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## History, society and heroism in the Nigerian War novel

### Abstract

A common denominator in the criticism of modern African literature would appear to be the recognition of the essentially historical orientation of the literature itself. This is in the sense that the vast majority of significant African writers are, in various ways and to varying degrees, preoccupied with a creative interrogation of the African experience, especially since the contact with the West. But critical discourse of African literature, if it is to acquire the identity of a rigorous discipline, must begin to address itself to the rather crucial relationship between the socio-historical determinants of the literature in question and the inner formal categories generated by those determinants. In other words, it is no longer sufficient to perceive and comment on Ngugi's commitment to a socialist reconstruction of modern Kenya in *Petals of Blood* or Achebe's concern with the morality of neo-colonial African politics in *A Man of the People* or even Armah's disturbingly stark depiction of contemporary Ghanaian reality in *The Beautiful Ones*. Germane as such observations may be, the revelations which they contain are becoming increasingly obvious as the world gets to know more about Africa. Consequently, critical discourse of modern African literature must delve deeper into the ontological configurations of the very literary works in order to decipher the truth value of the texts as systems of aesthetic signification of meanings that ultimately derive from history. This need becomes even more compelling in the realm of the African novel, for the novel in particular is generically amenable to historical conditioning.

# History, Society and Heroism in the Nigerian War Novel

## THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT: HISTORY AND HEROISM IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL

A common denominator in the criticism of modern African literature would appear to be the recognition of the essentially historical orientation of the literature itself. This is in the sense that the vast majority of significant African writers are, in various ways and to varying degrees, preoccupied with a creative interrogation of the African experience, especially since the contact with the West. But critical discourse of African literature, if it is to acquire the identity of a rigorous discipline, must begin to address itself to the rather crucial relationship between the socio-historical determinants of the literature in question and the inner formal categories generated by those determinants. In other words, it is no longer sufficient to perceive and comment on Ngugi's commitment to a socialist reconstruction of modern Kenya in *Petals of Blood* or Achebe's concern with the morality of neo-colonial African politics in *A Man of the People* or even Armah's disturbingly stark depiction of contemporary Ghanaian reality in *The Beautiful Ones*. Germane as such observations may be, the revelations which they contain are becoming increasingly obvious as the world gets to know more about Africa. Consequently, critical discourse of modern African literature must delve deeper into the ontological configurations of the very literary works in order to decipher the truth value of the texts as systems of aesthetic signification of meanings that ultimately derive from history. This need becomes even more compelling in the realm of the African novel, for the novel in particular is generically amenable to historical conditioning.

For the historically conscious critic, to study the changing faces of the hero in the African novel both as a literary type and as a social institution is to begin to contemplate, in the context of cultural action, the dynamics of the human factor in the process of African history. The peculiarity of

the heroic figure in the African novel becomes clearer when contrasted with his Western counterpart. Much of Modernist European literature (especially the novel) adopts as its hero the perpetual seeker who never finds and whose problematic career finds resolution only in the evocation of further contradictions. Most amply illustrated in the works of Proust, Joyce and Kafka, the psycho-social condition of this type of hero is best described by what Lukacs, at his most idealistic, calls the 'transcendental homelessness' of modern Western man.<sup>1</sup> He is man without gods, aspiring neither to chivalry nor to nobility, for in his world these values neither make sense nor demand serious attention. In short, the hero of the Western novel, especially in the 20th Century, is a lumpen wanderer in search of meaning in a world in which the quest for meaning is no longer a worthwhile undertaking. The social and historical roots of this condition are to be located in the unbridled angst, ennui and general self-doubt attendant on two devastating world wars and the coming of age of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The situation has only been further complicated in recent times by advancements in technology and industry which have culminated in the present ethos in which robots and computer chips could well be said to have taken over from man those tasks that ordinarily enlist heroic intervention. This is not, however, to suggest that the heroic instinct or its recognition and appreciation have finally disappeared from the Western psyche; it is only a re-statement of the obvious fact that since the late 19th Century, there has occurred a fundamental and decisive alteration in the sociology of heroism in Western society at large, an alteration which is evident in the recreations of the hero in the literary form (the novel) closely linked with the leading members of that society (the bourgeoisie).<sup>3</sup>

The state of the heroic institution in modern African society and literature presents a contrasting picture. The reality of underdevelopment in Africa connotes that those historical challenges which necessitate the assertion of the heroic instinct are still abundant; not only is the conquest and control of nature through science and technology still waiting to be accomplished, but the persistence of imperialism, neo-colonialism and the proliferation of corrupt and oppressive governments in Africa are historical challenges requiring urgent heroic intervention.

Consequently, the hero in modern African literature, especially the novel, is a very historical and therefore *problematic* being.<sup>4</sup> This is in the sense that he ontologically embodies those socio-historical contradictions which condition the social world from which the novelist himself derives inspiration in the first place. This point becomes even more compelling

given the rather intimate link between African history and the development of the African novel, a link so close that one is tempted to see the majority of African novels as historical novels of a realistic nature in the sense in which Alan Swingewood understands it as being concerned with 'man ... firmly structured within a totality of political, economic and social forces'.<sup>5</sup>

The implications of this observation for the changing faces of the hero in the African novel are far reaching for critical theory. The critical intelligence is challenged to resolve the contradiction inherent in characters who have to strike authenticity as both fictional protagonists as well as embodiments of definite ideological standpoints vis-à-vis important historical questions. In effect, we are confronted with such questions as: are we to understand Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* as a classic instance of the Aristotelian monumentalised hero or as a fictionalization of the complexity of traditional Africa's response to the European incursion? Is Ngugi's Mugo in *A Grain of Wheat* to be seen as just a classic instance of the psychologically divided character or as Ngugi's portrayal of the question of mistaken heroism in the Mau Mau struggle? Is Armah's Man in *The Beautiful Ones* to be seen merely as an existentialist everyman or as a concrete depiction of the plight of the individual Ghanaian moralist in the neo-colonial atmosphere of spiritual and moral decadence? Because each of these questions defies a unilineal answer, the career of the hero of the contemporary African novel is further problematised. As a result, the values which he represents and by which he can best be judged even as a literary category are ultimately matrixed in society and history.

We shall subsequently demonstrate this socio-historical determination of heroic value by examining the various faces of the hero in the Nigerian war novel. I need to point out that this essay is a fundamental re-consideration of the thesis of an earlier effort in which I tried, in rather idealist terms, to articulate the same problem in the context of the national question in contemporary Nigeria.<sup>6</sup>

## THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE NIGERIAN WAR NOVELIST

Solidly predicated on the acknowledged statistical dominance of Nigerian works in African literature, literary works based on the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) also constitute the largest body of works deriving from any

single historical experience in Africa to date. Throughout the decade of the 1970s, the Civil War provided the dominant socio-historical concern for most of Nigerian literature, a dominance which is only just being gradually replaced by depictions of the ethical and ideological dislocations of the period of oil boom. Within this impressive body of literature, the novel form, for certain geo-political reasons that I have highlighted elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> also occupies a dominant position. Accordingly, the various portraits of the hero in these novels derive ultimately from the position of writers in the structure of the Nigerian society up to the period of the war at least.

At this juncture, it is crucial to note that the Civil War witnessed the highest point in the involvement of the Nigerian writer in national politics to date. Having been nurtured in the colonial educational system as logical successors to the colonialists, such first generation Nigerian writers as Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo etc., felt naturally entitled to a leadership role in the post-colonial era. It was therefore with awe and frustration that they beheld the failings and massive betrayals of the hopes of independence by the politicians in the period immediately preceding the Civil War. Since the secession of Eastern Nigeria was predicated on the failures of the Nigerian federation, those of the writers who found themselves on the Biafran side felt naturally inclined to demonstrate, in practical terms, their commitment to a fundamental re-evaluation of the values which bedevilled the erstwhile Nigerian federation. In the heat of the conflict, Achebe had this to say:

Biafra stands in opposition to the murder and rape of Africa by whites and blacks alike because she has tasted both and found them equally bitter.... Biafran writers are committed to the revolutionary struggle of their people for justice and true independence.<sup>8</sup>

It was this kind of conviction that drew men like Gabriel Okara, Cyprian Ekwensi, Eddie Iroh, and Chukwuemeka Ike into the active service of the Biafran government in various capacities. It was for the same cause that Christopher Okigbo died in battle wearing the uniform of an army major. It is important to point out that the involvement of these writers was conducted in the context of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie (of which they formed an enlightened arm) in the life of the Nigerian state.

Accordingly, their literary undertakings in this period bear the stamp of their class perspective. This feature comes out most prominently in the novel form in which most of the protagonists could be said, at least on the

basis of professional ranking, to be transpositions of the world view and class role(s) of the bourgeoisie in the war milieu. For instance, Dr Kanu in Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* is a medical doctor and a former university lecturer; Chumah in Iroh's *Forty-eight Guns for the General* is an army colonel while the protagonists in Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun*, Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* and Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice*, respectively, are all members of a loosely defined bourgeoisie. In effect, the various novelists writing on the war are unconsciously mediating their own class roles in a specific episode of the national historical process and thereby lending credence, implicitly, to Lukacs' rather generalised observation that 'writers will tend to present an inside picture of the class on which their own experience of society is based. All other social classes will tend to be seen from the outside.'<sup>9</sup> This thesis finds further theoretical reinforcement in Goldmann's genetic structuralist conception of the relationship between literature and society: 'The ultimate source of a literary text ... is not the «I» of its author, but the «we» of the social class whose world vision it embodies.'<sup>10</sup>

But in being mediations of the world view of their creators, the heroes of the Nigerian war novel do not affirm the values of that world view but instead are cast in roles that are ultimately critical or even antagonistic to those values. The dominant temper of the novels in question is a certain critical realism which goes beyond the reflection of the empirical history of the war. Our specific theoretical caveat, which is further explored in the rest of this essay, is that the realism of the Nigerian war novel, like the 19th-Century European realism of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Turgenev and Dostoevsky, was inspired by the hegemonic ideology of the bourgeoisie but ended up being critical and even subversive of the position, interests and role(s) of that class.<sup>11</sup>

In pursuit of this position, we shall subsequently be concerned with an exploration of the extent to which the heroes of Ike's Iroh's *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* and Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* are able to carry the twin burden of simultaneously embodying the class world view of their creators while striving to justify themselves ontologically as fictional characters. We shall be arguing that owing to the indissoluble relationship between their historical conditioning and their status as artistic creations, the success or failure of these heroes as characters is in itself an assessment of the role(s) of the bourgeoisie in the specific historical milieu in question.

## FACES OF THE HERO

In *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, Eddie Iroh depicts the heroic function as it was displayed by the military arm of the Nigerian élite. The general conceptual framework for this departure appears to be the prominent political role which the professional soldier came to play in Nigerian history from 1966 to the end of the Civil War in 1970 and even beyond. Iroh portrays his hero against this background and uses him to explore the crisis of confidence which bedevilled the leadership of the élite in general and the army in particular. Colonel Charles Chumah who is at the centre of the novel's universe is an idealist and a patriot, an ardent believer in the secessionist dream of a Biafran republic. His training in British military institutions and subsequent contact with European soldiers during the United Nations peace-keeping operations in the Congo equip him with an anti-imperialist consciousness. 'The Congo transformed Chumah.... He discovered a flair for military politics and the ideological nuances of military conflict.... Charles Chumah came out of the strife-torn republic with two passionate hates: white diplomats and white mercenaries.'<sup>12</sup>

In the immediate context of the Civil War, Chumah is confronted with the onerous task of demonstrating his patriotism against a cabal of white mercenaries into whose hands the General (and Biafran head of state) has literally transferred the responsibility of defending the fledgling republic. Events unfold quickly in this exciting war thriller and in the ensuing war of nerves between the General and Chumah, the mercenaries betray the security of the republic and it is left to the ingenuity of Chumah and his kind to save their land from the deadly blackmail of the mercenaries. This apparently straightforward plot holds immense possibilities for the relationship between the hero and his socio-historical determination.

Of paramount importance is the fact that Chumah's heroism cannot easily be divorced from his perception of the political significance of his actions. He sees his opposition to the mercenaries not only as a patriotic duty but also as a practical illustration of his anti-imperialist convictions: 'I'm not prepared to fight alongside mercenaries who are making money at the expense of the lives of the people who are contributing the money...'<sup>13</sup> But to oppose the mercenaries is to challenge the General himself. Consequently, Chumah is compelled to spend the rest of his career in the novel reconciling between the need to translate his patriotism into action against the Federals on the one hand and the necessity to have the right political and ideological atmosphere for the flowering of



patriotism. Clearly, these are the two battlefronts and two sets of 'enemies' against whom Chumah is pitted. It is this twin battle that constitutes the essence of his heroic challenge in the novel.

In order to adequately equip him to confront this challenge, Iroh imbues his hero with contradictory attributes. He is a rare combination of right-minded patriotism and professional brilliance on the one hand and ruthless villainy on the other. He requires the first set of attributes to carry the weight of his ideological and political convictions; but he equally needs to be a villain to vindicate himself in a war situation. It is these contradictory impulses that govern his *life* as a fictional character and also fashion his psychological portrait. Cast in this mould, Chumah approximates what the Nigerian playwright and poet, J.P. Clark, terms 'the hero as a villain'. He is both 'a man admired for achievements and noble qualities' as well as 'a person guilty or capable of great wickedness'. These contradictory impulses are, according to Clark, the necessary complementary ingredients for the heroic personage:

...the concept of the hero, who on the whole is a fighter of one kind or another, carries within it positive and negative elements. Where these are acknowledged and properly coupled, there will occur that right degree of charge which becomes a source of power both for the person and the people who call him hero.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, Colonel Chumah is portrayed as a historically conditioned delicate balance of the positive and negative poles of heroism. His emotional constitution is tailored to reflect this contradictory essence. He is described as a man of 'intense emotions who hated and loved ... with consummate passion'. Even his facial countenance and overall physique equally convey his essentially problematic nature and career: 'Aged thirty-five years, he was tall, trim and not exactly good-looking; rather pleasantly ugly. His upper lip was weighed down with a heavy patch of hair which tended to lend his face a permanently severe mien that did not improve his looks.'<sup>15</sup> These antithetical qualities find easy correlation in the fact that he loved his Biafran nation with zest and hated the white mercenaries exploiting Biafra with 'consummate passion'. At the level of practical action, his efforts bear the stamp of his essential contradiction. We are told that his brilliant defence of the capital city 'became an epic tale of *ruthless, magnificent heroism* and inimitable gallantry...' (my italics). Yet there is everything about his conduct of this battle that testifies to the streak of villainy in Chumah. When at the end of the battle his subordinates confront him with a group of prisoners-of-war, the choice is between sparing them in line with the convention of civilized warfare and

summarily executing them. His instinctive order to his men is quite revealing: 'Take all twenty of them behind the trenches. And shoot them!'

Additional insight is provided, at the level of form, into the peculiar slant of Chumah's heroic stature if we consider the generic imperatives of the type of novel in which he *exists*. *Forty-eight Guns for the General* belongs in the realm of the war thriller. There is clearly an attempt by Iroh to marry the necessity for an 'accurate' depiction of history with the need for entertainment in its 20th-Century Western urban pop culture sense. Accordingly, one of the minimum requirements of the thriller form is that the hero should be a kind of superman in order to be the master of a fictional world characterised by precision in the timing of events, hair-raising suspense, narrow escapes, close-knit intrigues, espionage and counter espionage. In this role, Chumah is equally adequately suited. He possesses an incredible capacity to be at the right places at the right time, to master intrigues and to use his superior intelligence to avert calamities in a decisive manner. For instance, the precision and dexterity with which he frees himself from detention just in time to frustrate the mercenaries' siege on Biafra's lone airport smacks of Hollywood. Yet it is to Iroh's artistic credit that the classic aesthetic response to the exploits of the Hollywood-type hero (that of intoxicated applause) is not allowed to drown a perception of the more crucial ideological and political questions raised in the novel as a piece of historical fiction.

In the final analysis, then, Colonel Chumah is the hero who by virtue of his professional calling and instincts enacts a villainous role out of historical compulsion. Yet the nobility of his intentions and the practical value of his ideals for the society that sees him as hero are not depreciated by his violent method of asserting his convictions. His heroic stature is enhanced at the individual level because his private convictions (anti-imperialism, patriotism, etc.) also coincide with what a war-time society would ordinarily constitute as positive values. Yet, it needs to be pointed out that the overall impact of Chumah's heroism is rather limited by the fact that he spends most of his career in the novel in intra-class squabbles with the General who is tacitly depicted as an unconscious pro-imperialist. Iroh, like I.N.C. Aniebo in *The Anonymity of Sacrifice*, seems to be making the point that it was perhaps the intra-class squabbles rather than the force of arms that led to the demise of the Biafran republic. In artistically mediating this point, Iroh implicitly amplifies the contention of many a historian that the failure of Africa to date is largely a failure of élite leadership.<sup>16</sup>

In Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, we encounter another face of the bourgeois hero: this is the intellectual, the man of ideas. This facet of the question of heroism in the situation under consideration assumes added significance because it involves also a consideration of the position of the writer himself. The writer forms a vital sub-category of the intellectual arm of the bourgeoisie in most Third World nations. Against the background of the historically necessitated involvement of the writer in Nigerian politics already highlighted, Dr Kanu in *Sunset at Dawn* embodies the implications of the man of ideas turned soldier/politician in a war situation. His background as a university lecturer prior to the war coupled with his idealist cast of mind manifested in his propensity to rationalise everything in the realm of universals prepares him adequately for a heroic career. In concrete terms, his position as Biafra's imaginary Director of Mobilization affords him a unique opportunity to translate his ideals into practice.

Dr Kanu's specific challenge as a hero is twofold: it has to do first with the necessity to reconcile between his idealism and the practical exigencies of a war situation. Secondly, and perhaps more crucially, he is called upon to transcend the limitations in the world view of his class (self-aggrandisement, money, property, power tussle, rugged individualism, etc.) to make his actions have significance at the level of universal values, the realm of abstract patriotism, dedication, selfless sacrifice and self-denial in the interest of one's country and people.

As an idealist, Dr Kanu predicates his political convictions on abstractions, thereby enlarging the scope of the Biafran conflict into the realm of black nationalism and global anti-imperialism:

The imperialists never come out in their true colours... They don't want a black country that will stand firmly on its feet and talk to them on equal terms. They want us to cling perpetually to their apron strings, and if Biafra was allowed to survive, it would upset their apple cart.<sup>17</sup>

This level of idealism compels him to assume the role of a carrier of his people's cause. Consequently, Ike creates an organic link between the hero and his society to the extent that Dr Kanu becomes a personification of the ideals, promises as well as the inevitable contradictions of the Biafran experiment. This close identification between hero and society is so total that it resonates at the cosmic level. As Kanu's and Biafra's fortunes oscillate, so do the elemental forces of sun and rain wax and wane. And here lies the *tragic* essence, at the level of form, of *Sunset at Dawn*. There seems to be an attempt by Ike to elevate Dr Kanu into

something of a quasi-Aristotelian hero, a noble man who falls because of a certain conjuncture of personal, social and metaphysical inevitabilities. For Kanu, the personal failing (the flaw) is a certain unthinking, almost juvenile idealism and simple-mindedness which fails to see the futility of confronting the sophisticated military machine of the Federals with matchets or even bare hands: '...let those Nigerian *sho-sho* come with their armoured cars, shelling machines, and heavy artillery. With these matchets, and with God on our side...' <sup>18</sup> The social factor in his tragic heroic stature is to be located in the fact that his idealism has no place among his fellow members of the bourgeoisie. Each of Duke Bassey (the businessman), Ezenwa (the professor) and Akwaelumo (the bureaucrat) is too preoccupied with contemplating his 'personal loss' in the war to get involved in the process of general mobilization to which Dr Kanu is so committed. And of course the metaphysical repercussions of these actions are furnished by the *synthetic* aesthetic link which the novelist forges between human action and the world of the elements in the novel.

Cumulatively, these contradictions converge and further problematize Kanu's career as a hero. Each step he takes in pursuit of his ideals is an advancement in the direction of self-annihilation, for in the world of bourgeois individualism, trans-individual values and abstract ideals have no place except for the insane. His subsequent resolve to actualise his ideals physically in the battlefield is rendered with a faint undercurrent of satire which is directed both at him and the social class he represents. His subsequent death in battle is futile, for at the end of the war (and of the novel), Ike reminds us that the various surviving members of the bourgeoisie undergo 'instant moulting' as '[each] person sought his own hideout, to bury his discarded Biafran skin'. <sup>19</sup> Thus, what Kanu had rationalised and embraced as an epoch-making revolutionary challenge was after all only one scene in a giant drama of bourgeois political convulsions.

As I have insisted elsewhere, contrary to the charges of pro-Biafran partisanship constantly levelled against Ike in critical discussion on this novel, the main thrust of the critical realism of *Sunset at Dawn* consists in fact in Ike's indictment of the Nigerian bourgeois class, so intent on the pursuit of its narrow interests that it can afford to squander the lives of large sections of their illiterate fellow countrymen in a futile conflict. The hero of *Sunset at Dawn* is only a symbolic sacrifice to the god of bourgeois greed.

It is perhaps in Munonye's *A Wreath for the Maidens* more than anywhere else in the Nigerian war novel that the bourgeois writer has the sincerity to come face to face with his sinister role(s) in national politics.

Because Munonye's work is essentially a novel of ideas, the heroic function is not *acted out* but is instead explored dialectically (through Socratic-type dialogue) between two principal characters who, by education and social status, fall within the broad framework of the bourgeoisie. Biere Ekonte and Roland Medo are friends and members of what may be regarded as the second generation of the Nigerian élite. Together, they constitute a composite hero, a divided personality, the contradictory faces of an embattled class.

At the onset of the political crisis and subsequent civil war, both men, as symbolic rebels against the values of their class, are engaged in an active interrogation of the role of their fellows in national politics from the pre-independence period to the present. Here, we are compelled to confine ourselves to their views on the major issues at stake in the war milieu in particular.

Because both men opt for dispassionate objectivity in their analyses of issues, class suicide is implicit in their disposition. While admitting their complicity in the events that led to the war by dint of their class alignment, they assert their relative innocence: 'We are better patriots than the men who live in government quarters rent free and all cost-paid, who currently parade their own nationalism in public cars, often charging the nation for the service of allowing their noble bodies to be conveyed from one spot to another.'<sup>20</sup> Their critical consciousness is so pervasive that it spares no arm of the bourgeoisie, not even the all-powerful military: 'The military has been compromised by its woeful failure to satisfy the expectations of the masses in most respects...'<sup>21</sup> In their bid to further transcend the values of their class, Biere and Roland uncover the central contradiction of the war, namely, the fact that it was the poor who sacrificed the most. 'It is most unfortunate that there has been no logic in all the killing we've been experiencing. It's mostly innocent ones who have been shot or nacked to death — people who had very little or no share of the so-called national cake.'<sup>22</sup> This realisation culminates in a conclusion which, to my mind, figuratively summarizes the issue of class suicide in this very theoretical novel: '...all those in our midst who led the country into the present troubles ... should be the ones dying on the battlefield.'<sup>23</sup>

The special appeal of Munonye's presentation of the question of heroism lies ultimately, I think, in the novelty and freshness of his artistic method. Essentially, this is a novel that probes, in rather critical terms, the consciousness of its informing social class and its characteristic world view. What we witness in the composite picture of the Biere-Ekonte personality is the fictionalization of a rebel ideology; the bourgeoisie against itself. The implicit contradiction reminds us of Balzac in relation

to his class. In Munonye's work, the artistic implications of the contradiction are quite far-reaching. Because of the immensity of the socio-political and ideological questions they are involved in rationalizing and analysing, the characters hardly find time to *act out* their convictions. Furthermore, it would appear that because Munonye is articulating a disgust with the central place so consistently occupied by the élite in post-independence Nigerian social reality, he is reluctant to consecrate either of his protagonists as a hero in the normal literary sense of the word. Consequently, it would appear that the characters exist mainly for the purpose of animating the fictional world of the novel with a consistent ethical mooring which constitutes the yardstick for measuring whatever little action they take.

The candidature of the twin protagonists for heroism opens up two attractive theoretical possibilities. Firstly, it could be argued that the characters derive a certain heroic stature from their courage to subject the values of their class to active interrogation. This argument could even be stretched to imply that Biere and Roland are two bourgeois characters questioning and repudiating bourgeois values through the novel which itself is a bourgeois form. On another level, it is quite tempting to see the characters' relative inactivity as manifestations of a certain impotence. In this direction, it could be argued that, overwhelmed by the extent of their class complicity in the ensuing turmoil, Roland and Biere degenerate into cynical talkatives and grubletonians, blaming both themselves and their kind for the tragedy. But Munonye steps in to absolve them of this charge by making them take part in relief work and public enlightenment during the war, roles in which their moral appeal and humanistic vision would not be tainted.

In the final analysis, it is in the active interrogation of the role of the bourgeoisie which the two characters symbolize that Munonye conveys his undisguised disgust with the quality of élite leadership at that specific moment in Nigerian history.

## CONCLUSION

Beyond the obviously narrow academic concern of considering the various objectifications of the hero as a literary type in the Nigerian war novel, the foregoing discussion has, I hope, highlighted some salient issues in the sociology of that phase of the Nigerian war novel, namely, the following:

- (a) The Nigerian war novel continues a tradition of critical realism which was inaugurated in the 1960s with the publication of works like *A Man of the People* and *The Interpreters*.
- (b) Although the heroes of these novels variously amount to fictional repudiations of a specific phase of bourgeois hegemony in Nigerian history, no consistent ideological standpoint emerges from the novels as the works of members of a social class. The coincidence in their stance — their common critical stance towards the bourgeoisie — arises from an objective reflection of a concrete historical experience, not from a commonly adopted literary or social programme.
- (c) What is being indicted through the various heroes is the *quality* of bourgeois leadership, not the *basis* of that hegemony.

The foregoing discussion modifies the classic axiom that literature reflects social reality in one significant sense: the relationship between literature and society is defined not by correspondence but by ambiguity, irony and dialectics.

#### NOTES

1. Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971), pp. 66 ff.
2. Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. IV (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 215-217.
3. For an elaboration of the close link between the bourgeoisie and the novel form, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) and Alan Swingewood, *The Novel and Revolution* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975).
4. The concept of the problematic hero in the sociology of the modern Western novel implies a certain amount of psychological disorientation arising from the larger alienation in an industrial capitalist society. I use the term in respect of the African novel to imply that the historical problems in the African world also problematize the career of the hero. Purpose defines his 'existence'. His problem is that of mastering his historical milieu.
5. Alan Swingewood, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
6. See 'Society and Heroism in Nigerian Civil War Literature', in press with *Okike*.
7. Chidi Amuta, 'The Nigerian Civil War and the Evolution of Nigerian Literature', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 17, No 1 (1983), pp. 85-99.
8. Chinua Achebe, 'The African Writer and the Biafran Cause' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 83-84.
9. Georg Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), p. 94.

10. Lucien Goldmann, 'Dialectical Materialism and Literary History', *New Left Review* 92 (1975), pp. 36-37.
11. Alan Swingewood, op. cit., p. 57.
12. Eddie Iroh, *Forty-eight Guns for the General* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 8.
13. Ibid., p. 110.
14. J.P. Clark, 'The Hero as a Villain', Inaugural lecture, University of Lagos, 1978, p. 15.
15. *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, p. 8.
16. See Basil Davidson, *Which Way Africa?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 148.
17. Chukwuemeka Ike, *Sunset at Dawn* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1976), p. 192.
18. Ibid., p. 14.
19. Ibid., p. 246.
20. John Munonye, *A Wreath for the Maidens* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 90.
21. Ibid., p. 148.
22. Ibid., p. 157.
23. Ibid., p. 190.

# Njabulu Ndebele

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## INTERVIEW

Kirsten Holst Petersen interviewed Njabulu Ndebele at the African Writers' Conference in London in November, 1984.

*Could you say something about literary developments among black writers in South Africa today.*

I could make a beginning by saying that the history of black South African fiction is really the history of the short story. This was tied to the fact that most of the writing appeared in newspapers, literary journals or other kinds of magazines so the development of black South African fiction is part of the history of journalism. People have asked why the South Africans write short stories and not novels. I know that Mphahlele is