

Women and War: A Reading of Flora Nwapa's *Never Again*

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Abstract

Traditionally it is always men who have gone to war and the women have assisted from the margins in the capacity of nurses and caregivers. In war narratives, it is the male who goes into combat while the woman takes care of the home and the hearth. This stereotype is so entrenched that a woman writer's depiction of warfare is considered to be an anomaly. Post-Independence Nigeria saw one of the bloodiest Civil wars which shook the very core of the nascent nation. Flora Nwapa, the mother of African Women Writers saw the Civil war at very close quarters. In a novel aptly titled *Never Again*, she describes the horrors of the war from the eyes of the women who debunk the standard war narratives of bravery and nationalism and question the very essence of this exercise and call it out for what it is – a politically motivated, man made disaster. This Paper will examine Nwapa's autobiographical narrative of the War through her famous novel, *Never Again*.

Keywords: Gender, Warfare, Biafra, African Literature, Ibo tribe, Flora Nwapa.

“Why resurrect it all now from the past? History, the old wound. The post emotions all every again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment from the word from the image of another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion.”

--Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

The traditional division of gender roles sees the man as the economic provider while the woman is regarded as the nurturer. It goes on to see the man as being 'tough' enough to physically weather a warlike situation while the woman's role is more peripheral. However, this does not take into consideration the mental situation of either sexes. The male fighter might be a complete mental wreck even if he shows prowess in a battlefield and the woman who has been left behind, very often shows incredible mental prowess as the mere act of 'keeping alive' during warfare is in itself a grave challenge.

The Nigerian Civil War

Nigeria was barely free from the clutches of Colonialism when it witnessed a bloody fratricidal Civil war. Technically, the British had left Nigeria but there was a vested desire to continue to hold on to the oil wells. True to the colonial policy of "divide and rule", all that was needed to keep the rift alive was to get the tribes to fight against each other. As it is, there was an anger against the Ibo tribe – they were seen to be the most progressive and the most favoured by the British. It was felt that they were heading the country since most Ibos had landed plum jobs in higher governmental positions. The three major tribes in Nigeria, the Ibos, Yorubas and the Hausas, each backed their own candidates for the top jobs in Nigeria. The first NCC (National Council of Nigerian Citizens) had a prominent Ibo presence. The second important organization, the Yoruba Cultural Organization, as the very name suggested, was dominated by the Yorubas. The third Party was led by the Hausas whose chief was Tafawa Baleya. The Independence of Nigeria was a series of negotiations which were made by the elites. For, the poor and the marginalized, Independence was only on Paper. Post- Independence, the strife between the tribes continued to grow as did the rampant corruption. Soon, the sentiment of separatism crept in and there was a desire for an Independent land for the Ibos. The first coup or the January Boys' Coup triggered off the first round of the Nigerian civil war. The coup was planned by army officers comprising mostly of

the Ibos. It was a coup which was planned more to bring down than to build. On the night of January 14th, 1966, the army boys carried out assassinations in Lagos, Ibadan and Kaduna. After a brief political confusion, Major-General Johnson Irosoji took over. The coup in Kaduna was led by Major Chukuma Nzelegwu, an Ibo. The coup was extremely brutal as the Sarkin Sokoto was shot along with his wife. Interestingly, in this coup, an Ibo leader was killed. To the rest of Nigeria, it appeared as if the Ibos had orchestrated this coup for a complete take over. On 29 July 1966, in a counter coup, Irosoji and a number of other senior leaders were killed. Among the rest of the Nigerians, a strange fear of an Ibo takeover seemed to gain ground. Amidst immense political confusion, Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from a Northern minority group took over. For over a month different forms of governance were delivered to the beleaguered and battered territory of the so-called new Nation. On 26 May, 1967, the East, under the leadership of Ojukwu decided to secede. It declared its independence and the new state was called Biafra. Officially all ties between Biafra and the federal state of Nigeria was dissolved. This paved the way for one of the worst instances of fratricide recorded in history as brothers killed brothers- people who served in the same army earlier were now thirsty for each other's blood. More soldiers died of marasmus (malnutrition) and kwashiorkor (starvation) than bullets. For the Biafrans, it was a show of strength for sure, but it bordered more on foolhardiness. A British journalist reported from the scene saying:

When half starved, bare footed, ragged soldiers, numb with fear, speaking glowingly of their 'Biafra', when poor peasant boys march singing to the front-line with five rounds of ammunition a piece, proudly totting rifles they have never fired before; and when an illiterate present woman who has just see her second child die of starvation declares its spirit to the success of Biafra it is impossible not to accept that the masses- the Ibo masses at least- were behind the war. (Isichei 98)

The women's involvement in the Biafran war is a historical reality. They were involved in wartime administration. Some of them were recruited into the civil militia and also promoted to official cadres. The women provided all kinds of services-as nurses, as providers for food for the soldiers and some even opted for active combat. On the economic front, women sensed an opportunity and seized it. Food was required for the army and the women took contracts from the Biafran soldiers to become foodsuppliers. Many women who were erstwhile teachers, farmers and typists, took to this profession which provided them with some financial security. With the end of the war came the oil boom where Nigeria's income from petroleum skyrocketed. Many women, due to their proximity with army officers made a lot of money during this time. They were called the proverbial "cash madams". Ibo women are resilient and Nwapa records the resilience of the women in the face of war.

Never Again (1975)

Never Again, the title of the book, says it all. Nigeria or any other place for that matter should never be subjected to the horrors of war since it is debilitating and harmful for civilization. It does not matter who wins because in a war situation, everybody is a loser. Through this seemingly simple and uncomplex book, Nwapa recounts the horrors of the war through the eyes of Kate, an educated woman who is able to see through the politics of war. She is not fooled by the tall claims of the corrupt politicians but the war renders her helpless as she is forced to flee the land of her birth. The narration is semi-autobiographical. During the civil war, like most Nigerian elites, Flora Nwapa was forced to run away to the East. On her return she undertook the almost impossible task of trying to unite the orphans of the Biafran war with their families. It was an immensely difficult job but she met with some degree of success. *Never Again* is set in the times of the Civil War when the Biafran army is rarely to be seen. What has remained of Biafra is merely a dream. The novel is set in the lake town of Ugwuta. The Nigerian Federal Forces are fast approaching but the perpetrators of the Biafran

war- the army and some men who support it for their own vested interests insist that the town is well guarded and nobody should flee. Kate and her family have been on the run for quite sometime. The very first paragraph of the novel sets the tone for the horrific conditions the people of Biafra are forced to endure.

After fleeing form Enugu, Onitsha, Port Harcourt and Elele, I was thoroughly tired of life. Yet how tenaciously one could hold on to life when death was round the corner. Death was too near for comfort in Biafra. And for us who had known no danger of this kind before it was hell on earth. (5)

Throughout the text, there is a feeling that war has been thrust upon the common people. For the common masses, it mattered little who ruled. Kate realized that Biafra had been created merely with words and the hapless Biafran soldiers have no ammunition to defend themselves. But to the common man, the Biafran radio recounts their heroic deeds and the numerous victories they have supposedly won. In Biafra, BBC and other foreign news channels have been banned and the people have no means of finding out the real story as it plays out in the battle field. People are fed on the lies perpetrated by the middle men who want to keep the dream of Biafra alive. It is people like this who use the war to their advantage. One such person is Kal who is so pro- Biafra that people feared him. He claims to know everything about war fronts. He addresses people who flee war fronts as saboteurs. Yet, interestingly, two days before Port Harcourt is shelled, he runs away. After Ugwuta is shelled and then left barren, Kal is seen again as a Major in the army. Kate wonders at Kal's sudden change of fortune. He has never fired a shot nor taken any army training but by sheer lies and connivance he is wearing an army man's uniform.

Kate is Nwapa's spokesperson for exposing the hypocrisies of the pro war argument and the mercenaries who have declared the state of Biafra. Even if initially people believed in the

rhetoric of equality, it was clear very soon that while the common masses suffered, the politicians prospered. The dream that was Biafra, was indeed hollow. Kate always talks about it in the past tense.

That day, long long ago Biafra
Was declared. We stood and heard
Our national anthem and the speech.
It was six in the morning.
The anthem was inspiring.
Everything then was inspiring.(7)

Very soon the inspiration turned to acute despair. Biafra was supposed to be an honest and just nation but soon what remained was a travesty of these sentiments. The officials were corrupt, the Biafran soldiers looted for survival and the common man faced death and destruction for no reason at all. It was almost as if God had abandoned Biafra. While some women put their trust in the Goddess of the lake, Kate is unable to put her faith in God. Perhaps she is truly becoming the mad woman that people have started calling her.

To me God did not interfere in the affairs of Nigeria and Biafra. God had nothing at all to do with it. Not long ago in Nigeria we prayed to one God, now we had two Gods. The God of Nigeria and the God of Biafra. (9)

What has kept the Biafran war alive are a pack of lies. The young men who have been forced to enlist as soldiers have no ammunition and no food. Armed with sticks, they brave the bullets of the Nigerians. Kate is appalled at this sheer carnage but anybody who dares protest is dubbed as a saboteur and is liable to be picked up for questioning by the disciplinary committee. Endless meetings are being held where the “intellectuals” speak. One even likened the Biafra to the war between David and Goliath. Just as David had slain

Goliath, so would the Biafrans triumph over the Nigerians because their war was just. Unfortunately, the soldiers who defend Biafra tell a different story altogether. The two soldiers who report from the war front talk of fatigue and starvation. They talk of lack of ammunition but the committee turns against them and they are called liars. Both men are unceremoniously turned out of the gathering. Kate's husband Chudi goes to see the preparation for defending Ugwuta. He is appalled by what he sees,

Chudi was very sad. He had gone up to the field to see what the youths were doing. They had wooden sticks as guns on their shoulders. A wounded Biafran soldier was in command. He limped as he commanded and it was so painfully ridiculous... How could these people he saw defend Ugwuta? What were the people, the soldiers who were paid to defend us doing? They were not doing anything at all. And yet there was a strong campaign that anybody seen packing would be handed over to the army...(56)

In spite of the shelling moving closer and closer, the people of Ugwuta are not allowed to move out. An artificial petrol scarcity is created. While only a few are able to buy petrol at black market prices, many are forced to walk as their cars are rendered useless without fuel. When they finally evacuate, it is like a mass of humanity on the move. Old men and women, children, pregnant women, animals all seem to be moving out. The roads are lined with rotting corpses. It is almost as if nothing in Biafra will remain except for the corpses of its men, women and children. Nwapa also comments on the anti- Ibo sentiment that had pervaded Nigeria at that point of time. Ibos were seen to be becoming more and more powerful. Commenting on the prevalent the anti- Ibo sentiment, Kate muses:

The war was madness. We were not prepared for this war. We shouldn't have seceded. It was a big miscalculation. I had thought Gowon was not going to fight us. I

had thought that the rest of Nigeria would have been glad to get rid of the Ibos. The Ibos whom they said grabbed all their jobs, all the wealth of the country. The uncivilized Ibos who only the other day had their first lawyer, and who have just had their first generation of doctors and engineers. How dare they rub their shoulders with the Yorubas of the West, the civilized people whose grandfathers were doctors and lawyers; whose great grandfathers attended Oxford and Cambridge in the last century. (50)

In the face of war, life seemed to have lost all semblance of normalcy. Suddenly people find themselves sitting idle with nothing to do. Nwapa likens this idleness to mental inertia which very often prompts disruption. Kate is petrified of this idleness. She feels that because of this mental idleness, the Biafrans may start attacking each other. The Biafrans were accusing each other for being saboteurs. The army chided the civilians for not contributing as much to the war as they were supposed to. Moreover, the starved Biafran soldiers looted and plundered which made Kate wonder at the sanity of the war which had been thrust upon them.

We could have built Biafra where no one would be oppressed. Was anyone sure of this? There was already oppression even before the young nation could stand on its feet. Wasn't it even possible that war could've broken out in the young nation if there was no civil war? Perhaps Nigeria did well to attack us. If they hadn't, we would have, out of frustration began to attack and kill one another. (50)

The women play multiple roles during the wartime. Most of them organize kitchens for the soldiers. Nwapa shows her women characters to have enormous resilience in the face of severe oppression. While men debate over the political imbroglio, it is the women who make decisions with their heads and not with their hearts. Kate and her friend Bee are very clear sighted about the war. They see through the lies but know better than to protest. Kate's

primary concern is the welfare of her family and she works towards it keeping her wits together. She wills herself to survive the war and she does it. During the shortage of petrol, it is Bee who is able to procure the petrol which saves several lives. Yet another example is that of Mike's wife, one of the residents of Enugu. She is very critical of the war propaganda right from the outset. Her husband, however, would hear none of it. In order to sustain their twelve-year long marriage, she helps him buy a gun and dig a bunker in the house knowing fully well that this was a pointless endeavor. However, when Enuguis invaded, neither the gun nor the bunker are of any help. Mike and his wife are forced to flee to safety as the wife had foreseen right from the outset that the only way to avoid bullets was by fleeing the area before the attack.

When Kate and her family move out of the Lake city, it is again left to the women to organize the food and take care of the children. The men are rendered helpless and useless. They have lost their erstwhile jobs. Now, if they are in the army, they are kept busy, but as civilians, their ego takes a beating every minute. They are mocked at by the army men and not being trained in any kind of domestic work, they are forced to take a back seat as the women keep the family going. Sadly though, in spite of the women's strong resilience, it is they who are the worst casualties of war as they pay for the folly of the war mongering men with their bodies. When an old man is incapable of contributing to the war, he plays host to the soldiers allowing his daughter to sleep with them. Very often, the father would even allow the army men to take away their daughters. More often than not, the women had little or no say in the matter. The Biafran and Nigerian soldiers rape innumerable women. Several women are forced into prostitution. One such example is that of Agnes who had studied in Congo and had come back to her home town just before the war. She was not given a visa to fly back so she and her sister join the mercenaries in the hope that they would help them escape. Kate watches helplessly as the mercenaries take away two Biafran girls.

Agnes jumped out. She collected her suitcase and that of her younger sister. She gave some money to her mother and father and asked her sister to come with her. They drove away. The Mercenary had captured a Biafran girl. No two Biafran girls. (62)

The Federal Forces move on after capturing Ugwuta. Kate and her family cannot believe their good fortune. Kal and his henchmen claim all the credit for the evacuation. According to Kal, the valiant Biafran army had won their land back. There was no truth in it as Owerri falls soon after. However, the refugees cheer as their land had been cleared. Kate is appalled at the destruction she sees. In forty- eight hours, a vibrant and living village has been converted into a vast desolate land where the only thing recognizable is the Lake which lies thoroughly desecrated as dead bodies are seen floating in it. The novel, however, ends in hope as Kate sees the Uhamiri worshippers in white going towards the lake with the sacrificial white ram.

Uhamiri heard the pleadings of her people. She did not turn a deaf ear. She heard them. And she had acted according to the belief of her people. No invader coming by water had ever succeeded in Ugwuta. Uhamiri be praised. (80)

Nwapa's message reads loud and clear - war spells nothing but disaster and the perpetrators of war are the worst enemies of humanity. Looking at the was ravaged Ugwuta, Kate cannot believe that it was milling with people just a few hours ago. War can be so final and so debilitating.

Only a few days before, the place was swarming with people. Now it was empty. It was a battle ground. Where were the Nigerian troops who entered it just three days ago? Where was everybody? What arrogance, what stupidity led us to this desolation, to this madness, to this wickedness, to this war, to this death? When this cruel war was over, there will be no more war. It will not happen again, never against. NEVER AGAIN, never again. (70)

Conclusion

Nwapa is clear sighted as she depicts the woman's role in a warlike situation. War and Women are not natural allies yet in times of war, the woman, has, time and again proved her mettle and she has also been the worst sufferer. She pays with her body and soul for a situation she had never bargained for but her indomitable courage and her resilience in the face of severe oppression makes her contribution significant. However, history has chosen to ignore the woman's contribution as she is perceived to be helping from the margins, the glory of the war has always been the man's. From the numerous factual and historical accounts written about the civil war, especially by those who were in Biafra during the fighting, one could see that women remained consistent with their age- old role of providing support services, food and sustenance to the families. It is rather disappointing that most male writers who recreated the events of the war chose to highlight and exaggerate women's moral laxity forgetting that it was insignificant in comparison with their efforts towards winning the war, towards the survival of the family and towards rearing of children. What makes Nwapa's war writing stand out is her refusal to delineate women in war situation as prostitutes whose personalities are crippled by malignant moral lapses. Her women characters are independent, assertive and economically active. Neither do they indulge in sensational details of women's infidelity as seen in Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* and Aniebo's *Anonymity of Sacrifice*. Nwapa's women are nurturers, caretakers and providers and she celebrates this role as being one of utmost significance.

In a conversation with Brenda Berrian, Nwapa had mentioned that writing about the war was therapeutic for her. "*Never Again* is about my personal experiences during the war. The book is intended to depict the evils of war and demonstrate that people should not indulge in wars. During the war I encountered many difficulties when I espoused thoughts different from the false propaganda. My choice was to think like the majority in order to survive. Personally, I

would not swallow anything without asking questions.” (Berrian1) It is this indomitable strength of hers which gets reflected in Kate’s characterization as Nwapa sets about correcting yet another historical wrong of showing weak and manipulative women in the peripheries of warfare. Instead she shows how a thinking, educated woman deals with warfare, has the power to stand up to propaganda and work towards the safekeeping of her family in the face of severe adversity.

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