, the national pull is the weakest, while the ethnic pull is the strongest, framing political behavior and the actual exercise of state power. Here, Akinyaju's contention is quite compelling and evocative when he says that in Nigeria:

> The prominent attribute shared by Nigerians is a common geographical boundary. There are no common or shared goals. Different entities have different agenda. Not only are the agenda different, they are conflicting and antagonistic to each other. Those who feel strong enough want to dominate. Attitudes towards educational, industrial, commercial and welfare matters vary with different groups within the country. There is no defined common good and the interest of the people is not advanced. (128).

Indeed, because of the conflicting and even antagonistic ambitions of the different ethnic identities within it, Nigeria is a turbulent polity and is "… a country held together by force of arms" as Akinyaju aptly puts it (P.128). If as Wole Soyinka (1996: 139) notes, people retreat into cultural entities in the face of nationalist totalitarianism, it is logical to see why ethnicity comes to serve as a rallying mantra for Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni as they seek to overcome Nigeria's despotic nationalist discourses. As Soyinka puts it, "under a dictatorship, a nation

ceases to exist.", and identitarian loyalty is transferred to a more compassionate and filial nucleus of being. Soyinka explains this process succinctly:

> The process is entirely logical; the essence of nationhood has gone underground and taken refuge in that primary constituency of human association, the cultural bastion. And the longer the dictatorship lasts, the more tenacious becomes the hold of that cultural nationalism, attracting to itself all the allegiance, social relevance, and visceral identification that once belonged to the larger nation (139).

From 1990, Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni had become increasingly anxious that their cultural arguments for equal citizenship and community rights within the Nigerian entity had gone too long unheeded by an oppressive and intransigent State. Practical and concrete action must be taken by the community to organize a communal resistance against any further depredation of their lives and their land. Like many minority communities in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, the Ogoni community was always fragmentary and weak in the face of the predatory practices of transnational capitalism and the Nigerian state. Their leaders were constantly hunted and harassed, and their communities regularly sacked in government-instigated proxy wars publicized by the State media as "inter-communal" crises. But now, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) is formed.

As a mass organization, MOSOP represents the broad interests of the Ogoni community, canvassing its case locally and internationally and mobilizing the people in the pursuit of their rights. In chapter six of this study, I examine Saro-Wiwa's myriad agitational practices on the platform of MOSOP, and interpret the body's many activities as counter-narrative acts intent on inscribing a story of communal refusal. More significantly, I focus on the revolutionary role of the common Ogoni peasantry in the creation of what is widely regarded as one of Africa's notable anti-authoritarian movements (See: Biodun Jeyifo 1998: xxiiv-xxxii, Richard Peet, 2002:28-54).

The constitution of any country is the embodiment of the rules, codes and conventions governing the interacting and conflicting social forces in society. But, it is also crucially, a discourse through which power is inscribed, ossified and legitimated by hegemonic groups. Thus, rather than an impartial arbiter, the constitution becomes a strategic narrative discourse serving to energize and legitimize the structures of domination of weaker groups in social situations. Sally Falk Moore (1998:126-151) has explored how the legal system of states may be enlisted by ruling hegemonies to oppress dissenting perspectives and groups. Using the particular examples of Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria and the S. M Otieno case in Kenya, Moore reveals how the law may serve as a discourse of oppression, through disingenuous manipulation by those who control state power. Here then,

the incessant calls by the Ogoni for a "review of the constitution" or that they will, if necessary, act "in breach of the constitution," are, I will show, gestures which may be understood within the tradition of counter-hegemonic discourse.

Similarly, when on June 12, 1992, the Ogoni led by Ken Saro-Wiwa boycotted the presidential election, the only ethnic group out of the over three hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria to do so, they were not only making a political point, but one with a deeper discursive resonance. In taking the oath of office, the president would swear to protect the constitution. But the Ogoni are against the subsisting constitution, for it is a dominant narrative which suppresses them. Boycott, then, will be treated here as a counter-narrative strategy – a way of inscribing the story of resistance.

Before the boycott, however, there were strong disagreements between Ken Saro-Wiwa and other elements within the leadership cadre of MOSOP who had interest in national politics. How do we interpret such dissensions within the counter-narrative body? Here, I am reminded of Tejumola Olaniyan's cogent observation elsewhere that in social movements "there is always complicity, for the ground of resistance is veritably impure" (51) (1992: 47-55). In a similar but much more direct manner, James Ogude (1998:33-34) has argued convincingly that even within such resistance groups as the Mau-Mau in Kenya, it was possible to find conflicting tendencies within its discursive structures. Therefore, I will interpret

the conflicting perspectives of the leadership of MOSOP on the question of boycott as reflecting the tension between the regressive and progressive elements within the counter-narrative project itself. This tension is over the choice of narrative protocol or strategy to use against hegemony.

Finally, many commentators and critics alike have wondered repeatedly like Femi Ojo-Ade (1999:288): "Why did he (Ken Saro-Wiwa) not escape abroad, as have done other activists such as Nobel Laureate, Soyinka?" Here, in this final section of the work, I propose to canvass a perspective to this intriguing question in a way, I hope, that will contribute to an understanding of the sometimes uncanny protocols of minority poetics itself.

Briefly, I will argue that as an ardent practitioner of a libertarian discourse, Ken Saro-Wiwa always held an unconventional view of death, which transcended the mere physicality of that phenomenon. He 'died' whenever he saw injustice done against the weak; he 'died' when the Ogoni ecology died. He 'died' many times. Drawing from the premonitions of death as are manifested in his letters in and out of prison, his memoirs, speeches and other sources, I hope to theorize that Ken Saro-Wiwa chose, quite uncannily, to appropriate death itself as his final, most potent counter-narrative coup against the hegemonic discourses which sought so relentlessly to silence him and Ogoni. And in dying as he did, he overcame the discourse of silence. According to Bernth Lindfors (quoted earlier: 197) "…more

is written about him in recent years than about any other Nigerian writer except such canonical colossi as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe" (see also: Biodun Jeyifo, cited earlier, Kwame Anthony Appiah, 1998: xviiii-xxi).

As he faced the hangman, Ken Saro-Wiwa's last words were, "Lord take my soul, but the struggle continues" (Ken Wiwa 2002:176). Clearly, the struggle seems to be continuing in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. As daily news reports prove, a fiercer discourse of non-silence is certainly abroad. I conclude this study by examining the signification of Saro-Wiwa's martyrdom within the matrix oppositional practice in Nigeria and beyond.