

## WAR AND NIGERIAN POETRY: PETER ONWUDINJO AS A CASE IN POINT

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### Abstract

Long before now, some Nigerian poets have written on the country's civil war. One can remember the war poems of J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ossie Enekwe, among others. However, none of them has devoted so much attention to front-line agonies. Peter Onwudinjo's war writing shows the brutalising effect of the war on the men involved in fighting. The poet's uniqueness is that he takes us into the war camps, showing us the daily activities of the regular soldiers as well as the young conscript soldiers. It is our contention in this paper that Onwudinjo paints front-line agonies in three different ways. He does so by showing us the strenuous combat drills; by showing us horrible scenes of injured soldiers; and by painting pictures of the dead.

### Introduction

Over the years many Nigerian writers have written on the civil war (1967-70). Such fictional accounts of events are reflected in Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972), Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* (1972), Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Divided We Stand* (1980), and Kalu Okpi's *Biafra Testament* (1982). Besides prose fiction, there have been some poetry collections. They include J.P. Clark's *Casualties: Poems 1966-68* (1970), Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), and Achebe's *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems* (1973). Others are Ossie Enekwe's *Broken Pots* (1977), Peter Onwudinjo's *Women of Biafra and Other Poems* (2000), and many more.

This paper focuses on the civil war poetry of Onwudinjo. This volume of poetry appears to be one of the latest on the civil war. Onwudinjo was born at Umuejimoke Ihiala in Anambra State,

Nigeria. He attended Alvan Ikoku College of Education, University of Nigeria, and the University of Calabar. He was a combatant officer in the Biafran Army.

After reading *Women of Biafra and Other Poems*, one senses that the poet is preoccupied with agonies arising out of the civil war. These agonies are seen from poem to poem. This paper attempts to show that there are three main sources of agony in Onwudinjo's poetry: the poet agonises over frontline drills, feels sympathetic for the wounded, and weeps over the dead.

### **Combat Drills**

In 'Recall', the poet rekindles memories of the strenuous physical exercise. The 'I' of this poem is gifted with amazing powers of memory:

I well recall the early morning drills  
The bugger's brassy notes that stabbed the morn  
and slew your sleep and broke your dreams;  
the sighs and groans that mourned the quick  
demise of restful sleep. (3)

These opening lines give us some information about the speaker. It is clear from the start that he is a participant in the wartime combat 'drills'. The way in which, the speaking voice recalls in agony about the 'bugger's brassy notes' shows that he is not a regular soldier. Before now, the speaker is not used to waking up very early in the morning for strenuous exercise. Through clever management of sound effects, the poet emphasises the stresses and strains of war camp particularly as it affects those who are not regular soldiers. Consequently, the trumpet blast is seen as an interruption to 'restful sleep'. Thus, one of the agonies facing the conscript soldiers is the denial of a good night's sleep. This is reflected in their 'sighs and groans'. Here the poet appeals to our auditory and this captures the agonising situation.

Apart from the auditory effect, the trumpet is also personified. The conscript soldier recoils in horror at the sound of the trumpet stabbing and slaying 'sleep' and 'dreams'. Here is an evocation of the agony of war through the use of personification. By personifying the bugler's trumpet, the poet has achieved two major things.

Firstly, the image of the trumpet, which emerges is one of a fighter. As a result, the trumpet itself is made to assume the position of a militiaman. Secondly, the trumpet is seen in the guise of a murderer.

Onwudinjo's poem is full of reminiscences about wartime combat drills. From the sinister sounds of the bugler's trumpet, the reader is led to the parade ground:

and the 'fall in' 'fall-out' soon reinforced  
snakeing weals twist the trunks  
and maddening feet stampede the door  
we drive into the morning air  
sown with the teeth of harmattan  
'by..... the front  
Jogging ... begin'. (3)

The persona is seen falling in and falling out, and this causes enough agony. Being a conscript soldier, he has not yet mastered the rigours of marching. It is even more agonising to note that the marching exercise is done outside in the cold. To support this, the parade ground is said to be 'sown with the teeth of harmattan'. Once again, the poet uses personification, but this time it indicates the biting effect of cold. It is also an indication that he gives us an eyewitness account of the strenuous combat exercise.

After the rigorous march past, the soldiers begin to jog around the camp. This is indicated at the end of the poem, but it is given elaborate attention in yet another poem entitled 'Jogging Begins'. The poem opens in a factual manner and provides information about the compulsory jogging:

At first you trill with cold  
And your teeth rattle and clatter unrestrained  
with the searing cold  
You must steel yourself  
to the bite of harmattan. (4)

For the poem to convey its full import, the reader must be able to listen to the sounds of words. In reading this poem our experience involves more than considering the agony of conscript soldiers. It includes our apprehension of the poem's form, its patterns of sound and sense. Onwudinjo's choice of diction is both aurally and visually

effective. The sound of the poem echoes the footfalls of the jogging soldiers. The sounds of such words as 'trill', 'rattle' and 'clatter' should be taken into account in weighing up the poet's intentions here. Besides, the sounds of these words are used to echo the cries of conscript soldiers, who are subjected to horribly cold weather.

Shortly after, the troops begin to get hot and breathless from the exertion of 'jogging'. They are seen:

Streaming and steaming sweat  
and trailing clipping tang of healthy youth  
And you roar the songs that pulled  
the village from her sleepy dawn. (4)

The poet's account of conscript soldiers who have become tired from 'jogging' up and down shows his capacity for direct reporting. But more importantly, the poet's choice of words reminds us of Alexander Pope's statement that the 'sound must seem an echo to the sense' (12). The poem is remarkable for its sound quality, and one of the best ways to appreciate it is to try to read it aloud. Alliterative words contribute to the sound impact of this poem. They are used in creating the sounds of steady drops of sweat from the exhausted soldiers. In other words, the poet captures front-line jogging experience through sound effect.

In 'Songs of Combat', the physical exhaustion is derivable from the continuous war chants. The speaker captures it vividly thus:

Our song flew up and down the rolling plains  
He-echo-  
Down the smokey vales  
Ye-echo. (6)

This brief extract from the poem is rich in onomatopoeic effect. In the sounds of these words, one can perceive that the conscript soldiers are in agony and tired out. The onomatopoeic words enact their terrible situation. In it, the sound quality of language recreates the bitter war experiences.

The poet makes much of the fact that war chants are part and parcel of the war. This is made plain in the following lines:

Our chants flew like eagles...  
To the beat of combat drills  
to toughen up the boys

Boys must ripen to men  
in four weeks  
And men must shed  
the idle fat  
'Brains and brawns only'

'Brains and brawns', roared commandant Murphy. (6)

As this passage shows, war chants are strategies used by commandant Murphy to arouse the fighting spirit of the young conscript. Although so many 'boys' have been conscripted to join the army during the war, the sad reality is that they have to undergo agonising physical and mental exercise within one month. This is because during training sessions, commandant Murphy, stresses the qualities of 'Brains and brawns' as yardsticks of victory.

The military training is such that the 'Boys must ripen to men' in no distant time. This line illustrates the truth of the assertion that any single word or phrase in a poem is qualitatively different as it might be used in ordinary language (Evan Watkins 25). The word 'ripen' is usually associated with fruits. But in the context of the poem it is associated with conscript soldiers. As a result, it is suggestive of Murphy's relentless attempts to make sure that the 'boys' reach maturity within four weeks. In pursuance of this goal, the 'boys' undergo hasty and hazardous training. This is to facilitate their physical and mental maturity. In addition to this, the commandant forces the 'boys' to trim down so that they can be fit for fighting.

### **Agony over the Wounded**

The poet agonises over the plight of the wounded in 'Nightmares'. One striking effect of the poem is its abrupt opening lines:

Put your ears  
to the bosom of the land  
and hear  
the clash and clatter and clangour of armour. (14)

In order to understand this poem, one needs to listen to its sound and think about its sense. The poet evokes an impression of gunfire by using words for their aural qualities. Much of the effect of the above lines depends upon our awareness of the precision with

which the poet has chosen his words. This poem repays reading aloud because the sound of the verse is an integral part of meaning. The succession of sound in the expression 'clash and clatter and clangour' indicates the deafening sounds of guns. Alliteration plays a large part in creating aural effects. In this regard, the poet uses sound of words to create a verbal mimicry of war.

At every moment in this poem the sound of words helps to convey the impression of warfare. This is continued in the following lines:

Listen close  
and hear  
the barked orders and running feet,  
hear the whirr, the chatter and  
the stutter of signal guns. (14)

The mounting tension, the motions of soldiers, the firing of guns, is all integrated into the aural impact of this poem. Here the recurrent sound mimes two different kinds of action. Firstly, the verbal sounds imitate the noise made by the approaching soldiers. Secondly, the harsh and discordant effect of diction is used to imitate the sound of gunshots.

This is continued again and again:  
and the rapid burst  
of rapid recoiling ruffles  
the roar of Jerry guns  
and the thunder and crash of long toms. (14)

The poet's choice of words gives the poem a cacophonous quality. Commenting on the concept of cacophony, M.H. Abrams says that it may be 'inadvertent' through a lapse in a writer's attention or skill. Besides, cacophony may also be 'deliberate' and 'functional' (58). From the above extract, one notices that the poet does not use alliteration for its own sake; it is used to emphasise the continuous blast of guns. In this regard, the sound device underlines the nightmarish quality of the poem.

This poem is unique in that it keeps the frightful pictures of the wounded in suspense. It starts by making us feel and hear the blast of guns. Thereafter, he shows us the pictures of those scarred by the exchange of gunfire:

and the sharp intermittent twangs  
of the sniper's sneaky gun  
the wild crescendo of screaming blood  
howls of severed limbs  
and apocalyptic tremors  
Terrors  
Offlying  
OGBUNIGWE. (14)

The poet's method is that he gives us a build-up to the piteous spectacles of gaping wounds and flowing blood. In this connection, all the details of shooting in the earlier part of the poem are in preparation for the ultimate aim of presenting the wounded. The poem begins with the exposition of severe shootings and it reaches its climax by showing us victims of grievous bodily harm. Besides, the word 'OGBUNIGWE' reminds one of the Biafran weapons of mass destruction. 'OGBUNIGWE' is made to appear as the only word in the last line. By so doing, the poet seeks to emphasise its dangerous nature. In addition to this, the word 'apocalypse' as used in the poem deserves some comments. In the first place, it is a biblical allusion to the destruction of the world. But more importantly, it is used to project the poet's apocalyptic view of the Nigerian civil war. To him the war is ghastly, as human 'limbs' have been deformed. Moreover, the 'screaming blood' is an indication that the war has left hideous scars on many people. Therefore, Onwudinjo's apocalyptic view of war is that war is evil and destructive. Besides, sound devices in this poem are not just adornments, but they are used to reflect a total picture of those scarred by gunfire.

In the poem entitled 'The Green Horns', the poet uses a persona for two reasons: as an observer and a commentator. These are the opening lines:

It's sad  
To stay in camp  
Waiting for the jungle to mature,  
watching the bound and fated crowd  
from the safety of the pop. (2)

The poem is about the feelings of agony experienced by the persona on seeing a lot of wounded soldiers. These lines are written in the distinct style of everyday speech. The poem opens in a conversational tone. Onwudinjo's aim is to communicate with the reader. Simplicity of style is appropriate so that the gruesome pictures of the wounded soldiers are conveyed clearly. A disheartening reality of the war is that many soldiers have bound up their injuries with 'pop'. This acronym, which stands for plaster of paris, conjures up a mental picture of an orthopedic hospital. As much as possible the devastating effect of the war is captured in medical terms. The poet's aim is to show us a number of soldiers who have undergone orthopaedic surgery. In this respect, Onwudinjo's use of the medical acronym is appropriate. It has arisen out of the need to provide an authentic version of casualties during the war.

The poet employs a persona through whose eyes one sees the victims of a grievous war. One senses the persona's power of observation, revealing the war's damaging consequences:

Watching the tired soldiers  
who have learnt not to die  
healing from a stump  
Hacked by blazing hand grenade. (2)

The sight of soldiers nursing physical injuries is unpleasant and depressing. Here the poet's language is deft, brilliant and contrived to generate a shock of comic surprise. At first sight it sounds surprising that some soldiers have 'learnt' how to conquer death. But on a closer examination, the poet is referring to the soldier's life-and-death struggle. The poet uses language in a paradoxical way, thus stressing the agony of those nursing severe injuries. Here Onwudinjo's diction illustrates the saying that 'poetry is memorable in a way that prose is not' (Burton and Chacksfield 43). In this regard, the poet's paradoxical presentation of the wounded soldiers is such that can linger on in one's memory.

Onwudinjo conveys to the reader in subtle way what he himself feels about the civil war. This, he achieves, through the use of a persona. The persona's presence is crucial; it is the persona who shapes the point of view from which the tragic events are to be told:

I was hurt by the anxious strut  
of the green-clad green horns  
callow youths  
who know not soldiering more  
Than sporting pips and epaulettes,  
And itched to roast and burn  
In the devil's frying pan. (2)

The poet takes the agony of the war as his major starting-point but treats the theme not only emotionally but on a didactic level as well. With this kind of direct comment, the reader becomes aware of the poet's voice, which directs our attention to a serious lesson to be learnt from the war. Although the 'green horns' are celebrating the injuries they have inflicted on their opponents, they have lost sight of the double-edged quality of war. Onwudinjo's basic method is to adopt a persona who talks in the first person to the reader. It is an example of how a poet can present his view of war through the thoughts and emotions of a speaker. The poet says that in war sadism assumes a terrifying importance. Nevertheless, the damaging effect of war is a vicious circle. In the speaker's opinion the 'greenhorns' are celebrating out of ignorance. This is because they themselves are in danger of sustaining severe injuries. The ironic and barbaric presentation of the 'greenhorns' support Romanus Egudu's statement that the civil war experience has provided poets with opportunity of manifesting through art the nature of their feelings about life and human values (104).

### **Agony over the Dead**

In 'Terror', the poet renders a ghoulish account of the Nigerian civil war. A large part of the poem reflects the horrific nature of war. It begins abruptly thus:

Who can tell the terror  
in the flight  
or the wrenched-off heads in spray  
or the grotesque stagger of the head  
Less trunk in flight  
Oh Lord how he ran!  
How he fell how he slumped! (28)

Much of Onwudinjo's portrayal of the war here is devoted to physical description, but it is not merely detail for the sake of detail. Each aspect of the description adds to our impression of the poem's macabre atmosphere. The poet uses imaginative detail to make a point about the ghastly scenes of war. In this poem, the scenes of carnage are shown through the consciousness of the speaker. One shudders with fear to see bullets ripping into human 'head'. Onwudinjo includes just enough descriptive detail to enhance the ghoulish setting. Reading this poem, one notices that some soldiers are collapsing and dying from gunshots. Moreover, the use of exclamation enhances Onwudinjo's skill in depicting action and emotion and in building up the nightmarish setting.

The language of the poem is chosen for sympathetic appeals:  
or the eyeless stare of skulls  
smashed up long ago;  
The ceaseless twang and whine of death  
That poured all day all night  
From the glow-lipped guns. (28)

It has become obvious that casualties have reached monstrous proportions. The main force of the poem seems to come from its piteous presentation of dead soldiers. Furthermore, its full force cannot be felt until one notes that there are cases where dead bodies have been dismembered. Besides, the poet selects those words that most record his experience. The very sound and rhythm of words such as 'twang' and 'whine' mime the experience; they contribute to the macabre tales of blood-sucking guns.

This portrayal of scenes of carnage runs through the poem. It is continued as follows:

And the thump and roar of rockets and endless bombs  
And the crash and anguished cries  
The hellish howls that rose and rose  
Above the din of fire and blood  
That poured from mouths and guts  
That never can speak again. (28)

If these lines are read aloud, it is possible to hear the staccato bursts of gunfire. The poem's strength is that of giving to the rhythm and sound of words the exact rhythm and sound of gun and bomb

blasts. The poet wishes to take us into the battlefield itself, and the outcome of this is a deliberate patterning of words. The sound quality of language, which continually recurs in Onwudinjo's poems, is one of the marks of his individuality. One of the most vivid and revealing examples of the sound qualities of language are to be found in the above quoted lines. They are a perfect combination of repetition, assonance and even alliteration. These devices are used to express the sound of gunfire as well as those screaming out in terror. Therefore, the feeling of agony permeates the poem's diction, sound and rhythm.

In 'Women of Biafra', the poem, which gives the collection its title, there is a photographic record of the agony of women on the Biafran side. One obvious feature of the poem is the sense of war as a source of death. The poem makes it clear that war is painful, full of tears:

Women of Biafra  
so hard to forget  
The sleepy-eyed girls  
Hair tumbled to inviting chaos. (29)

In this poem, the poet creates a speaker who agonises over the predicament of Biafran women. Onwudinjo's simplicity of words is something that might well be imitated by other poets. He is not obscure or difficult, what he wants to say he says it with artistic skill. For instance, the women are described as 'sleepy-eyed', because they have been suffering from insomnia since the outbreak of war. It is possible for a reader to see the sleepwalking scenes with perfect ease.

From stanza to stanza, the speaker of the poem seems imbued with photographic memory of the suffering women:

Women of Biafra  
So hard to forget  
They saw us in mind fatigue  
And held their breasts  
And wept. (29)

The recurrence of the phrase 'Women of Biafra' shows how the poet tries to create a feeling of sadness. The use of repetition is an important aspect of its rhythm. This is used to echo the distant cries

of women. Onwudinjo's literary style is an example of clarity and force; he never shows the slightest difficulty in making his meaning intelligible to us.

As the poem progresses, the poet indicates the most painful reason why these women are wailing and crying. It is captured as follows:

They wept  
For the nameless  
Logs of wood carted to hasty graves  
Everyday on barrows and push trucks  
They mourned  
For the throngs  
Strewn and scattered  
across mine fields and blazing parapets  
melodies broken at midrib. (29)

Onwudinjo has to concentrate meaning and emotions within the space of a few words. The poet's language is concentrated and weighty. This need to concentrate language leads the poet to find images that will communicate the deep sense of loss. By a stroke of imagination human corpses are equated to 'Logs of wood'. This comparison is typical of what Horace (64) refers to as distinguished writing. This can be achieved when a poet renews a particular idea. The effectiveness of reading the poem depends on our imagining the similarity between dead bodies and 'logs of wood'. One reason why they are comparable is that both have lifeless qualities. The poet holds his readers attention by his gift for making the scenes of carnage seem true. Few will read this poem without experiencing a sinking of the spirit. Above all, this analogy enables us to see the dead in a fresh way.

Many women are seen weeping over severe human losses:  
At mid noon  
They cried  
For us, volunteer expandables  
Codomen  
Canon-fodder retraining to break  
the endless walls of fire and brimstone  
blazing on faggots of men

these 30 monstrous months. (30)

The voice of the speaker is that of a conscript. He speaks with the skills of a conscript soldier, wishing to make as clear as possible to his readers scenes, which they have never witnessed themselves. Furthermore, it is revealed that these women are crying their eyes out over the fate of 'volunteer expendables' and 'canon-fodder'. The speaker himself belongs to this category of soldiers. The poet's diction here is suggestive of the disregard for human lives during war. This leads to the imaginative reconstruction of the dead as 'faggots'. In this picture, the reader is struck by the remarkable resemblance between dead bodies and pieces of fried meat. This picture creates a melancholic atmosphere.

Long before now, two Nigerian poets, Chinua Achebe and Ossie Enekwe have lamented over the agony of women during the civil war. One notices this in 'Refuge Mother and Child' (*Beware Soul Brother*, 8) and 'Mass For The Dead' (*Broken Pots*, 27) respectively. In Achebe's poem a weeping mother is seen attending to her 'child':

She held  
a ghost smile between her teeth  
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's  
pride as she combed the rust-coloured  
hair left on his skull.

Similarly, Enekwe presents the picture of weeping women as follows:

In the valley  
the women folk wail  
and battered bells chime  
the daily demise of youth.  
The concourse of the living stare,  
not sure if to pray for the dead  
or for themselves dying in degrees.

Achebe captures the agony of women rather ironically. This is because the 'mother's tenderness' is shown posthumously. However, Enekwe captures the collective wailing of women through auditory appeals. Here the tolling of 'bells' is used to mimic the war's casualty toll, along with the collective cries of women. Onwudinjo's poem can be compared to Achebe's in that both poets

employ offensive images to portray the dead. But Enekwe's poem differs slightly because he portrays the agony of war in paradoxical terms. This notwithstanding, the three Nigerian poets depict the sorrowful condition of women during the war.

The poem entitled 'Rescue Party', exemplifies the conventionally abrupt opening of most of Onwudinjo's poems. It is set in a war camp and the speaker begins by making us know that some soldiers have been sent on a rescue operation:

'4-man rescue party formed up.  
Ready for action Sir!' roared Ed Braiye  
'carry on Ed. Be careful, no heroics, good luck'  
And before I could utter another  
A quivering salute flushed across the setting sun  
And they left, hurry to action (27).

In reading these lines, one comes to see that although poems are not plays, sometimes they can employ dialogue to dramatise situations and events in a way reminiscent of stage plays. The earlier part of the poem takes a form of dialogue between two soldiers. This has a part to play in contributing to the mounting tension in the camp. The poet uses the dramatic technique, which is an attempt to reproduce the dialogue of these soldiers. The above is a short sample of Onwudinjo's mastery of atmosphere – the power of creating a war camp which any reader can see as real.

This is seen especially in the second stanza:

Akpan turned round once  
A terrible smile on his chubby face  
'See you tomorrow, when the raid is over  
At Rendezvous with cornmeal porridge,  
stock fish and truculent breasts at the Mammy  
market  
when the raid is over'. (27)

The poet reveals his talent for verisimilitude through his use of dialogue. The dialogue can be acted on a stage more or less as it is written. Evidently, Akpan is a member of the 'rescue' team and he is said to be wearing a 'terrible smile' on his 'chubby face', this underlines the mounting tension and horror of the poem. It is

especially in the use of paradox here that the agonising quality of this poem manifests itself.

One interesting aspect of the poem is the switch from dramatic technique to that of the narrative:

Aghast, I watched them bobbing, cannon fodder,  
Up and down, up and down, up and down  
willed to steel  
Down the line of fire  
They went, ready for action  
6 hours later, sit rep  
4-man rescue party bombed across the parapet  
Survivors: nil. (27)

To understand this poem, one must have a good grasp of the ironical situations. Irony appears in the poem's language, in its description of incident and in its point of view. Starting from Onwudinjo's language, it has become clear that the title itself is ironic. This is because the 'rescue party' ends up as casualties. Moreover, it is an irony of fate that Akpan never comes back to fulfil his date at the 'mammy market'. In fact, the 'terrible smile' on Akpan's face before the 'raid' foreshadows the painful death that awaits him. Moreover, the poet also uses direct invective to emphasise the ironical situation. Although the soldiers are warming up for the 'rescue operation', the speaker refers to them as 'cannon-fodder'. This is a direct denunciation by the use of derogatory epithet. These men are actually 'Cannon-fodder'. The lesson is that in times of war death is a living reality; it can come at any time, striking down soldiers on both sides.

### **Conclusion**

It is the portrayal of front-line agonies that will ensure Onwudinjo a central position among Nigerian war poets. His experience as a combatant officer has prepared him to write about the brutalities of war in explicit terms. He does this by a patient accumulation of detail and with typical honesty. The reporter's eye, which is the foundation of all his war writing, is ever present. Onwudinjo remains a faithful reporter, able to pin down in words the agonies of the soldier's daily life during the war. The poet is able to shock

with the horrors of details; these agonies are explicit and his poetry serves its purpose of shocking the reader.

He is conscious of the poetic devices he uses and deploys them with great artistry. The harsh consonant sounds and vowels of almost all his war poems support the telling choice of words to emphasise the physical and mental agonies. Onwudinjo is interesting in this respect. It is the sounds of words, which seek to persuade the reader about the reality of war. The poet uses words for sound as well as for suggesting meaning. In his poetry the most obvious of the poetic devices based on sound is alliteration. In these war poems the chime of repeated sounds awakens us to the reality of front-line gunfire. In this regard, the poems are meant to appeal to our ears as well as to our minds; he finds dissonant words and places them in the best possible order so as to generate sounds of agony. Against this background, these poems have harshness of sounds, which is striking. Among Nigerian war poets, he is pre-eminent in this respect – using sound effects to reinforce sense. By so doing the agonies of war are heightened and reinforced by the sound effects rather than subservient to them.

Usually, he creates a speaker who is clearly not the poet, but the poems suggest that Onwudinjo's own attitude towards the war is not markedly different from the speaker's. The brutalities of war are experienced through the speaker's eyes; the reader is forced to see the disastrous happenings through his way. It is typical of this poet that he uses speakers who have experience of front-line fighting. Thus, the poet's speakers are saddled with the task of exposing combat drills; agonising over the fate of the wounded, and lamenting over the dead. These agonies of the war are captured in superb images. The pictures are sometimes of haunting and evocative brilliance. In his capacity to recreate the scenes of carnage and convey it with metaphorical subtlety, he is unique among African war poets. An exploration of the poet's imagery further deepens these agonies. His images are not mere appendages but an integral part of the poems. Onwudinjo's images are horrible, enhancing the ghoulish atmosphere of not just the civil war in Nigeria, but of wars in general.

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