



IRONY OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY: EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS OF THE BIAFRA WAR IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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Abstract:

This paper is predicated on a fictionalised aspect of the Nigerian civil war and/or the Nigerian-Biafran war, which took place from 1967 to 1970, and which actually fragilised the socio-political structure of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Drawing from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it examines the ironically ever-widening gap between idealistic revolutionary expectations and pragmatic outcomes of the Nigerian civil war. It argues that a combination of foreseen and unforeseen factors thwarted the Eastern Region's attempt to create an independent 'Igbo nation' known as 'The Republic of Biafra'. The aspiration to create an ethno-nationalist Igbo state failed because the separatist army could not defeat the well-equipped federal army; the armed struggle was spontaneous and poorly planned; the army's leadership was plagued by scandalous ills; and the army ultimately turned against the population it sought to liberate from the Nigerian federation. Based on these reasons, the paper demonstrates how the irony of the Biafra struggle for political autonomy, propelled by the Igbo community's appetite for self-determination, eventually led to a calamitous civil war that caused extensive suffering, which invariably highlights the ineffectiveness of violent conflict as a means to self-determination. Therefore, reading Adichie (2006) from the point of view of the ironic twist of the Biafran war affords us the vantage point from which to question the continuous rise of ethno-nationalist-led independence struggles being waged by predominantly uniformed ethnic groups in postcolonial multi-ethnic societies, especially in Africa. The discussions engage with the key new historicism's concept of: referentiality and the postcolonial concept of resistance.

Keywords: Nationalism and nation, ethnicity, autonomy/independence, separatist struggle, leadership

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1. Introduction

The attempt by high-ranking military officers from Nigeria's Eastern Region to establish a separatist state called the Republic of Biafra was the outcome of the ethno-political tensions between the Eastern Region and the Northern-controlled military leadership of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Forsyth (2015), and Achebe (2012). The conflict, which took on an ethno-religious dimension, culminated in the Nigerian Civil War, triggered by the declaration of the independence of the Eastern region by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu;

"Affirming your trust and confidence in me; Having mandated me to proclaim on your behalf and in your name, that Eastern Nigeria be a sovereign independent Republic [...] of the name and title 'The Republic of Biafra' (Forsyth, 2015, p.83). In fact, Forsyth (2015), and scholars such as Falola and Heaton (2018), Ojibara (2016), Aremu and Buhari (2017); Akresh et al. (2011), Etire and Toru-Orua Sagbama (2022), Miller (2024), Gould (2013), Enyinnaya et al. (2020), and Achebe (2012), respectively, attribute the outbreak of the civil war to the ethnic-driven political tensions and the coups d'état of January 15th, and May 1966, events that precipitated widespread violence, including the ethnic cleansing of the Igbo population in the Northern Region of Nigeria. At this juncture, it is necessary to indicate that this conflict degenerated into a civil war, which is considered as "[...] an armed combat taking place within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between two parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities" (Kalyvas, 2006, p.17).

In this regard, the armed conflict was the consequence of the widespread divisions within Nigeria's multiethnic groups, which were exacerbated by fragile independence and post-independence political institutions as well as ineffective leadership structures. According to Ojibara (2016); Aremu and Buhari (2017); Akresh *et al.* (2011); Achebe (2012); Etire and Toru-Orua Sagbama (2022); Falola and Heaton (2018); and Forsyth (2015), these structural and ideological tensions were deeply intertwined, collectively laying the groundwork for the crisis. The Nigerian Civil War, therefore, cannot be understood as the product of isolated events; rather, it emerged from the convergence of historical, political, and ethnic forces that defined the early postcolonial state. By foregrounding these interconnected dynamics, this discussion seeks to provide a nuance understanding of the failed efforts of the Biafran secessionist movement and the enduring implications of the conflict for Nigeria's national cohesion and collective memory.

In reality, the Nigerian civil war can be contextualised within the broader trajectory followed by most newly independent African states in the early stages of decolonization in the 1960s. It is assumed that weak and ineffective leadership at independence largely accounts for the proliferation of coups d'état and military juntas that dominated the African continent, cutting across its former French, Portuguese, Spanish, Belgian, and British colonies. The principal cause of this situation lies in the crisis

of legitimacy resulting from the manner in which these European colonial powers granted political independence to their African colonies. In many cases, these powers privileged particular ethnic minorities within complex multiethnic amalgamations, elevating them to positions of leadership while marginalizing majority groups who consequently felt excluded from the nation-building process. As Ogundiya (2018) observes, “[...] *political rebellion in Africa is a symptom and consequence of the endemic crisis of legitimacy. The crisis of legitimacy confronting governments in Africa has debilitating consequences – separatist demands, wars, rebellion, insurgence*” (p.1). It is against this backdrop that the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war can be understood, particularly as a consequence of the Igbo secessionist attempt, itself informed by the strong influence of ethnic nationalism and tensions that shaped the political structure of the Nigerian nation-state at and after independence (Achebe, 2012), (Forsyth, 2015), and (Ogundiya, 2018). Similarly, Falola and Heaton (2008) argue that Nigeria’s democratic leadership at independence was undermined by crises of illegitimacy arising from its federal structure, which fostered ethno-religious nationalism and weakened national cohesion. This, in turn, fuelled secessionist aspirations among various ethnic groups, most notably in the Eastern Region dominated by the Igbo ethnic community. Ogundiya (2018) states that:

“Nigeria recorded its first separatist demand in 1966 when Isaac Adaka Boro declared the Niger Delta a separate and independent republic. In 1967, civil war broke out when Lieutenant Colonel Ojukwu pronounced the birth of the Biafran Republic from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. More than one million people died. The horror of the war is still fresh in the memory of Nigerians.” (p.4)

The near-chaotic state of Nigeria at independence, as depicted by Ogundiya, shows the emergence of an explosive conflict situation. Indeed, the outbreak of the civil war and the devastation it caused is considered a consequence of the deficiencies of the political and military leadership, compounded by the deep-seated ethno-religious fragmentation of the nascent nation-state. This is highlighted by Ojibara (2016), who indicates that:

“[...] the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) [...] didn't in any way come as a surprise because the possibilities of a war onset had been with the Nigerian state since independence or amalgamation of 1914. The events that sparked the outbreak of the civil war could be located in a cobweb of factors ranging from the remote which includes but not limited to the military coup d'état of January 15, the counter coup of July 29, 1966, other factors are the regional election crisis in Western Nigeria in 1965; the Tiv riots of 1964; the Federal Elections of 1964; the killing of the Igbos living in Northern Nigeria from May to September 1966 [...]; the structural Imbalance of the Nigerian federation; and, most importantly, the asymmetrical distribution of power among the various ethnic and geopolitical groups [...].” (p.53)

Indeed, the conflict-ridden atmosphere that characterized Nigeria at independence – culminating in two major coups d'état and, ultimately, a civil war with a staggering death toll - has left an enduring psychological imprint on the collective consciousness of the Eastern Region in particular, and the nation as a whole. It is this collective consciousness that Adichie (2006) fictionalizes as she exposes the atrocities of the conflict, thereby reminding Nigerians and the Igbo population in general, of the necessity to uphold the positive values of democracy as deterrents to the mayhem the country experienced in the close to four-year conflict.

2. The Irony of the Aspiration for an 'Igbo nation' within the Federation

Historically speaking, observers and scholars such as Achebe (2012); Forsyth (2015); Falola and Heaton (2018); Ojibara (2016); Aremu and Buhari (2017); Leone and Osili (2011); Etire and Toru-Orua Sagbama (2022); Miller (2024); Gould (2013); and Enyinnaya *et al.* (2020) hold that the Biafran secessionist armed struggle, which spanned from 1967 to 1970, was a failure. The failure is attributed to numerous factors that contributed to thwarting the Eastern Region's aspiration for self-determination. These reasons range from the lack of international support for the Igbo; the hasty declaration of secession; the unpreparedness of the separatist army; the superior strength and ferocity of the Nigerian army, aided by segments of the international western community; the use of starvation as a weapon through the federal blockade of the Eastern Region; the heavy loss of civilian lives and its demoralizing impact on both soldiers and the population; and the inadequate training and poor equipment of the secessionist forces. Thus, the discussion below argues that the combination of these factors illustrates the illusory nature of revolutionary ethnic nationalist ideology that underpinned the Biafran attempt for independent statehood.

This dimension of the civil war is fictionalized by Adichie (2006), where she exposes most of the above-mentioned factors that led to the defeat of the Igbo separatist movement by the Nigerian federal army. Indeed, a close reading of the novel reveals that the Eastern Region's secession from the Federal Republic of Nigeria was untenable, largely because the separatist army lacked the capacity to overcome a better-equipped and more professionally trained national army. Hence, the failure may be attributed to the evident weaknesses of the Biafran military leadership, which failed to fully anticipate the financial and logistical demands of waging a prolong war against a federal government with superior economic resources and access to advanced weaponry. Therefore, Adichie (2006) portrays the short-lived existence of the Republic of Biafra as, in part, the consequence of the egocentric dispositions of its military leadership under the command of Colonel Ojukwu Emeka.

The apparent authoritarian attitude of Colonel Ojukwu toward high-ranking officers within the separatist army constitutes one of the major weaknesses of the military leadership. The case of Madu, whom Colonel Ojukwu falsely accuses of plotting to overthrow him in collaboration with other Biafran military officers, reveals the fragility

of the aspiration for independence. In reality, Colonel Ojukwu's dictatorial style of leadership becomes evident in his unwillingness to tolerate criticism from his officers when they draw his attention to the reasons behind their inability to defeat the federal forces. Actually, Ojukwu fails to recognise that it is the responsibility of officers such as Madu to point out the shortcomings within their ranks and within the army as a whole. Consequently, it is highly ironic when Colonel Ojukwu, as leader of the 'liberation army', refuses to listen to criticisms and suggestions that could have positively contributed to the success of the separatist struggle. This major weakness of Colonel Ojukwu is brought to light when his commanders observe that the conspicuous absence of arms, ammunition, and military hardware constitutes a major handicap in the face of a well-equipped federal army. This is evidenced when Kainene recounts:

"Madu told me today that the army has nothing, absolutely nothing. They thought Ojukwu had arms piled up somewhere, given the way he's been talking, 'no power in Black Africa can defeat us!' So Madu and some of the officers who came back from the North went to tell him that we have no arms, no mobilization of troops, and that our men are training with wooden guns, for goodness' sake! They wanted him to release his stockpiled arms. But he turned around and said they were plotting to overthrow him. Apparently, he has no arms at all, and he plans to defeat Nigeria with his fists." (Adichie, 2006, p.185)

The outcry of the officers constitutes indisputable evidence that Colonel Ojukwu founded the future Republic of Biafra on mere propaganda, despite being fully aware of the difficulty of defeating the well-equipped and highly trained federal army. In this regard, the absurd accusations levelled against officers who remain committed to the cause of the Eastern Region appear to serve as a means of concealing his apparent shortcomings as a military leader motivated largely by vengeance against the federal leadership, which failed to intervene during the massacre of the Igbo population in the northern region of the country, (as recounted by Achebe (2012), and Forsyth (1969)). Indeed, Colonel Ojukwu's responsibility in the failed attempt to secure Igbo regional autonomy becomes particularly evident when separatist army instructors such as Madu are compelled to train soldiers with wooden guns. Consequently, in his determination to sustain the propaganda that projects him as a liberator, Ojukwu brands conscientious officers as traitors merely because they draw his attention to the grave dangers confronting the region in a war he hastily declared.

According to Achebe (2012), some intellectuals in the Eastern Region believed that Ojukwu was not a good leader for the Biafran cause because he was blinded by ego and "[...] a lack of administrative experience, and obsessed with interpersonal competition and petty rivalries" (p.123) between him and General Yakubu Gowon, the military leader of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Better still, Colonel Ojukwu might have declared the war because of his ambition to challenge Gowon's authority as a military leader of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This historical fact might have been the fundamental reason for the defeat of the Biafran army, especially when Adichie (2006) exposes the propaganda that

accompanied Ojukwu's declaration of war. This is most apparent in the sarcasm conveyed in the remark "*apparently he has no arms at all, and he plans to defeat Nigeria with his fists*" (Adichie, 2006, p.185). The irony embedded in this pathetic declaration underscores the tragic circumstances that culminated in the massacre and devastation experienced by the Eastern Region during the war. In fact, Achebe (2012) indicates that another section of scholars from the Eastern Region, against the backdrop of carnage caused by the conflict, believe that the war would have been prevented if the Region at the time had a military leader other than Major-General Ojukwu Emeka (p.125).

The views of Achebe and a section of intellectuals from the Eastern Region, as well as the fictional portrayal of these views recorded by Adichie (2006), all indicate the state of unpreparedness of the separatist army. Adichie's (2006) portrayal of the deplorable state of the separatist army corroborates the factual account of the shortcomings of the Biafran army provided by Forsyth (1969), when he states:

"Never in modern history has a war been fought between armies of such disparity in strength and firepower as the Nigeria-Biafra conflict. On the one hand has been the Nigerian Army, a monstrous agglomeration of over 85000 Men armed to the teeth with modern weapons, whose government has had uninhibited access to the armouries of at least two major powers and several smaller ones, which has been endowed with limitless supplies [...] Facing it has been the Biafran Army, a volunteer force representing less than one in ten of those who have presented themselves at the recruiting booths for service. Manpower has never been the problem. It has been arming those prepared to fight [...] Forty per cent of the Biafran fighting manpower is equipped with captured Nigerian equipment [...] Also contributing to the firepower have been home-made rockets, land-mines, anti-personnel mines, stand-cannon, booby-traps and Molotov cocktails." (pp. 95-96)

When one considers the disparity between the two armies described by Forsyth (1969), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2006), one is tempted to hold Colonel Ojukwu responsible for the massacre of the Easterners in a war that was not only poorly planned but also hastily declared. First, Colonel Ojukwu, like his officers, is fully aware that the wooden guns used by conscripted secessionist soldiers during training cannot adequately prepare them for real combat, let alone enable them to defeat the regular army of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which is equipped with sophisticated weaponry (Achebe, 2012, p.136). Secondly, his army lacks the most basic and essential equipment required to wage and win a war, yet he does very little to remedy this major setback. It is particularly disturbing that he neither seeks effective means of acquiring real weaponry nor pays sufficient attention to the advice and suggestions of some of his high-ranking officers, such as Madu. Indeed, the fictionalized Colonel Ojukwu does not exhibit the strong and constructive leadership qualities necessary for the effective mobilization and training of volunteers, indispensable to the realization of the Eastern Region's autonomy. Colonel Ojukwu's attitude toward Madu and other high-ranking commanders whom he accuses of plotting against him confirms Desgrandchamps' (2018) claim that "[...]The

intransigence of the Biafran leaders was also partly to blame for the desperate situation in which the civilians found themselves [...]" (p.2). In other words, the attitude of Colonel Ojukwu displays an intolerance of his authority, which does not contribute to the achievement of the Biafran objective to offer security to its citizens in an autonomous state.

In essence, the failure of the Biafran military leadership which frustrated the aspirations of the Igbo ethnic community, is particularly evident when the fictional representation of Colonel Ujukwu's inadequacies is juxtaposed with the historical reality documented by Forsyth (1969), who describes the meagre armament of the separatist army as consisting of "[...] *anti-personnel mines, stand-cannon, booby-traps and Molotov cocktails*" (pp.95-96), and Achebe (2012) who recalls that "*My nephew, Uche Achebe, [who] had left to join the army [...] lamented the fact that the Biafrans were not well equipped and appeared to be in perpetual retreat [...]*" (p.191). More significantly, his exaggerated sense of personal infallibility prevented him from giving due consideration to the tactical recommendations of his officers, thereby weakening the operational effectiveness of the Biafran army. This deplorable condition of the Biafran army is further vividly underscored by Achebe (2012), who observes:

"The Biafrans were devoid of any heavy military equipment apart from that of the former Nigerian battalion stationed in Enugu, Saracen armored cars, and 105-millimeter howitzers. Federick Forsyth recalls in an excellent BBC documentary, Biafra: Fighting a War Without Guns, that Biafran soldiers marched into war one man behind the other because they had only one rifle between them, and the thinking was that if one soldier was killed in combat, the other would pick the only weapon available and continue fighting." (pp. 148-149.)

The image that emerges from Achebe's (2012) declaration is that of an army composed of poorly equipped and inadequately trained volunteers whose aspiration for victory becomes little more than a figment of the imagination. It is therefore pathetic that the soldiers are doomed to death, as depicted in Adichie (2006), and reinforced by the historical accounts of the war highlighted by Forsyth (1969) and Achebe (2012). Indeed, the fictionalised Ojukwu's vested interest in preserving his personal authority as leader, even in the face of imminent defeat by the federal army due to severe material inadequacies, causes him to overlook the fact that military command requires collective teamwork in which a leader must listen both to officers at the battlefield and to the political wing of the separatist movement. This fictionalised authoritarian tendency associated with the historical figure of Colonel Ojukwu is identified by Achebe (2012) when he recounts:

"Ojukwu [...] told me that he wanted the new committee to report directly to him, outside the control of the cabinet. I became immediately apprehensive. I was concerned that this arrangement could very easily become an area of conflict between the cabinet and this new committee that I was going to head. Who would be reporting to whom? And it seemed to

me that Ojukwu wanted a hold on the organs of government - these two organs, plus the military - not so much separated but working at a pace and manner of his design." (p.138)

Achebe's description of Ojukwu's tyrannical attitude, characterized by his desire to exercise absolute control over all aspects of power, is deeply ironic for a leader who purportedly seeks to liberate the Igbo community from the injustices inherent in the country's federal structure of governance. Achebe's (2012) portrayal of this historical figure appears to dovetail with Adichie's (2006) representation of the historic Igbo leader. In Adichie's (2006) fictionalized account, the leader is depicted as a man entrenched in an often arbitrary and cruel exercise of authority over his officers, a conduct frequently driven by selfish motives. This is evident in the conversation Kainene has with Richard as they both return from Orlu:

"The only saboteurs we have are the ones Ojukwu invented so he can lock up his opponents and the men whose wives he wants. Did I ever tell you about the Onitsha man who bought up all of the cement we had in the factory shortly after the refugees started coming back? Ojukwu is having an affair with the man's wife and has just had the man arrested for nothing.'[...] Her disdain... began when Madu complained that his Excellency had bypassed him and made his junior a commanding officer. If His Excellency had not bypassed Madu, perhaps she would be less critical." (p. 319)

Ojukwu's authoritarian behavior is evident in the manner in which he treats those he perceives as opponents to his ambition. He goes as far as punishing individuals whose views differ from his regarding the conduct of the war. This is exemplified in the case of Madu, whom he humiliates by appointing a subordinate officer to supervise him despite Madu's considerable experience as a soldier in the Nigerian federal army. Colonel Ojukwu's suppression of constructive opinions and initiatives within the ranks of the separatist army, often through intimidation and imprisonment, partly explains the defeat of the Biafran forces by the Nigerian army. Indeed, the federal army appears more organized and disciplined, with commanding officers committed to preserving the territorial integrity of Nigeria, in contrast to the apparent disorder within the separatist ranks caused by Colonel Ojukwu's leadership style. Ojukwu's shortcomings as a leader are further compounded by his deplorable abuse of military authority for personal gratification, particularly through his sexual relationships with the wives of citizens whom he unjustly imprisons. At this point, Achebe's (2012) apprehension regarding Ojukwu's obsession with power becomes perceptible, as such conduct ultimately betrays the Biafra cause. Consequently, Ojukwu's professed commitment to the liberation of Biafra becomes highly questionable, thereby justifying Kainene's remark to Richard that their leader is becoming an unreasonable tyrant who must be 'removed' once the war is won: *"Really, when Biafra is established, we will have to remove Ojukwu"* (Adichie, 2006, p.319).

This clearly suggests that Colonel Ojukwu demonstrates little genuine concern for the well-being of Biafra, as evidenced by the negligible attention he pays to the soldiers fighting at the war front. The narrator reveals that these soldiers are neither adequately catered for nor properly fed because their commanding officers are deeply self-centered and indifferent to their suffering. As leader of the secessionist movement, Ojukwu appears fully aware of this deplorable situation, yet he fails to implement effective measures to address it. Such negligence inevitably undermines the morale and combat effectiveness of the troops, thereby diminishing the separatist army's chances of winning the war. Concretely, the narrator states:

"[...] one afternoon, the commander's jeep drove in with a sickly goat lying on his side, legs tied together. It had been commanded from an idle civilian. It bleated meekly, and soldiers gathered, excited at the thought of meat. Two of them killed it and made a fire, and when the large-cut chunks had been cooked, the commander asked that all of it be brought to his quarters. He spent long minutes checking through the basin to make sure the goat was complete: the legs, the head, the balls. Later, two village women came and were taken into the commander's quarters; much later, soldiers threw stones at them, so they left." (Adichie, 2006, p.373).

What is evident from the soldiers' experience is a certain degree of disregard on the part of the high-ranking officers for the underlying essence of the Biafran cause. This largely explains the failure to preserve Biafran independence, particularly when senior commanders grant themselves privileges such as the commander described by the narrator, whom he depicts cooking goat meat and feasting with prostitutes while the soldiers watch helplessly. Consequently, the foot soldiers become resentful, as symbolized by their act of throwing stones at the women. Their hunger-induced anger undoubtedly undermines the morale of these soldiers, whose excitement at the mere prospect of eating goat meat reflects the severe starvation they endure in a war that was hastily declared.

From another perspective, the commander's greed, rooted in the abuse of power within the locality where his army is stationed, further exposes the reasons for the failure of the struggle. This is particularly evident in his seizure of a goat from a poor villager, whereas one would have expected him instead to protect the old man from any unruly behaviour on the part of his soldiers. Therefore, the commander's greed and cruelty, both towards the owner of the goat and towards the soldiers in general, call into question the true purpose of the Biafran struggle for independence from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This actually accounts for the general feeling of disillusionment among the population evidenced by the account Achebe (2012) gives, *"many Mid-Westerners passed along to me accounts of their conflicting feelings after the Biafran offensive: 'we, on the one hand, were being told by the Biafran propaganda machinery that we were being liberated from tyranny, but on the other [we were] feeling like an occupied military zone under martial law'"* (p.131)

In actual fact, the initial dream of an independent republic appears to have been a false promise made by Colonel Ojukwu and his senior officers. This is seen through Ugwu's disdain for Ojukwu's poor administration of Biafra, reflected in the manner in which his officers command their respective battalions. Ugwu's initial enthusiasm to join the struggle, contrasted with his subsequent disappointment in the leadership's poor management of the liberation war, is deeply ironic. This unfortunate outcome is underscored by the narrator, who points out:

"But the announcements that his Excellency would be visiting did. The soldiers swept the compound, washed their clothes, lined themselves on the benches to welcome him. When the convoy of jeeps and Pontiacs drove into the compound, they all stood and saluted. Ugwu's salute was slack, because he was [...] not interested in his Excellency, because he did not care for the commander. He did not care for any of the officers, with their superior sneers and the way they treated their soldiers like sheep." (Adichie, 2006, p.373)

Based on Ugwu's reaction, it is clear that he is dissatisfied with the leadership of the entire army, whose attitudes towards the subordinate soldiers leave much to be desired. His reaction confirms the despicable behaviour of the commanders at the top, who starve their soldiers while indulging in prostitutes. Such inappropriate treatment meted out to junior soldiers such as Ugwu and others demoralizes them, as symbolized by Ugwu's growing disinterest in the separatist army's high command. Consequently, the false image of the prowess of the Biafran army, presented by Colonel Ojukwu and admired by Ugwu before his conscription, appears to be nothing more than a propagandistic manoeuvre. The conclusion one can draw is that Ugwu's reaction reflects his regret at belonging to a liberation army that is evidently doomed to failure due to its major shortcomings.

The hypocrisy of the separatist army's leadership is further reinforced by the contradiction Ugwu observes between the army's weaponry and its proclaimed objectives. As previously noted, Ugwu's initial excitement at participating in Biafra's quest for independence from Nigeria is gradually shattered when he discovers the falsehood upon which such an enterprise is founded. This disillusionment becomes evident when he realizes that the Biafran-made land mines are far less effective than Professor Ekwenugo and the high command had claimed:

"He remembered Professor Ekwenugo describing the ogbunigwe: 'high impact landmine.' How glamorous it sounded, this Biafran-made mine, this Ojukwu Bucket, this wonder that was so perplexing to the vandals that they were said to send cattle herds ahead to understand just how the ogbunigwe killed so many. But when he went to the first training session, he stared at what was before him: a dull metal container full of scrap metal. He wished he could tell Eberechi about his disappointment." (Adichie, 2006, p.367)

From Ugwu's regret, it is obvious that the army's leadership, in its attempt to lure civilians into joining its ranks and supporting the independence struggle, embarked on a propagandist campaign tinted with falsehoods. This observation emerges from the harsh reality Ugwu confronts when he finally joins the army, particularly during his first military training session. As reflected in Ugwu's reaction, it is deeply disappointing to discover that the separatist leadership, symbolized by Colonel Ojukwu, Professor Ekwenugo, and the commanders, had circulated exaggerated descriptions of the sophistication of the army's weaponry when, in reality, such equipment did not exist. Consequently, persuading young people to join such a poorly equipped army on the mere dream of controlling a territory was tantamount to sending fellow citizens into what may figuratively be described as a slaughterhouse before the ultra-equipped federal army.

Even though some observers of the war praised Biafran military technological advancement in the course of the war, one would note that what the critics consider an achievement in reality is largely inadequate to win a war. Enyinnaya *et al.* (2020) indicate:

"Biafra became creative in order to sustain the war. Lorries were fitted with rusty sheets of metal to make armored vehicles; small tourist planes were remodeled to drop bombs. A research and production department was created, made up of engineers and scientists who made innovative home-made weapons. Such weapons included mines, rifles, grenades and armored vehicles that were dubbed 'red devils'." (p.14)

In fact, Enyinnaya *et al.*'s praise of the technological ingenuity of Biafran scientists and researchers rather exposes the major difficulty the separatist army was confronted with. The supposed innovative strategies actually show the inability of the army to sustain and win a war of secession with home-made weapons such as rifles, grenades, mines and modified cars or non-combat planes. These, in reality, expose a desperate attempt to sustain an illusion.

At this point, one is inclined to agree with the subtle criticism of the Biafran army's state of preparedness that Adichie (2006) conveys through her portrayal of the region's male population being compelled to join the so-called 'liberation' army. Particularly disturbing is the indiscriminate conscription of virtually every able-bodied male into a hastily assembled force with little or no adequate military training. This is the case of Ugwu and a sixty-five-year-old man who, despite his advanced age and frail physical condition, are forcibly taken from their village to participate in the fighting. The narrator vividly depicts this scene of conscription:

"'Come on, stand, you bloody civilian! Join them there!' Ugwu stood up, and the soldier slapped the back of his head and a splintering light spread to his eyes; he dug his feet into the loose sand to steady himself for a moment before he walked over to join the two men standing with their arms raised high. One was elderly, at least sixty-five, while the other was a teenager of about fifteen... 'Enter the van,'... His thick beard covered most of his

cheeks. 'If it has come to this that you are conscripting somebody of my age, then Biafra has died,' the elderly man said quietly." (Adichie, 2006, p.364)

The policy of compelling all men, regardless of age or physical condition, to enlist in the ranks of the separatist army reveals the extent of its lack of preparedness for a prolonged armed conflict. In fact, an army that relies on fifteen-year-old boys and sixty-five-year-old men for combat duties can hardly be considered adequately equipped for the demands of modern warfare. This raises an important question: how could such a force realistically hope to defeat the Nigerian Federal Army, a well-trained and comparatively better-equipped regular military force? (As recorded by Ojibara (2016); Aremu and Buhari (2017); Akresh *et al.* (2011); Achebe (2012); Etire and Toru-Orua Sagbama (2022); Falola and Heaton (2018); and Forsyth (2015)). The answer appears self-evident. Teenagers and elderly men are generally ill-suited to endure the physical and psychological rigours of warfare, including the ability to undertake long and exhausting military operations when circumstances require. The dependence on such vulnerable recruits underscores the fragility of the Biafran military structure. Consequently, the prospect of sustaining an independent Biafran state was severely undermined from the outset.

The attainment of Biafran statehood from the outset of the declaration of secession appears to have been an unattainable aspiration, particularly given the separatist military leadership's assumption that every male child encountered in villages across the Eastern Region could serve as a potential soldier. Adichie (2006) provides a revealing account of this illusory aspiration for a Biafran state when she exposes the desperation that characterized the military leadership's search for able-bodied recruits that could help in sustaining the war effort. Her narrative suggests that suitable fighting men had become increasingly scarce, forcing the authorities to rely on indiscriminate conscription. This shortage of military manpower highlights the structural weaknesses of the separatist movement and helps explain why the dream of an independent Biafran statehood ultimately remained unrealized.

"The soldier ran into the church compound. 'Stop or I shoot!'... 'You know what the call me?' the soldier shouted. 'Kill and Go!'... 'Bloody civilian! Follow me' [...] Kill and Go shouted at one of the men, cocked his gun, and shot into the air. Some women had gathered a little way away, and one of them was speaking to Kill and Go's partner. At first, she spoke in low, pleading tones, then she raised her voice and gesticulated wildly. 'Can't you see he cannot talk well? He is an imbecile! How will he carry a gun?'" (Adichie, 2006, p.358)

It is particularly striking that Colonel Ojukwu embarked on a war with little or any visible evidence of adequate preparation or strategic vision. This lack of preparedness is evident in the actions of Biafran soldiers who roamed villages across the Eastern Region in search of male children to conscript into the army. Even more disturbing is the fact that they recruited individuals regardless of their physical condition

and prepared to use violence against anyone who resisted their orders. In essence, the question posed by one of the female onlookers during one such raids underscores the impossibility of achieving the region's long-sought independence under such circumstances. Her protest, *"Can't you see he cannot talk?"*, exposes the desperation that characterizes the Biafran military campaign. Consequently, one is inclined to agree with the lament of the sixty-five-year-old man who declares, *"If it has come to this, that you are conscripting somebody of my age, then Biafra has died"* (Adichie, 2006, p.364). This statement serves as a powerful indictment of the Biafran leadership's failure to build a sufficiently prepared and sustainable military force capable of securing the independence it sought.

From a historical perspective, this weakness constituted one of the factors that contributed to the eventual defeat of the separatist army because as Enyinnaya *et al.* (2020) notes *"As a result of the devastation and insecurity caused by the war, hunger increased in Biafra, men could not move about freely because they were conscripted into the Biafran army [...] people could not farm very well as they had done before the war for fear of being conscripted into the Biafran army"* (p.12-13). Thus, due to the actions of the Biafran army together with the onslaught from the federal army, most men were forced to flee from the region with its attendant impact on the cultivation of foodstuffs and eventually widespread starvation. This state of affairs became the major cause of the capitulation of Biafra, as the soldiers, like the civilians, were not able to find food.

Moreover, the failed military attempt of the Eastern Region to secede from the Federal Republic of Nigeria can be explained through the double standards that characterized the former's professed hostility toward the political structure acquired at independence. Adichie (2006) exposes the indispensable relationship that continues to exist between the secessionist region and the country from which it sought to detach itself. This irony is visible in the persistent commercial ties between two entities that ostensibly regarded each other as irreconcilable enemies. Although the civil war erupted because of the Eastern Region's desire for complete independence from Nigeria, Biafrans continue to engage in trade with Nigerians, often using the currency of the very nation they claimed to reject. What makes this situation particularly ironic is that both Biafra and Nigeria viewed each other as adversaries while simultaneously sustaining economic exchanges that strengthened their respective economies. Arguably, such commercial interactions benefitted Nigeria more significantly, as they contributed to an economy capable of acquiring sophisticated weaponry that could be used against Biafra. This contradiction becomes especially apparent in a conversation in which Mrs Muokelu informs Olanna that she intends to begin trading with the Federal Republic of Nigeria because she has numerous dependents to care for after her husband lost a leg during the war:

"I am going to start afia attack and see if I can buy salt. I can no longer teach. 'I understand' Olanna said, 'but must you join them in buying from enemy territory?' 'What is there to buy in Biafra? They have blockaded us Kpam-kpam!' 'But how will you go?' 'There is a woman I know. She supplies garri to the army, so they give her lorry a military escort. The

lorry will take us to Ufuma, and then we will walk across to where the border is porous in Nkwerre-Imyi.' 'How long is the walk?' 'About fifteen or twenty miles, nothing a determined person cannot do. We will carry our Nigerian coins and buy salt and garri and then walk back to the lorry.' 'Please be careful, my sister' 'Many are doing it, and nothing has happened to them.'" (p.299)

It is important to note that Mrs. Muokelu's husband is a Biafran soldier who is a victim of the war after losing his leg on the battlefield. His story illustrates the irony of Biafran desire to secede from Nigeria given that his wife, like many other Biafrans, engages in trade with Nigerians and uses Nigerian currency. Thus, it is paradoxical that while her husband and other Biafran soldiers fight for separation from Nigeria, their relatives maintain commercial relations with the very nation from which they seek independence. The most striking aspect of this incongruity is that such trading activities are often facilitated by the Biafran military itself, which transports traders across the porous borders between the two territories. The decision of both Biafran citizens and soldiers to trade with the perceived enemy raises serious questions about the coherence and viability of the Biafran struggle. Consequently, this contradiction helps to explain why the aspiration for an independent Biafran state ultimately ended in failure. This conclusion is reinforced by examples such as Mrs. Muokelu's experience and that of Olanna's cousin, Odinchozo, a former Biafran soldier who, following the declaration of armistice, recounts to Olanna how Biafrans regularly traded with Nigerians, "*Some of us in Biafra too had Nigerian money and we traded with them even though we were in the militia,*" (Adichie, 2006, p.424). This firsthand account reveals that despite the ongoing military confrontations between the separatist forces and the Nigerian army, economic exchanges continued between the two sides. Such interactions underscore the deep interdependence that existed between Biafra and Nigeria, thereby exposing the irony at the heart of the secessionist project.

Enyinnaya *et al.* (2020) describe this situation when they hold that Biafran women actually traded with their supposed enemy, as many ventured out of the Eastern Region to buy what was absent in the war-torn region,

"[...] young women brought piles of Biafran currency notes to buy stolen relief goods by airforce military personnel for resale [...] the dangerous trans-border trade [...] was dominated by Biafran women [...] the Biafran government was forced to aid and abate the food smugglers [...] the Biafran government went as far as issuing special passes to some smugglers that sold food to the military barracks." (pp. 14-15)

Adichie (2006) exposes corruption as a vice that transcends the divide between civilians and the military, thereby weakening the moral foundations of the Biafran project. The Biafran army, like the civilian population, is characterized by corruption. This is illustrated through the soldiers whom Olanna bribes to prevent Ugwu from being conscripted when the liberation army first arrives in the area in searching of young men

to recruit. This is seen when Olanna reproaches Ugwu: “‘you are so stupid you do not deserve the luck you had today’ [...] ‘I bribed that soldier with all the money I have. Now you will produce what I will feed my child, do you understand?’” (Adichie, 2006, p.359). This incident reveals the irony that shrouds the liberation army that claims to be fighting for freedom from a Nigerian government accused of corruption and bad governance, yet engages in the very practice it condemns. Therefore, the soldiers’ willingness to accept bribes exposes the contradiction between the ideals of the Biafran struggle and the conduct of those entrusted with its realization. From another perspective, Olanna’s decision to bribe the soldier also implicates her in the perpetuation of the corrupt practices that undermine the society she and other Biafrans hope to build. In fact, Ogor (n.d) declares that “*nepotism and bribery [...] were also commonplace in the Biafran government. This obviously posed a problem, because if the Biafran government was also corrupt, then the Biafrans were facing the same issues that they faced in Nigeria and their attempt at secession had been futile*” (p.43).

Another major shortcoming of the Biafran struggle is the brutality of its soldiers toward fellow civilians. It is worth noting that, despite the hardships and suffering brought about by the war, the civilian population continued to make enormous sacrifices to support the quest for independence. It is therefore unfortunate that the very army they support turns against them and subjects them to violence and abuse, even though it is supposedly fighting to protect them from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This irony is particularly evident when the narrator describes a scene of military violence against civilians:

“[...] a dusty Volkswagen Beetle drove towards them [...] ‘Get out! Bloody civilians!’ The man who was driving looked stern, as if determined to show that he could not be intimidated. Beside him, his wife began to cry and plead. ‘Please, we are going to look for our son.’ A soldier was violently hitting the bonnet of the car. ‘We need this for an operation!’ ‘Please, please, we are going to look for our son. They told us he was seen in the refugee camp’[...] ‘We are dying for you and you are here driving a pleasure car?’[...] pulling her out of the car. Her husband climbed out himself, but still stood by the car. His fist was tight with the key inside. ‘This is wrong, officers. You have no right to take this car. I have my pass. I am working for our government.’ One of the soldiers slapped him. The man staggered, and the soldier slapped him again and again and again, and he crashed to the ground, and the key slipped out of his hand... Another soldier touched the man’s neck and wrist to make sure he was breathing. The wife was bent over her husband as the soldiers squashed into the car and drove to the bar.” (Adichie, 2006, pp.370-371)

The vivid description of violence above illustrates the brutality of the Biafran soldiers towards the very civilians they are supposed to protect by defending the territorial integrity of the Eastern Region against their common enemy, the Nigerian army. This reflects the deplorable state of the future nation they are struggling to create, a state in which respect for human dignity appears to be absent. This is evidenced by the inhumane treatment inflicted upon the owner of the car and his wife despite the

legitimate explanation they provide for their journey. One would have expected the soldiers to assist the couple by taking them to the refugee camp where their son is reportedly staying. Ironically, the separatist soldiers instead brutally beat the man when he refuses to hand over the keys to his car and, shockingly, leave him unconscious on a deserted road with only his wife to care for him. The most despicable aspect of this brutality is that such violence is compounded by the dispossession of civilians, such as the couple above, of their property under the pretext of making sacrificing for the war effort.

In addition to the above, the cases of rapes committed against girls and women across the Eastern Region constitute another form of military violence against civilians. According to Enyinnaya *et al.* (2020), *"Biafran women suffered different forms of humiliation and death during the war"* (p.15), and rape is one of such acts of humiliation and death of women. An illustrative example is seen in the horrific conduct of the battalion that had earlier assaulted the couple on the highway and whose members are also accused of raping a female bartender. Soldiers, who are expected to uphold the highest standards of conduct in the protection of civilians, instead become a source of fear and insecurity for their own people. The barbarity that characterizes their actions is most evident in the graphic description of the incident as recounted by Ugwu. The disturbing image of the scene stands out when the character provides details of the reprehensible behaviour of members of the battalion:

"Everything was moving so fast [...] He stayed there for a while until he heard loud shouts from the bar [...] When he finally went back inside, he stopped at the door. The bar girl was lying on her back on the floor, her wrapper bunched up at her waist, her shoulders held down by a soldier, her legs wide, wide ajar. She was sobbing, 'please, please, biko'. Her blouse was still on. Between her legs, High-Tech was moving. His thrusts were jerky, his small buttocks darker-coloured than his legs. The soldiers were cheering, 'High-Tech enough! Discharge and retire!' High-Tech groaned before he collapsed on top of her. A soldier pulled him off and was fumbling at his own trousers when somebody said 'No Target destroyer is the next!' [...] She was dry and tense when he entered her [...] he moved quickly and felt his own climax...while some soldiers clapped." (Adichie, 2006, p.372)

The description of the soldiers' inhumanity paints a gruesome picture of the weak foundation of a country they aspire to create. The soldiers transform this appalling act into a sporting event, using it as a means to release the stress and frustrations of war. Indeed, these soldiers are prepared to kill the bartender, even as their supposed enemy continues to reclaim the so-called Biafran territory. This conclusion stems from the symbolism that can be attached to the phallus: the penis thrust into the girl becomes analogous to a pistol that fires psychological bullets, slowly destroying its victim. This comparison is reinforced by Akresh *et al.* (2011), who state that *"[...] investigation of the Biafran war of 1967-70 shows that several generations of Nigerian women, many of whom are*

alive today, carry the scars of their exposure to this war" (p.6). The deplorable actions of members of the Biafran military were not unknown to Colonel Ojukwu, who, from the inception of the conflict, had realized that this Liberation Army could easily deviate from its principal objective of fighting for freedom of the Eastern region. This historical factor, which undermines harmonious coexistence between the people and their supposed liberators, is depicted by Adichie (2006) and further corroborated by Achebe (2012), who recounts:

"Aghanya invited me to join the group [called Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters, BOFF] and help develop an education strategy that would improve civilian-military relations. Although this desire to bridge the civilian-military divide is nothing new, Ojukwu wanted the Biafra military to be different, to pay careful attention to the welfare of the people of Biafra." (p.152)

The failure of the aspiration to attain independence through military means becomes apparent when one juxtaposes the Biafran leadership's objective of fostering coexistence between civilians and the military with concrete actions of the soldiers on the ground, particularly the rapes they perpetrate. At this point, it is obvious that Colonel Ojukwu's hastily constituted army lacked the commitment required to safeguard the welfare of the people it purported to liberate from the marginalization of the Nigerian federation. Such a state of affairs is hardly surprising in an army largely composed of forcibly conscripted child soldiers who received little or no professional military training. Consequently, it would not be inaccurate to argue that the ultimate failure of the Biafran separatist project was partly a consequence of the unruly conduct of its army, which alienated the very population whose support it depended upon. Against the backdrop of all the violence on the population by the soldiers, one understands why Aremu and Buhari (2017) declare that *"the Nigerian civil war has been described as one of the bloodiest wars in sub-Saharan Africa [...] The trauma that their remembrance has brought to surviving families, relatives and friends is just as dreadful"* (p.68).

3. Conclusion

The discussions above have attempted to bring to the lamplight the underlying reasons for the failed Biafran armed struggle for autonomy from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It has shown that the said failure to achieve statehood based on ethnic nationalism resulting from the victimization of the Igbo community is the consequence of numerous precedence with the most conspicuous being the weaknesses of the Biafran military leadership, and its ill preparedness for a war of secession from an apparently unified federal structure with a well-equipped as well as trained army loyal to the founding precepts of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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