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## THE NOVELIST AS A JUDGE OF THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT: WAR CRIMES IN EMEKA J. OTAGBURUAGU'S ECHOES OF VIOLENCE

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### Abstract

Every literary text, particularly the novel, is a site of conflicts, and every literary discourse is a domain for the violation of the rights and freedoms of the individual character that inhabit the world of the text. It has been the duty of the creative writer, from the time of Classical era, to bring to the limelight the conflicts and derogations of the rights and freedoms and to point the way forward for the resolution of the conflicts and the protection of the rights and freedoms of the individual characters in order to create an egalitarian society and a peaceful world order. In order to do this, creative writers, particularly the novelists, assume the roles of human rights activists and judges of courts to draw the attention of the readers to the consequences of the derogations of the people's rights and freedoms.

In Emeka J. Otagburuagu's *Echoes of Violence*, the novelist assumes both the role of human rights activist and a judge of the International Criminal Court to examine critically the thirty-month Nigerian Civil War, which an eye-witness called "the orgy of blood", and a war in which the "economy of the people grossly regressed, as available resources and money were spent on prosecuting the war". It is a war that has received so much attention by creative writers, particularly in the form of war fiction because of its physical and psychological trauma on the dead, the survivors and the witnesses to the war.

### Introduction

Every literary text, particularly the novel a site of conflicts, and every literary discourse is a domain for the violation of the rights and freedoms of the individual character that inhabit the world of the text. It has been the duty of the creative writer, from the time of Classical era, to bring to the limelight the conflicts and derogations of the rights and freedoms and to point the way forward for the resolution of the conflicts and the protection of the rights and freedoms of the individual characters in order to create an egalitarian society and a peaceful world order. In order to do this, creative writers, particularly the novelists, assume the roles of human rights activists and judges of courts to draw the attention of the readers to the consequences of the derogations of the people's rights and freedoms.

In Emeka J. Otagburuagu's *Echoes of Violence*, the novelist assumes both the role of human rights activist and a judge of the Criminal Court to examine critically the thirty-

month Nigerian Civil War, which an eye-witness called “the orgy of blood” (Okoro, 2015:205), and a war in which the “economy of the people grossly regressed, since available resources and money were spent on prosecuting the war” (Agha, 2015:154). It is a war that has received so much attention by creative writers, particularly in the form of war fiction because of its physical and psychological trauma on the people. In its devastation on the Biafran enclave, joint statements were made by several relief agencies called “an emergency concerning just not hundreds of thousands but millions of people” (August 16, 1968). The International Committee of the Red Cross did not mince words when it bluntly stated that it was the greatest emergency they had handled since the Second World War and that “there were between 8,000 and 10,000 deaths every day in the Biafran enclave” (September 27, 1968). It was a catastrophic war which Dr. Clyde Shepherd stated before the Canadian House of Commons Committee on External Affairs through random sampling at the end of July 1968, that the death rate from villages, refugee camps and hospitals from every province in Biafra stood at “6000 deaths a day from malnutrition and starvation” (quoted in Okoro, 2015: 204).

This study goes beyond looking at *Echoes of Violence* as “only a symbolic and metaphorical representation of a certain historical experience” (Kabir Ahmed, 2014:77), for it is a historical war novel that chronicles the chaos within the “diverse units, the colonial states, based on the dismemberments of Africa” (Ayi Kwei Armah in Kwame Prince Adika, 2014:160) orchestrated by the British colonizers. Though G.T. Basdem argues that with all savage peoples the Ibos, prior to the British occupation of the country, occupied their spare time fighting, generally town against town (*Among the Ibos of Nigeria* 1983). But this study can effectively and efficiently be done by looking at the provisions of *The Rome Statute of International Criminal Court*, which comprises four Geneva Conventions that strive to establish international humanitarian principles in warfare so that a violator cannot “justify his actions based on ...a fundamental role in the protection of the state and its values” (Spleth, 2014/2015:37). In order to contain a Hobbesian state of nature or jungle justice in international war or warfare of any magnitude whatsoever, the statute spelt out clearly what constitutes crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity. It further establishes the International Criminal Court in Hague and imbues it with the jurisdiction to try these serious crimes, which are of concern to the international community as a whole. The serious crimes as a result of the international and/or inter-religious war between the characters that inhabit the fictive settings of *Echoes of Violence* fall within the ambit of war crimes. A war crime has been defined legally as a “Conduct that violates international laws governing the conduct of international armed conflicts” (*Black’s Law Dictionary* 1720). The *Rome Statute of International Criminal Court* enunciates that the following acts in armed conflicts not of an international character constitute war crimes when they are directed against persons taking no active part in hostilities and armed forces who had laid down their arms. Such crimes in Article 8(2) include:

- i. Violence to life and persons, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;
- ii. Committing outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment;

- iv. The passing of sentences and the carrying of executions without previous judgement pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all judicial guarantees which are generally recognised as indispensable;

It further provides in Article 8(2)(c) that war crimes are not limited to the above acts, but also include the following:

- i. Intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities;
- ii. Intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objects;
- iii. Pillaging a town or village, even when taken by assault;
- iv. Committing rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy....

The International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg held the position that crimes against international law are committed by men, not by abstract entities and only by punishing individuals who commit such crimes can the provisions of international law be enforced. *The Nuremberg Charter* is regarded as customary international law and sets down the following principles:

- i. Any person who commits an act which constitutes a crime under international law is responsible thereof and liable to punishment.
- ii. The fact that internal law does not impose a penalty for an act which constitutes a crime under international law does not relieve the person who committed the act from responsibility under international law.
- iii. The fact that the person who committed an act which constitutes a crime under international law acted as Head of State or responsible government official does not relieve him from responsibility under international law.
- iv. The fact that a person acted pursuant to his government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law; provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him.
- v. Any person charged with a crime under international law has the right to a fair trial on the facts and law.
- vi. Crimes punishable under international law are as follows: crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- vii. Complicity in the commission of a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity as set forth in principle VI is a crime under international law.

The *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* upholds the principle of individual criminal responsibility in its Article 25. An individual is however not relieved of criminal responsibility on the grounds of official capacity as seen in Articles 27 and 33 of the Statute. These principles were used in the two **ad hoc** tribunals established by the Security Council namely: the *International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia* and the *International Tribunal for Rwanda*, which tried violations of the law of war, genocide, crimes against humanity and other international crimes committed in these jurisdictions.

From the purview of the above provisions of the statute which establishes a permanent court in Hague to try individuals for war crimes among other crimes, Emeka J. Otagburuagu in *Echoes of Violence* sits as a judge of the International Criminal Court to evaluate the transformed Nigerian Civil War in the fictional world of his historical war novel to pronounce that the two armed forces in the fictive war committed war crimes as they violated, with impunity, the principles of humanitarian laws embodied in the statute. He further calls attention to the fact that the statute is a law, and a law:

...is an obligatory rule of conduct. The commands of him or them that have coercive power (Hobbes). A law is a rule of conduct imposed and enforced by the sovereign (Austin). But the law is a body of principles recognised and applied by the state in the administration of justice (Salmond). Blackstone, however, maintained that a rule of law made on a pre-existing custom exists as positive law apart from the legislator or judge (*Osborn's Concise Law Dictionary*, 2005:238).

### **War Crimes in *Echoes of Violence***

In the one-hundred-and-forty-one-page novel of eight chapters, the novelist uses an omniscient narrator, who at times witnesses authorial intrusion, presents horror-filled war crimes on every page and every chapter of the novel. These crimes are committed by both parties to the conflict against the Alaoma citizens, who are at the receiving end or victims of the war. From the very first page of the novel, the narrator makes it clear that the civilian population, an unnamed federating unit in the United Republic violated Article 8(2)(c)(i) of the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* when they murdered millions of their Alaoma neighbours in a pogrom. In the pogrom, “pregnant women and children had been brutally massacred; their young and aged maimed by their neighbours.... These were men and women, boys and girls, children and babies who committed no crimes except that they lived among their neighbours under one roof ” (1). The survivors of the pogrom flee to Alaoma after “they had lost everything” (2). Apart from the murder of the Alaoma civilian population which counts in millions, the narrator recounts the trauma of the survivors thus:

The widows and orphans among them were weeping because the pogrom had deprived them of their breadwinners and loved ones. The hospitals were filled with the maimed and wounded. The railway stations teemed with haggard and worn out returnees with piles of luggage that appeared as shriveled as their owners. Panic stricken and expectant relations surged to the stations in search of their kit and kin. Many waited in vain for such returnees. The pogrom had taken its toll on them (2).

In a pogrom where there is wanton destruction of lives and property, in a massacre that does not spare the unborn child, in a religious cum ethnic cleansing that has left millions dead and the survivors neurotic, the Alaoma people resolved unanimously that they “should go to war in self-defence” (*Echoes of Violence* 3). The first step towards Alaoma’s self-defence is a declaration of its secession from the federation by its young military leader, and the military head of state of the federation declared full-scale war on Alaoma. The Alaoma people see the war as the price they have to pay for self-determination, but their enemies see it as a Jihad or as a holy war on the infidels. The enemies, who were once wrongly thought as cowards, are turned into “ruthless killers and warriors” so (9) that “Every home in Alaoma, the land of the rising sun, saw the horror, felt the pain, and suffered the loss” (9).

The narrator makes it clear that the war between Alaoma and the United Republic is not a war between equals. Not only that the Alaoma army is largely constituted by volunteers who are inspired by patriotism, heroism and propaganda, but that they are ill-trained and ill-equipped unlike the enemy troops, who have the resources to procure state-of-the-art military armament and mercenary, and also enjoy the support of the international community. The incompatibility of the two sides of the war is seen in the narration of the Alaoma people who “went to the battlefield with clubs and batons against machine guns or locally made double-barrelled guns against armoured cars and heavy artillery bombardments” (3). The narrator also states that the Alaoma soldiers are ill-clothed and beggarly as they “wore tattered army uniforms and were also going from house to house begging for alms” (28).

With its superior armament, the central government closes the borders of the seceded territory and unleashes mayhem on both the freedom fighters and the civilian population of Alaoma. It is not only at the warfront like Itumbuzor sector that the “enemy troops used heavy mortar bombardments on the location of the freedom fighters which led to the death of more than a battalion of soldiers” (135), but their actions in “an enemy jet bomber which appeared midair throwing mortar bombs everywhere” (136) violates Article 8(2)(c)(i) of the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* and constitutes a war crime as their bombing of Chief Akoma’s compound in Amaekpu, in which Omerenma and Azuka died, cannot be justified by military necessity. This provision is also violated in attacks of the enemy troops on civilians not taking part in hostilities as seen in the narrative thus:

He spoke of the massacre of his kinsmen at Okuku. He said the victims had offered their wealth as ransom and had pleaded with their assailants to spare their lives. They shouted “biko biko” as they were being slaughtered. Egbulefu went to say that Okuku called the street “Biko-Biko” street to mock Alaoma citizens whom they had killed. He told the story of how enemy troops had gathered thousands of Alaoma civilians at Akasa town and promised to send them to refugee camps. Later, these civilians were slaughtered by those who had promised to deliver them (97).

From this narration, therefore, it becomes obvious that there is no hiding place for Alaoma people, both within and outside the enclave of Alaoma.

In the ruthless war that defies international humanitarian warfare, cities and villages in Alaoma are targets of military bombardments as well as civilian infrastructures like hospitals, churches and relief centres. It is a violation of Article 8(c)(iv) of the statute when an enemy jet bomber directs airstrikes on buildings dedicated to religion and charitable purposes and this constitutes war crimes as seen in the war between Alaoma and its neighbours, where:

The jet bomber also raided the refugee camp where Omerenma was trying to remove some relief materials. One of the bombs which had been targeted at the church building missed its way and struck Chikezie dead as he was trying to remove a bale of stockfish from the store (104).

Moreover, those Alaoma citizens, who survived the organized massacre in every part of the United Republic against them and those, who survived the violent death from enemy artillery bombardments in the enclave of Alaoma, may die in the cold hands of starvation and malnutrition which the Alaoma enemies used freely as an instrument of warfare which constitutes a war crime under Article 8(c)(i) and (ii) of the statute as it is intended to cause death to both the Alaoma civilians and its freedom fighters. Apart from the change in currency, the omniscient narrator states it clearly that:

The borders had been closed. Economic blockade and starvation had been proclaimed as legitimate instruments of warfare against the people. At this time, it was difficult to provide adequate meals for the soldiers in the different military location. Drugs were difficult to come by.... Soldiers and civilians faced the threat of dying by gunshots, mortar fires, bomb shells, hunger, disease especially Kwashiokor (83).

From the reports of the international humanitarian agencies on the war, and the narration of the events in the fictive world of the novel, starvation takes a huge toll on the Alaoma population. The blockade and starvation create a severe scarcity of commodities which results in the survival of the fittest. In this case, the Alaoma soldiers are the fittest as the dire situation “enabled the soldiers to take whatever they could use or sell for food. They plundered and pillaged everywhere within their reach” (83). The war turned human beings to cannibals as “people served all manner of things as meat including human flesh” (85). As the war rages on, “Calamity seemed to surround the people. Vultures were seen around every nook and cranny feeding on decaying bodies. Disease, hunger, insecurity were stark realities which stared everyone in the face” (86). To situate the reality of deaths from starvation and malnutrition on the vulnerable group, in the Red Cross Clinic at Amato Central School:

...he [Onyekwere] saw human beings who had been disfigured by Kwashiokor. Young children, pregnant women, nursing mothers with yellow hair, yellow skin and yellow eye lashes were there in large numbers. Some of them had swollen legs and bellies and had no hope of survival (61).

Furthermore, the enemy troops from the United Republic committed a war crime as provided in Article 8(2)(c)(vi) of the statute when they took Alaoma maidens as the booties of war when they over-ran the seceded territory. The women are either raped by the victorious soldiers or subjected to sexual slavery or prostitution or forced pregnancy. Irrespective of the method used in committing this war crime, the important thing is that the omniscient narrator ends the narration with:

The sun instead of rising in Alaoma suddenly set. The setting sun brought a sudden winter to the tropics and transformed unwilling maidens to wives. Alaoma had a bustling population of in-laws as the Abokis found joy in anarchy and grabbed the frightened war virgins (139).

With the conquering of the Alaoma territory and the defeat of its rag-tag soldiers, the victorious soldiers feminize both the territory and the men and the result of this feminization is the rape of the women who conceive and bear children for them.

The reader should note that the novelist as a judge of the International Criminal Court does not also spare the people of Alaoma as he holds up for them his critical and legal lenses for them to see the war crimes they also committed within the territory of Alaoma and against their own people. From the very beginning of the war, it is obvious that nepotism, injustice and impunity reign supreme. The rich and powerful send their sons abroad in order to avoid being conscripted into the army. According to the narrator:

The new sovereign state had plenty of job opportunities especially for those who had 'big' brothers and godfathers. Those who did not have Abraham for a godfather got enlisted in the army where they had slim chances of survival in the face of sophisticated artillery weapons which their neighbours used against them (*Echoes of Violence* 5).

The sons of the poor are "conscripted to fight a battle with sticks against the heavy artillery weapons of the enemy" (50). It is also obvious that the leaders of Alaoma are very corrupt and they betray the young nation and her people. Apart from the military leader being disdainfully described by Ikechi as a "drunken captain" (74), it is obvious that the war will fail because he is incompetent to lead the new nation and to prosecute the war. Besides, some of the top military officers engage in corrupt practices and senior functionaries like ambassadors embezzle money meant for the procurement of heavy armament overseas. Alaoma's defeat by their enemies is possible and corpses of both "Aloma freedom fighters and citizens" (139) litter the roads as the newly independent state succumbs to the superior enemy troops. However, the narrator makes it clear that there are people within Alaoma, who ought to be tried for war crimes because:

There are stories of big time contractors who received huge sums of money as mobilization and do nothing at all. He now remembered the case of a senior government official who manipulates foreigners to defraud the government of billions of pounds. What pained Onyekwere most was the story of military officers and civilians who took huge sums of money from the enemy to expose the military locations of the country.... It was like exchanging one's freedom for money. These people who are called saboteurs are worst than murderers.

For the treasonable felonies these people have committed, the narrator has judged them and rightly branded them "murderers", because they are implicated or culpable in the mass death of soldiers and civilians through artillery bombardments and starvation as seen in the *Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court*.

Besides, with the secession of Alaoma from the United Republic and the subsequent war, the legal system is replaced by jungle justice and a state of chaos and anarchy. There is no longer any rule of law as the army dispenses justice through the use of torture and cruel treatment of suspects, and these constitute war crimes as provided in Article 8 (2) (c) (i), (ii) and (iv). Not only that they torture their victims, subject them to

cruel treatment, commit outrages upon their personal dignity and degrade them, they also engage in extra-judicial killings or executions of their victims without giving them fair hearing, and their defence is always based on the “issue of state security” (Janice Spleth 37). The irony in *Alaoma* is that those that committed treasonable offences are left to go scot-free while those that commit misdemeanours face execution in a lopsided and anarchical system of justice. For instance, Amadi arranged with some soldiers to conscript Onyekwere into the army to “wreck vengeance for the cock he had prevented him from buying from Mgboro” (55). And Amadi “had told the soldiers to kill Onyekwere on the road after conscripting him, but his god or chi did not allow that” (55). Onyekwere would have lost his life for a trifle. Onyekwere’s father, Chief Akoma, frames Amadi in a deadly revenge strategy, and the soldiers, without trial to ascertain whether the dead body found in a bush near Amadi’s compound was actually the corpse of a soldier or to ascertain his culpability, or whether he died of natural causes or not commanded Amadi to say his last prayers and, “The spark of the trigger was heard and Amadi was no more” (57).

But the worst of the extra-judicial killing would have been the death of Onyekwere and Ubani over a futile search by the soldiers and the citizens of Amaekpu when Mary, who suffers from a psychological disorder after the killing of her son and husband in the pogrom, raised a false alarm. Through the error of mistaken identity, she raises alarm that she has seen a white mercenary in Amaekpu and the whole community and soldiers comb the bushes only to discover that the white mercenary she saw was Ubani, an albino, who came back to Amaekpu with the other internally displaced persons. For the false alarm raised by Mary, the soldiers left her, because in warfare in pre-colonial Igboland, “women and children were usually spared. At worst, they were taken captives as prisoners of war” (Aiziken, 2015: 178). But they “ordered Chief Akoma to get ready to go with them to explain to the Head of State why he would not face public execution for deceiving the whole nation” (124). Onyekwere volunteers to replace his father as a ransom and the soldiers take him and the albino, Ubani. At the detention camp, Onyekwere and Ubani are tortured, degraded and humiliated as they were “stripped naked, tied hands and feet together and bundled into the guardroom” (125). According to the narrator, the guardroom is a terrible place to stay as “acrid smell of urine was sufficient poison to the respiratory and immune systems of any individual who was put in it” (125). As if it is not enough punishment, in the morning, they are brought out in the “open field and asked to face the sun and identify the colours in the rays of the sun” (125). His torturer, Sergeant Etim told “Onyekwere to say his last prayers before his executioners would come” (126), but his life and that of Ubani are saved by Major Ikpeme, Onyekwere’s junior in school before the war. Ubani is ordered to frog jump and Onyekwere is brought out nude to the open field as a sacrificial lamb. “This was the common fate of all military detainees during the war” (128). From this narration, it is obvious that the *Alaoma* freedom fighters spend more time committing war crimes against the *Alaoma* citizens than they spend on planning and execution of the war against the enemy troops, because:

Onyekwere wondered how many innocent citizens had been arrested, tortured, dehumanized and sent to their untimely death through the recklessness of people who called themselves freedom fighters. How some of them prosecuted the war was one of the uncanniest things anybody would contemplate in history (133).

As a witness to the war crimes the Alaoma freedom fighters committed against Alaoma civilians, and as one who sees them as “dastardly villain who deceived the populace” (134), and despite their assertion of innocence after the war, the narrator insists “their hands were stained with blood and the spoils of loot and theft” (141), and hopes that they “should not go into the United Republic with the philosophy of looting which fatigue operations had taught the freedom fighters” (141). The narrator rightly describes the war as a “holocaust” (141), and the war crimes and abominations committed in Alaoma during this period are summed up as “symptoms of a disintegrating universe, the symptoms of end times” (139).

Apart from the war crimes committed by the enemy troops and civilians on Alaoma citizens and the ones perpetuated by Alaoma freedom fighters and leaders on the ordinary people of Alaoma, war crimes are also committed by Omerenma against the husband’s half-brother, Onyekwere, and internally displaced persons and workers at Onyekwere’s camp. The novelist x-rays the polygamous family of Chief Akoma to unearth the fragmented entities that constitute it with the familial intrigues, ruthless rivalries and political subterfuge which Omerenma, the wife of Chief Akoma’s first son, hatches and executes on the entire household. It is obvious from the narration that the dog-and-cat relationship between Omerenma and Azuka on one side and the other members of the polygamous household parallels that which exists between Alaoma and the other units that constitute the United Republic. The war in the polygamous family is as devastating and ruthless as the one between Alaoma and its enemies. Omerenma who is presented as a nasty blackmailer, resentful and vengeful bears an unforgiving grudge against the family because Chief Akoma said that “Your brother [Azuka] would not marry me. He accused my mother of witchcraft....Your mother joined him” (20). And for Onyekwere, she willingly and readily frames him up, claiming that he raped her for which her unintelligent and robotic husband sends him away. But what is behind her intrigues is that Onyekwere should fail, for if “he succeeds; he will begin to compete with her husband” (22).

In order that Azuka does not use his connections to get Onyekwere a job that would exempt him from the army, she feigns that Onyekwere rapes her, an act that is an abomination in Amaekpu and Azuka sends him away from his house in Port Harcourt without money and food. The physical and psychological trauma and starvation which Alaoma citizens undergo during the war is replicated in Onyekwere’s three days’ journey on foot from Port Harcourt to Amaekpu. The narrator describes his ordeal thus:

Onyekwere looked devastated when he got home. The three days’ journey coupled with the embarrassing ejection which he had suffered in the hands of his brother left him a shadow of his former self. He was feeling quite hollow and hungry when he arrived home...(35).

As if his ordeal of starvation and long journey on foot is not enough for him, Omerenma plans to get him killed at the war front at Nchara and to take his well-organized refugee camp. She convinces her husband to persuade Onyekwere to join the civil service, but in her calculation:

This is the only good chance you have to silence this ambitious boy. When he takes up this job, you must arrange to transfer him to a distant place where he will either die of hunger or get conscripted and die in the army (65).

Within two weeks of his being employed in the Ministry of Commerce, he is transferred to Nchara, “an offshore village which has been facing heavy bombardment from the enemies” (66). When he moves to Nchara, Omerenma schemes and takes full control of his refugee camp, St. Michael’s Camp, which is Onyekwere’s brainchild and where he gives relief materials, holds counselling sessions and prayer meetings with internally displaced persons, as well as bring “the community health workers to give them medical attention” (91). Immediately Omerenma takes over the camp, she tries unsuccessfully to discredit Onyekwere. As if this is not enough, she imposes her will on the workers and refugees and supremacy struggle ensues between her and the workers. When Omerenma espouses the withdrawal of weekly relief materials, which amounts to the starvation of the camp workers and their families, the workers like the Alaoma people strategize for self-determination as they cannot continue to keep silent in the face of cruel treatment and violations of their rights and freedoms. They set up an elaborate espionage system, and arrange for the assistance of the military police. According to Esonu, the Camp Director:

You were all there this morning. You saw how she insulted us... She has imposed herself on us. The latest is that she is planning to stop our benefits as camp workers. She is planning to get all the male workers conscripted... Ladies and gentlemen, this is your chance to resist tyranny, fight usurpation and stop injustice. You need to do something to stop her plans (98).

But as if by divine providence, one of her accomplices in selling the relief materials donated to the camp, Chikezie, dies when a bomb targeted at a church building misses its target and strikes him. She continues with her atrocities and illegality until a jet bomber throwing mortar bombs indiscriminately drops on Chief Akoma’s compound, “Onyekwere and his family were lucky to escape the mortar fires but Omerenma with her husband could not” (136). With the death of the couple, it seems that the rotten teeth in Chief Akoma’s compound has been pulled out as the deadly strife in the family is masterminded by Omerenma, who fails the traditional role her culture thrusts on her as constituting “the bridge, the link and the nexus of the connections, the bonds and the alliances” (Ike Odimegwu, 2015: 598) within her nuclear family and the extended one.

### **Language Use in *Echoes of Violence***

In literary discourse, literary language plays the role of the muscles that gives support and protects the internal organs in the human body. For the reader to get at the writer’s message, he must first of all decipher the language that encapsulates the message as one cannot get at the human internal organs without breaking through the muscles. Therefore, in Emeka J. Otagburuagu’s *Echoes of Violence*, the reader cannot comprehend the verdict of the novelist about the war crimes committed in the fictive world of the novel by the two sides to the war, and at the family level without a clear understanding of the language use in the war fiction.

For instance, Otagburuagu makes it clear that it is the three-year-old civil war between predominantly Igbo-dominated Eastern region and the Northern region that has undergone transformation in the world of the novel. He uses Igbo names like Onyekwere, Omerenma, Ikechi, Ubani, Ugoeze and Igbo towns like Amaekpu, Alaoma, Nchara to make it clear that the events in the fictive narrative take place in Igbo land. As if these are not enough, and even though the language is Westernized and cosmopolitan, the narrative itself is studded with Igbo grammar like in the war slogan that calls for extreme vigilance by the Alaoma populace in:

“Onye ndi iro gbara  
gburugburu na eche ndu ya  
nche mgbe nile” (*Echoes of Violence* 4).

Otagburuagu uses proverbs, which Chinua Achebe calls the palm oil with which the Igbo eat words to “evoke the cultural milieu in which the action takes place” (Lindfors, 1978:5). Apart from evoking the cultural milieu in the novel, proverbs are “used to express an essential idea” (Helen Chukwuma, 1976:17). And to Dan Mac Dougall, it is a “saying popularly known and repeated, usually expressing simple and concretely, though metaphorically, a truth based on sense or practical human experience” (1087). Wolfgang Mieder holds the same view as the others, but elaborated further that it is a saying or expression of “the folk, which contains, above all, wisdom, truth, morals, experiences, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation” (5).

As stated before, Otagburuagu makes predominant use of proverbs to encapsulate the various experiences of the war. The first proverb that “People had often said that to fire the moon was a waste of gun-powder. But in this case any gun-powder used to fire these awful neighbours would be justified” (3) underscores the unpreparedness of the ill-equipped Alaoma freedom fighters that are going into battle with sticks, clubs and locally made guns against the heavily equipped and artillery gunfire of the enemy forces. But because of the unprovoked attack and pogrom, they decided to attempt to do the impossible, because it is “better to die while fighting in self-defence than to wail and die a tortured death in the hands of unprovoked enemies” (3).

During the war, all schools are closed, but Onyekwere listens to the radio everyday to know whether there would be news about the resumption of schools so that he could go back to school but, “Rather than hear such news, war reports dominated the news items” (5). The news about the war are more important than those of the school resumption, because there is no way the students would be told to go back to school in a war-torn area where civilian infrastructures are also targets for the jet bombers. Therefore, the concentration of the leaders of Alaoma on the prosecution of war supersedes the resumption of school and this is encapsulated in the proverb, “This was not indeed strange because when there is a greater problem in the farm, the barn is sold” (5). In other words, the barn would have nothing to store, if the farm has a problem; therefore, the barn can be done away with since it would have nothing to store.

Again, during the war in Alaoma, most youths voluntarily enlisted in the army out of patriotism and heroism. But there are the sensible ones like those who hide in bunkers in bushes and Papa Biafra who feigned to be insane and jocularly entertain people in the

market square and gets enough food to eat and to feed his mother. To him, there is no heroism in warfare, particularly where the soldiers of Alaoma are ill-equipped, ill-trained and ill-clad. Therefore, his survival strategy during the war is encapsulated in the proverb of, "... the wood pecker must shift as the hunter shifts to avoid being killed by the hunter's bullet" (39). Clothed in "his tattered military uniform" (39), and in "his lunatic mood" (38), no one can conscript him into the Alaoma army, as he is thought to be insane.

In warfare, neighbours betray other neighbours and most of them get killed for trifles. Therefore, when Amadi secretly and maliciously arranges with some soldiers to get Onyekwere conscripted into the Alaoma army, in order to get him killed, Chief Alaoma warns his son to leave buying poultry birds for Amadi so he can survive the war. He encapsulates this survival strategy in a proverb that, "If a snake conceals itself well, it survives many generations. Its enemies will only see the scales of old age which it has left in its former habitat" (51). In other words, he warns Onyekwere to be cautious of Amadi and others like him, if he would survive the war. Also in Chief Akoma's conspiracy against Amadi for arranging to get Onyekwere killed by the soldiers, he makes it clear that he would stop at nothing to get Amadi killed by soldiers as seen in the proverb, "If someone bites me on the anus without minding the excreta in it, I will bite him on the nose without minding the heavy and yellow mucous in it" (53).

Besides, when Egonu discovers that Omerenma has rendered him powerless by removing his armband from under his bed, it becomes quite clear to him that the woman the narrator calls "Iron lady" (96) is more powerful than he is. However, he swears to use intrigues to deal with her, as seen in the proverb, "If you cannot make a grandchild bleed, nothing prevents you from pressing his larynx hard so that he can scream" (97). In other words, even though he cannot stop Omerenma from running the camp and denying them their rights, he can still instigate other workers and military police to help him destroy her.

When Onyekwere substitutes himself to be used as a scapegoat instead of his father, the freedom fighters tortured, humiliated, degraded and almost executed him at the military detention camp before his school mate, Major Ita Ikpeme "waded into the matter and secured his release..." (127). Even before the major comes, he knows that by volunteering to replace his father, his love and loyalty would see through all ordeals or tribulations, and the belief of being saved is underscored in the proverb, "A child is not usually burnt by the burning faggots which his parents have placed in his palms" (126). Therefore, despite the other war crimes the soldiers committed against him and Ubani, they survived the ordeal and the war.

Finally, the novelist ends the human beings wasted and the carnage to property in the war with the proverbs, "When two brothers wrestle in the kitchen, some utensils must be broken" (140). This proverb seems to be too trivial when one considers the war crimes — murder, torture, cruel and degrading treatment, maiming, rape, destruction of property and all the carnage that goes with the war. But what may exonerate the novelist is that the war ends in not just the conquest of the rebels, but in the building of bridge between the two warring factions as seen in the several births from the unions between Alaoma women and the victorious soldiers. The proverb may be rightly justified by the omniscient narrator's view that:

The in-laws called most of the virgins they took from the people “Rose”. Onyekwere then wondered whether what happened between Alaoma and his neighbours could not be called a war of roses. Couldn’t it have been better if the in-laws named their new found love Esther (140)?

One other figure of speech that features prominently in the novel is irony. For instance, there is irony in the name of “Alaoma”, where the novel is set. “Alaoma” literally means in the Igbo language “a good land”, “a fertile land”. Initially, the people believe that Alaoma is “the land of the rising sun” (5) and that secession would not only give them freedom from their enemies, but would also fulfil “their dreams of a land of milk and honey” (141). With the secession and the war that follows it, the land can best be described as evil land where there is so much corruption, and treason, where one can easily lose one’s life for trifles, where one like Ubani may face execution simply because of his skin pigmentation, where there is hyper-inflation, where people torture and degrade others, where vulnerable group like babies, pregnant women and nursing mothers suffer malnutrition while the Inspector General of Police “looked so well fed that no one would imagine that he was living in a war battered economy” (130). It is a devastated land where the omniscient narrator takes the reader on imaginative journey to witness the holocaust in Alaoma with two of the survivors of the war crimes, because:

As they walked home wearily, a distance of 20 miles, they passed many shallow graves where war casualties had been buried. Onyekwere got worried more and more as they journeyed across these mounds of aborted and ruined talents (*Echoes of Violence* 133).

Also Omerenma is another character, whose name is ironic as it means goodness or a good person, but she is symbolic of the evil women who cause havoc in their husbands’ families. She represents the evil woman in the *Bible* like Portiphar’s wife who lied to her husband, Joseph’s master, that Joseph wanted to rape. She is also presented as Eve in her manipulation of Adam to eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge. Like the Biblical Adam, Ugoeze feels Azuka is a young woman whose nature was full of milk of human kindness, but “it is an awful thing to fall into the hands of a domineering woman” (79). Omerenma is also presented as Jezebel, who persuaded her husband, Ahab, to kill Naboth the Jezreel and confiscate his vineyard which he envied. In the character portrayal of Omerenma, she personifies evil, and that’s the reason the narrator says, “She had a strange lifestyle” (17). And because of her strange life-style, which is basically evil, “Onyekwere dreaded Omerenma like a contagious disease” (19). And like a contagious disease, it infects anybody who comes close to her as seen in her ejection of Onyekwere from Azuka’s house in Port Harcourt and the plan to send him to the warfront, where he would be killed. Also when she assumes control of the refugee camp when Onyekwere leaves for Nchara, the camp workers and internally displaced persons also experience her evil machinations. Her death and that of Azuka with that of her accomplice at the camp seem to be divinely propelled as acts of punishment for their evil deeds which amount to war crimes in the fictive setting of *Echoes of Violence*.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the creative writers in every genre have striven towards the protection of the individual's fundamental human rights and freedoms. It is submitted that Emeka J. Otagburuagu in *Echoes of Violence* through a symbolic and metaphorical representation of the Nigerian Civil War sits like a judge of the Criminal Court to pronounce judgement on the war crimes committed by the two sides in the war against the civilian population and the monumental destruction of property in the fictive world of Alaoma and the United Republic. In fact, he is of the view that the freedom fighters of Alaoma committed more war crimes against their own people than the enemy troops and the civilians of the United Republic. The situation is adjudged the case of "Mentors turn to cannibals leaving the mentees without respite" (Otagburuagu 139). In reality, no criminal charges are brought against the war criminals despite the elaborate provisions of the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. The international community can no longer keep silent in the face of the mindless murder of civilians and soldiers who laid down their arms and in the face of wanton destruction of property that goes against the principle of military necessity. The torture, cruel treatment, humiliation and degradation that leave physical and psychological negative impact on the individual, and the treatment of women as booties of war were to pronounced to be neglected.

It is submitted further that though *Echoes of Violence* is written in Western and cosmopolitan English, it is laced with ironies and proverbs that point to the cultural milieu of the setting and world view. The text also gives literariness to the novel as a work of literature and bear the weight of the writer's warning to his society (Bodunde 2001).

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