Portraits of the Nigerian Soldier in Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty* and Festus Iyayi’s *Heroes*

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Abstract

An essential feature of Nigerian literatures is their capacity to exploit history and social experience to bring to light the human condition in society without compromising literary aesthetics. Thus, Nigerian novels often appear to be more educative than entertaining by their ability to illuminate social realities far more effectively than historical or sociological texts. This is evident in the representations of soldiers in Nigerian novels which are highly influenced by historical and social circumstances. This paper carries out a comparative and descriptive analysis of portrayals of Nigerian soldiers in Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty* and Festus Iyayi’s *Heroes* from a new historical perspective. Most studies on the military in Nigerian novels often focus on their actions in war situations and their disruptive and undemocratic activities in politics. However, these studies frequently explore the military as a group with little attention to the texts as expositions on character types in the Nigerian military. This study therefore contributes to criticism on the nexus between literary representation, history, and society. It further highlights historical and social contexts of military explorations in Nigerian novels and their impacts on the perception of the Nigerian soldier in society. These are aimed at showing that depictions of the military in Nigerian novels go beyond their capacities for disruptions and destructions in society; they represent artistic probing of the nature and character of persons in the Nigerian military.

Keywords

Nigerian soldier, military, literary representation, Nigerian novels, history, society, Okpewho, Iyayi

Introduction

This study deviates from the norm of assessing the Nigerian soldier in imaginative literature from perspectives similar to political and sociological studies, which survey the military by institutional paradigms. Such studies offer little to understanding the complex character of soldiers in society. This study therefore directs critical attention at soldiers, not the military institution, because appraising soldiers in block creates a distorted image of them. In so doing the study highlights character types among Nigerian soldiers rarely explored outside biographical writings.

A “portrait” is a picture, drawing, painting, or photograph of someone or a group of persons. It is also a representation, depiction, portrayal, or description of persons, things, or states of affair in given contexts or situations. It is in the second sense that it is used in this paper. “Portraits of the Nigerian soldier” therefore means the literary portrayals or depictions of the Nigerian soldier via characterization in the texts under study. Aspects of characterization that guide the interpretations of military characters alongside historical and societal factors in this paper include descriptions, speeches/dialogues, actions, reactions, and inner thoughts.

Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty* (1976) – (henceforth *TLD*) and Festus Iyayi’s *Heroes* (1986) have frequently been studied as war novels that depict the fratricidal Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970, especially among literary scholars gauging the destructiveness of armed conflict in postcolonial African countries. However, the studies hardly examine individual soldiers as personalities beyond the circumstances of war as the present one sets out to do.

Structurally, the sections “The Military and Society” highlights extant military theories as framework; “The Military in Nigerian Novels” reviews related literatures; “New Historicism” explains the theoretical perspective deployed;
and lastly, “Portraits of Soldiers as Character Types in Heroes and The Last Duty” analyzes major military characters in the texts.

The Military and Society

Historically, military units existed in most societies. From primitive times till the present, man’s sense of insecurity has made the military a necessity to society. The military scholar, Huntington (1957) asserts that “the existence of the military profession presupposes conflicting human interests and the use of violence to further those interests” (p. 62). This view suggests that man’s violent nature necessitates the formation of military units in every society. Hence the primary duty of the military is to defend their various nations from external aggression. Huntington calls this duty a functional imperative (p. 2). Added to this necessity is a second one he calls a societal imperative. To him, this second obligation originates from the “social forces, ideologies and institutions dominant within the society” where the military exists (p. 2). These two imperatives are common to militarized societies universally. In Africa, however, there is a third resulting from the military’s direct involvement in politics. This is why another military scholar, Grundy (1968) observes that: “it would be fallacious to view the military and politics separately . . . particularly in the developing countries [where] militaries are part and parcel of contemporary politics and cannot be divorced from it in theory, reality or analysis” (p. 1).

The military in many African countries are legacies of colonialism (Grundy, p. 9). Their involvement in politics often provoked diverse socio-political problems, which was why Nkrumah (1967) warned that the first military coup in the Congo was “a dangerous development” (p. 35). In the 1960s and 1970s military coups and counter coups were so rampant in Africa that First (1970) declares that “precipitate military action” [occurred as] one professional soldier replaced another at the head of government” (pp. 3-4). It is of that period that many scholars agree that the image of soldiers as an identifiable group in Africa underwent a transformation (Grundy, p. 1).

Janowitz (1960) is a seminal study on the mindset and behavior of soldiers. To Janowitz, “[because] the military is disciplined, inflexible, and in a sense unequipped for political compromise, the life of the [soldier invariably] produces a pattern of mental trait [that is] blunt, direct and uncompromising” (p. 4). First agrees with this view with the assertion that, “the army ethos embodies a general allergy to politicians” (p. 5). Predictably, these tendencies contribute to the infamy of soldiers in African societies. Achike (1980) captures this succinctly in the Nigerian context when he declares that the Nigerian soldier was not a popular figure before 1966. “The low prestige” of soldiers, he notes, was attributable to many factors of which the most significant was that the colonial administration used them to oppress its subjects. In addition, Nigerian soldiers on their own often used their uniforms to terrorize the local population making them a deeply hated group (pp. 21). To Kirk-Green (1971) however, the fact that the Nigerian soldier was part of the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF) before the country’s independence challenged the stability of the new nation immediately after the event (p. 20). He enumerated major internal problems within the military that posed challenges to the country, which include the conflict of “social origin” that raged between the rank and file and the officers corps, the “political interference” in the internal organization of the force and the problem of evolving a role in peacetime for military officers who had become “politically” ambitious (p. 29). These were key factors that precipitated the military’s incursion into Nigeria’s politics. The foregoing shows that the twin factors of colonial misuse and political exploitation by Nigerian leaders ultimately shaped the public perception of the Nigerian soldier character-wise as agency of coercion; a development which predictably compromised military professionalism.

Behaviourally, there are tendencies often associated with soldiers in society. The first is an attitude of professionalism which marks the sharp distinction between “warriors of previous ages” and modern soldiers (Huntington, 1957, p. 7). To Huntington therefore, the modern soldier is trained to imbibe the ethic of “the military mind” which engenders discipline, rigidity, and a scientific mindedness (p. 59). Such mind is not “flexible, tolerant, intuitive, or emotional” because such sentiments would hamper optimal performance for the professional soldier (p. 60). Huntington further delineates two levels in civil-military relationship: “the power level” and “the ideological level.” The first deals with the relationship of the military with the civil populace while the second concerns “the compatibility of professional military ethic with political ideologies prevailing in society” (pp. 86–87). Luckam (1971) appraises the Nigerian army and concludes that the military should not just be a professional body insulated from politics [as Janowitz and Huntington envisage]; it should also not be influenced by the political environment where it exists. In other words, the military should be “a social system in its own right, with definable boundaries across which transactions with its political and social environment takes place” (p. 7). This view rationalizes those of Huntington and Janowitz and attempts to justify their strengths as well as excuse their weaknesses. Luckam’s ideal military is not merely a professional body living on the fringes of society, or one solely predisposed to armed struggle with or without professional codes; it is a social system like any other in modern society with its own interests, be they political, social, economic, or environmental. In other words, it should be a body with its own stakes in the political and economic arrangements of the state. These factors, Luckham asserts, explain the behavior of soldiers in Africa, South America, and Asia where they frequently intrude into politics.
Some other studies on the Nigerian military explore their historical development and roles in post-independent Nigeria, which all contribute to societal perceptions of the Nigerian soldier. These include Miners (1971), which investigates the Nigerian military from the years 1956 to 1966 when they launched themselves into the nation’s politics. Miners’ study shows that the military of the 1950s and early 1960s were thought by many to be immune to the corruption and ethnicity that plagued the nation in those years. But at the end of his study he concludes that “no one now believes in the incorruptibility of military men” (p. 234). Another is Ostheimer (1973), which investigates the factors behind the change in attitude of the military toward politics from what it used to be in the colonial era. It traces a connection between this change and politicians’ over-reliance on soldiers to enforce internal order in the polity where the police failed; or used them to intimidate, harass, and ultimately subdue political opponents. This dependency, Ostheimer contends, is at the nub of the military’s abdication of their “apolitical heritage. . . [and] ambivalence and assumed that they were the only alternative to corruption and chaos” that resulted from the political quagmire that engulfed the Nigerian nation in the first few years of self-rule (p. 59).

Oyinbo (1971) focuses mainly on the political crises that engulfed the nation and their aftermath in the period before the civil war and concludes that after the military took over the polity with very high expectations from the people, a few months of their stay in power threw up a number of issues that reveal that the peoples’ expectations were misplaced. The study concludes that “a military government does not have the links with the people to get the necessary feedback which is an essential of successful government [because the] military organization is rigid and designed for very special and rather negative circumstances” (p. 144). Oyinbo therefore dismisses military romance with politics by declaring that military governments have “no special advantages over political governments,” but are instead worse (p. 144).

**The Military in Nigerian Novels**

Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966) was the first Nigerian novel to depict the Nigerian military as redeemers in Nigeria’s body politic. Since then, there has hardly been any novel of significance that portrayed them charitably. After that milestone, the military has been explored mainly in two categories of Nigerian novels: “war novels” and novels of “critical realism” (Benson & Conolly, 1994, p. 1159). War novels reflect the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970 where the central concern is to reconstruct fictionally the events of the fratricidal conflict. The military in such novels are depicted in their traditional role as belligerents at war with the central goal of overcoming “the enemy” by whatever means at their disposal. These novels portray large-scale destructions of lives and property with other human rights abuses perpetrated by soldiers. Novels in this category alongside the two explored in this study include: S.O. Mezu’s *Behind the Rising Sun* (1971); Kole Omotoso’s *The Combat* (1972); Wole Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy* (1973); John Munonye’s *A Wreath for the Maidens* (1973); I. N. C. Aniebo’s *The Anonymity of Sacrifice* (1974); Flora Nwapa’s *Never Again* (1975); Eddie Iroh’s *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* (1976); Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Survive the Peace* (1976); Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* (1976); Eddie Iroh’s *Toads of War* (1979); Andrew Ekwuru’s *Songs of Steel* (1979); Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Divided We Stand* (1980); Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982); Eddie Iroh’s *The Siren in the Night* (1982); Meki Nzewi’s *And I Spied* (1997); Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006); Uche Ezeh Al’s *Jungle Drumbeats* (2011); and Akachi Ezeigbo’s *Roses and Bullets* (2011) among others.

Novels of critical realism explore contemporary socio-political issues troubling society. These novels identify and criticize persons, institutions, and social tendencies responsible for moral and socio-political decadence in society. Some scholars have argued that the military’s lust for political power and their abuse of it should be the thrust of such novels where they choose military activities as subject matter (Benson & Conolly, 1994, p. 116; Nnolim, 1989, pp. 62–63). Soldiers in these novels are not depicted in their traditional roles; instead, their engagement in politics and with civil society is explored. A few examples include Chinua Achebe’s *Anthrills of the Savannah* (1987); Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991); Chukwuemeka Ike’s *The Search* (1991); Isidore Okpewho’s *Tides* (1993); Adebayo Williams’s *The Remains of the Last Emperor* (1994); Frank Mowah’s *Eating by the Flesh* (1995); Oke Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* (2000); Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* (2002); Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003); Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005); Habila’s *Measuring Time* (2006); Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013); and Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen* (2015) among others. Artistically, the characterization of soldiers in this category is more complex than in the war novels.

Arguably, there have been few studies on the military in Nigerian novels considering their profuse exploration in the genre. Of these, none of significance has explored the approach proposed in this paper: to appraise Nigerian soldiers as individuals reflecting character types in the military. Many of the studies scrutinize the military as a group in either theaters of war or politics. Among critical studies on the Nigerian military at war is Ezeigbo (1986) which investigates fact and fiction in the literature of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970. Inevitably, the military as active belligerents feature prominently in the work. However, the study focuses mainly on investigating the interface of fact and propaganda in the literary output generated by the civil conflict. Amuta (1984) and Nwahunanya (1991, 1997) are patterned along similar trajectories and focus on the military as a block at war.
On the other hand, studies on the military in politics include Adeoti (2003a) which surveys how writers have captured the experiences of people under military rule within the years 1966 to 1999 and concludes that the military’s recurrent presence in Nigerian literature is evident that they have become entrenched in the psyche of the Nigerian people. In another study also, Adeoti (2003b) appraises the autobiographies and biographies of major Nigerian military officers who have played significant roles in the nation since independence. He concludes at the end of the exercise that such publications were efforts at self re-writing. In both studies, he does not specifically make the Nigerian soldier the subject of his enquiry. Many other studies on the military in Nigerian novels explore military despotism, oppression, tyranny, and other forms of anarchical leadership. These include Carrol (1990), Ogu (1990), Ojinmah (1991), Folorunsho (1993), Benson and Conolly (1994), Eghagha (2004), Asika (2011), Akung (2011), and Onwuka (2016, 2018) among several others. The two studies of Onwuka come closest to analyzing soldiers on character basis, but their major concerns were on military dictatorship and oppression in society.

The review above shows that though studies on the military in Nigerian novels are hardly adequate, the little that has been achieved often viewed all soldiers as a block with none particularly investigating character types among Nigerian soldiers which can be achieved by individualizing and critiquing them on the basis of individual characterization. This is the gap that this study addresses.

New Historicism

Veeser (1989) articulates the seemingly disruptive but refreshingly eclectic character of New Historicism, describing its fluidity as a literary approach:

New Historicism has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of non-interference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power; indeed on all matters that deeply affect people’s practical lives – matters best left, prevailing wisdom went, to experts who could be trusted to preserve order and stability in ‘our’ global and intellectual domains. . . New Historicists combat empty formalism by pulling historical considerations to the center stage of literary analysis. (p. ix, xi).

Highlighting another aspect, Greenblatt (1980) argues that literary texts are not just cultural symbols; rather, they are sites of discourses of power and culture. Thus, new historicism does not consider art [images and narratives] as products to be merely contemplated for their esthetic content. Rather, it views art as a “cultural workshop” where issues of culture and power are probed. 3 New historicism, therefore, is deemed an appropriate perspective in this study because of its multidisciplinary character such as appropriation of military theories from other fields and their application to the analysis of military characters in Nigerian novels. The fact that literature draws from and feeds other fields of knowledge justifies this inter-disciplinary exercise. Further, new historicism is chosen because the characterizations of soldiers in Nigerian novels are heavily influenced by the military's historical antecedents and their activities in society.

However, it is the perspective of McGann (1988) that is of greater relevance to this study. It’s viewpoint is that “New historical criticism tries to define what is most peculiar and distinctive in specific works, [and] in specifying these unique features and sets of relationships, it transcends the concept of the-[text] –as-verbal-object to reveal the [text] as a special sort of communication event” (p. 131). This view guides the appraisal of Nigerian soldiers in the two novels in the light of historical realities in Nigeria. It also mediates the interpretations of power relations between soldiers and civil society reflected in the texts. With the new historical mode therefore, characters of soldiers in the two texts are critiqued mainly from historical perspectives to highlight what is distinctive about them; and to show what character type each represents in Nigerian society.

Portraits of Soldiers as Character Types in Heroes and The Last Duty

Critical studies on Heroes and TLD have inexplicably not been as many as those on works of similar significance like Chinua Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah (1987) and Chimamanda Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun (2006). Among the noteworthy ones is Palmer (1993), which extols Okpewho’s brilliance in TLD but appraises the two central soldiers in the novel rather harshly. While examining the concept of duty from each soldier’s responsibilities in the study, it strangely tagged Private Okumagba as “the sadistic soldier” (p. 22) and “[a] brutal, semi-literate soldier (p. 25). Then it described Major Ali unjustifiably as “the most obsessive” character preoccupied with the concept of duty, and exhibiting “smug self-satisfaction” in his thoughts and actions. Ni Chréacháin (1991) appraises Heroes as a counter-narrative from the perspective of the rank and file to the dominant narrative of the officer corps, who are part of the ruling elite that profited from the Nigerian Civil War. It faults the novel for failing to highlight the “unknown soldiers” strongly enough, which it claims to extol. This interpretation foregrounds the class dichotomy between the officer corps and the rank and file, and therefore remains a block assessment of soldiers on group basis rather than their individualities. Similarly, Ni Chréacháin (1992), which analytically compares Iyaiy’s fictive narrative of the Civil War with Obasanjo’s autobiographical My Command (1980) of the same event, explores soldiers in groups and proclaims Heroes “the re-writing of history, the exposure of the social contradictions, [and] the unmasking of the military and the ruling class” (p. 56). Finally, Chukwunah and Nebeife (2017) examines Heroes and TLD alongside other texts in exploring
issues of scapegoatism/victimhood in investigating “persecution in Igbo-Nigerian Civil-War Narratives.” The authors’ application of a persecution theory in the reading of the texts indicts the Nigerian army as a group for mob action against Igbos led by their Commander-in-Chief, General Gowon, who ruled Nigeria in the war period. In all, soldiers are explored as groups in these studies, not as individuals.

Characterization of soldiers is realized quite differently in Heroes and TLD. The development of military characters in Heroes compared to TLD is relatively shallow and lacks depth socially and psychologically. Despite the fact that most of the characters in the novel are soldiers, few of them are individualized. The novel’s concern with propagating the Marxist ideology significantly affects its character development, which is why there is more of “telling” than “showing” the activities of soldiers (using the critical parameters of Henry James). Most of the military characters are nameless with only four soldiers given some degree of personality in the novel. These are Brigadier Olu Otunshi, Sergeant Kesh Kesh, Sergeant Audu, and Corporal Kolawole. These characters typify various personalities in the Nigerian military.

Brigadier Olu Otunshi is characterized as a senior officer in the Nigerian army. Though he mirrors Huntington’s ethic of “the military mind” that engenders discipline, rigidity, and a scientific mindedness which is not “flexible, tolerant, intuitive or emotional” (pp. 59–60); his portrait reflects the worst kind of Nigerian soldier that blights the overall image of the military as a group. He is so ruthless that he cares neither for the sanctity of life nor the welfare of the men he commands. He is callous enough to shoot another officer for staring at his wife and habitually sends his men into battle on the eve of payday so he could appropriate the remuneration of the dead. At the battle of Onitsha he sacrifices his men by deploying them into battle without back-up and then goes off to attend the wedding of the Head of State (Heroes, p. 189). He is neither patriotic nor selfless in his duty; instead, he is chauvinistic and exploitative. He is a Brigade Commander who sells arms meant for his men to the enemy, a heinous crime if ever discovered.

Brigadier Otunshi’s character represents the arrogant megalomaniac type of soldier who is hypocritical, power-crazy, and often demands from others virtues they lack themselves. As a Brigade Commander, he belittles the lives of every other human being below his rank. He ordered the execution of many brave soldiers who survived a suicidal invasion of Onitsha, a military fortress of the opposing army, without considering the odds against them because he considered them all cowards for retreating at all (Heroes, p. 232). His autocratic mindset and brutal conduct in the war put the military in bad light because he misuses the power at his command to entrench immorality, injustice, and destruction. His character reflects the dangers and negative effects of the military ethic that allows a single individual to wield so much power which inevitably leads to abuse. Virtually all undesirable traits often associated with soldiers throughout Nigeria’s history are lumped together in his personality. His character is an embodiment of all that is corrupt in Nigeria’s military high command which allegedly perpetrated atrocious war crimes against humanity during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970.

Brigadier Otunshi’s kind is a product of a privileged upper class that perceives the rank and file, who are recruited from the masses, as pawns to be commanded and manipulated to advance their interest. He has the disposition of a politician in military fatigues lording it over the impoverished but ideologically psyched field soldiers that make up his defense line against his kind on the opposing side of the war. This enables him to continue to exploit the rank and file by demanding their unreserved allegiance to duty through intimidation and unimaginable ruthlessness on the one hand, and the crumbs he throws at them as war stipends on the other. This background conditions him to view his men at the war front as expendable items in his quest for economic gains, just like corrupt politicians use the impoverished voting public they discard after each election to get to power. His general disposition in the novel is a reflection of his contempt for the suffering masses of Nigeria who sacrifice their lives for an ideal that has been sold to them by his kind: “to keep Nigeria as one.”

Sergeant Kesh Kesh and Sergeant Audu signify another type of Nigerian soldier. They represent the ideal among the rank and file that constitute the majority of combatants in the Nigerian Civil War. The two soldiers reflect virtually all the attributes of the quintessential soldier espoused by both Huntington and Janowitz. Both men are patriotic, selfless, courageous, dependable and dutiful. They are professional soldiers who are in the military not for material gains, but for the love of their country. Both were betrayed by their officers in battle and had to fight their way out of very difficult situations. They correspond to soldiers committed to duty at personal costs which is why they fight on in spite of the treachery of their officers. Sergeants Kesh Kesh and Audu are better explored in Heroes than the other soldiers in the novel. In fact, Kesh Kesh is the most developed military character in the novel and possesses all the virtues absent in the officers. In addition to his military stance of stoic determination in his constant confrontation with violence, rage, and death on battle-fields, he remains humane for which he is admired and respected by his men. He is able to organize and motivate his men to fight because they trust him. Like Audu, he shares the pain of his men and respects them all. Overall, the characterization of the two sergeants focuses on highlighting those positive attributes lacking among the officers in the novel.
The negative perception of officers in *Heroes* and the patent sympathy for the rank and file is a clear reflection of its Marxist ideological tenor. The officer corps is grouped with the exploiting class while the rank and file is classified among the exploited in society. Consequently, Sergeants Kesh Kesh and Audu are foils to the officers in the novel.

Corporal Kolawole stands for the committed but often victimized soldier in the military. His kind is frustrated in all they do and are usually punished with demotions for challenging any untoward decisions of their superiors. In the novel, Kolawole questions his officer-in-charge over the latter’s porous battle strategy. The plan fails and many lives are lost. Ironically however, the officer gets promoted while Kolawole is demoted. In spite of the demotion, Kolawole fights on zealously refusing to be cowed or demoralized. Like Sergeants Kesh Kesh and Audu, he has nothing personally against the opposing combatants but he fights because duty requires him to do so. Kolawole’s is a true patriot in the military where the leadership has surrendered to the vices of greed, selfishness, and aggrandizement. His struggles in the novel reflect the travails of patriotic soldiers in the Nigerian military who are willing to pay the ultimate price for the country but are frustrated by their commanders. He represents those who fight bravely and die heroically in battle but remain unsung while their incompetent officers often claim the glory of their efforts. Sergeant Audu expresses the condition thus:

After this war many generals will write their accounts in which they will attempt to show that they were the heroes of this war, that it was their grand strategies that won the war. They will tell the world that they single-handedly fought and won the war. The names of [rank and file] soldiers . . . will never be mentioned. The soldiers take the dirt and ambushes and the bullets with their lives. The soldiers pay for the unity of this country with their lives and yet, what happens? Always the officers are the heroes. Always the generals, the officers take the credit. Always the generals get the praise. Always they are the heroes. Always. (*Heroes*, p. 86)

The message in *Heroes* is that soldiers like Sergeants Kesh Kesh and Audu and Corporal Kolawole and their kind who die in combat are the true heroes that ought to be celebrated for their sacrifices; not the officers who indulge themselves partying behind the war zones.

Sergeants Kesh Kesh and Audu as well as Corporal Kolawole are from the grassroots, the masses who constitute the majority of Nigerian society. They have been toughened by economic hardship and the inhumane exploitation by the upper class long before the war. Thus, they are so used to struggle and fighting for survival that they view the war as another battle site they must survive, even though they know that those they fight are their own kind on the other side of the conflict. In spite of losses of comrades and friends, they are stoic and pragmatic enough to know that they cannot escape their situation as long as society is structured to favour their oppressors. Emotionally, they have lost the capacity to mourn or dwell on losses or fear death. This is why Audu reacts to the death of his colleagues after their officer abandoned them thus: “There is nothing to be sorry about . . . This is war. You don’t get sorry about anything here . . . We are all Nigerians at the front. We all are, as even the Biafrans who fight us are” (*Heroes*, pp. 85–86). It is an acceptance of their condition as pawns in the theatre of war.

Other military characters in *Heroes* are mere stereotypes resulting from negative perceptions of soldiers in a nation long under military rule. Many of them are nameless, faceless and underdeveloped; so they lack individuality and tend to act in groups like packs of wolves. This lack of identity is also suggestive of a “mob” mentality where there is no distinguishing characteristic or feature among soldiers. This impression that Nigerian soldiers behave alike with no independence of thought or action implies that the soldier’s life is monotonous and therefore finds excitement in violence and wars. At another level however, *Heroes* excuses the barbaric actions of Nigerian soldiers in the civil war and proposes that evil is innate in mankind and that the soldier’s uniform and wars are merely platforms for its manifestation. The Nigerian soldier is therefore absolved of the war crimes of the civil war by the novel’s protagonist in these words:

You do not have to be brutal to be a soldier or rather you are brutal not because you are a soldier but because there is a sadist, a rapist, a fascist and a murderer in you who wait for war and army uniforms to give them expression. (*Heroes*, p. 62)

The portrait of the Nigerian officer corps in *Heroes*, unlike that of the rank and file, has far-reaching implications negatively. It is conceivable that a group of rank and file soldiers could carry out a barbaric act and remain faceless, but not so with officers who act individually. The novel is replete with decisions and actions taken by officers in such irresponsible a manner that raises questions on their competence as officers. Some of these decisions taken during the civil war continue to fuel ethnic suspicions in Nigeria presently and nurture mutual distrust among the various groups that make up contemporary Nigeria.

Another significant aspect in the depiction of soldiers in *Heroes* is their presentation in groups where they are faceless and nameless in incidents of reckless destructions. This tendency in the novel is suggestive that soldiers signify lawlessness and chaos. This notion runs through the gamut of the narrative especially with several acts of brutality against civilians traced to unidentifiable groups of soldiers. This unmitigated violence against civil society fuels the perception that the military is a metaphor for physical or psychological violence. In seven major instances in *Heroes* where soldiers act in groups, they leave in their wake wanton destruction of lives, and so much misery. These include: where Federal soldiers search the house where Ade lives and execute the landlord and all the persons he is sheltering (*Heroes*, pp. 15–16);
where Federal soldiers accost Osime [the novel’s protagonist and main narrator] at the stadium and beat him up (Heroes, pp. 27–30); where Biafran soldiers raid a village, rape the women, push sticks into their wombs through the vagina and then behead the men (Heroes, pp. 60–61); where Federal soldiers shoot and kill Ohiali and eight others (Heroes, pp. 56); where Federal soldiers kill 187 prisoners of war to avenge a recent defeat to Biafran soldiers (Heroes, pp. 227); where Biafran soldiers gang-rape the major female character, Ndudi, as they flee Oganza (Heroes, pp. 224); and where Federal soldiers gang-rape Ndudi after they liberated Oganza from Biafran soldiers (Heroes, pp. 224).

There is a common factor in the instances above. The atrocities of these groups of soldiers were all perpetrated outside combat situations. The novel thus explores in the main the theme of military brutality and destructiveness and projects soldiers as misanthropes in the circumstances listed above.

III

Okpewho’s TLD presents a different kind of Nigerian soldier in the character of Major Ali, a sector Commander and a significant figure in the novel. His portrait reflects the conscientious type of soldier who believes in the rule of law and the sanctity of human life. This mindset makes him sensitive to issues concerning the welfare of the people he supervises. In the performance of his duty, he considers the implications of his decisions and actions and worries about the feelings of both soldiers and civilians under his watch. Though he respects the leaders and elders of society, he does not succumb to the manipulations of Chief Toje, a respected town elder, when he dubiously suggested that the military apply more force in dealing with the people (TLD, p. 52). Major Ali’s personality is quite uncommon for a soldier in the Nigerian novel. His kind is a rarity in Nigerian literature for that matter. He is so deeply meditative and introspective that he hardly comes across as “a Nigerian soldier” going by the stereotype of Nigerian soldiers, especially in the period of war. He is portrayed as a patriotic, selfless, and self-effacing soldier who conducts himself with respect and dignity. In his area of command in Urukpe, the senseless antagonism between military and civilian authorities which is often the norm in many other Nigerian novels is practically non-existent. What he offers is a military leadership that recognizes the relevance of civilian authorities. His sensitivity to the feelings of the civil populace of Urukpe is almost palpable. This is illustrated by his emotional response to the public execution of a soldier he condemned to face a firing squad for committing murder, a condition that Huntington’s and Janowitz’s postulations proclaim an aberration in a soldier. The Major narrates the event thus:

He [the condemned man] took his last look at the world, and his head was wrapped securely in the hood. A firing squad of six took up their positions in a line ten yards away facing him. The officer gave his orders . . . volleys of fire put an end to the killer’s life. The effect on the civilian gathering was no less than shock [sic.]. Old men rose from their seats and shook their heads at this addition of yet one more incident to their catalogues of woes. Allah, what faces they wore! Women and children cried at the horror. Mothers clutch their babies fast to their bodies as they ran quickly to their homes. . . In the car as I was being driven home, I sat pondering the unglamorous grandeur of justice and bounden duty. Walahi! (TLD, pp. 22–23)

Such emotional response and depth of feelings in a soldier, especially in a war situation, is unprecedented in portrayals of the military in Nigerian literature. It is in total contrast to the norm where soldiers are often depicted as callous persons. The implication of Ali’s portrait is that the Nigerian soldier is not just about brute force. He is capable of benevolent and altruistic feelings, a reality that negates the often near-total condemnation of soldiers as oppressors.

Major Ali’s character in TLD is complex and a significant improvement on portrayals of soldiers in Nigerian novels. Structured in his personality is a sense of motivation that equips him functionally for the conflicts he encountered which eventually confirms his humanity by the strengths and weaknesses he manifested physically and psychologically. For instance, he sees through the subterfuge of Toje, but his respect for civil institutions prevents him from interfering with the high chief on the issue of Aku, Oshevire’s wife. However, this decision not to intrude in “civilian” affairs results in dire consequences for all the characters in the novel. Clearly, Ali’s dilemma emanates from his personal convictions and commitment as a professional soldier. His decision to allow civilians go about their normal activities relatively unimpeded in the war circumstance in order to avoid the high-handedness associated with military leaderships backfired. The result: preventable disaster. That error in judgment blights his achievements and leads to his transfer from the Urukpe front.

Major Ali’s character and disposition to his men (the rank and file) and the civil populace suggests a background of someone who has worked his way up the rank and file to the officer corps. His deep understanding of the conditions under which his men operate is an indicator that he had once been in their situation. Similarly, his emotional connection to the ordinary people of Urukpe is suggestive of his grassroots background, especially as he goes to great lengths to ensure that the people’s way of life is not disrupted in spite of the war conditions. Where the likes of Brigadier Otunshi in Heroes oppresses and kills; he sympathizes and preserves. Thus, his character shows a clear distinction between a professional soldier on the one hand, and the opportunistic and exploitatative officer on the other represented by Brigadier Otunshi in Heroes.
IV

Major Akuya Bello in TLD reflects another kind of Nigerian soldier. He is the gullible type that is easily intimidated and manipulated by the political elite. He is Ali’s predecessor at the Uruke command post and actually facilitated the arrest of Oshevire at the instigation of Toje. His failure to investigate Oshevire’s alleged offense or listen to the man’s protestations of innocence says a lot about his type of soldier. He is unable to discern between subterfuge and sincerity or illusion and reality which is why he is easily manipulated by the powerful in society. His perception of societal dynamics is very shallow so he becomes a tool in the hands of the rich to oppress the poor. Inevitably, his kind is susceptible to aggression and intimidation against the common people.

Major Bello’s character also represents Nigerian army officers who measure the success of their command by the number of arrests and detention they achieve while in charge. In the novel he concludes that Oshevire is guilty as alleged as long as the word comes from a personality like Chief Toje (TLD, p. 129). His obvious antagonism toward the accused at his trial shows that he considers the legal process a waste of time and would gladly throw him into jail had he the powers. Major Bello, though an officer of the same rank as Ali, is completely different from him. He lacks Ali’s sense of justice for all irrespective of status. His portrait is therefore in tune with critical historical perceptions of Nigerian soldiers as agents of intimidation, brutality, and death especially against the common people. He is a foil to Major Ali which implies that Nigerian military officers do not necessarily have the same mindset to societal issues or react to them in the same way. Just like the society at large, the military are made up of different character types with diverse dispositions and attitudes to the nation’s socio-political conflicts.

Major Bello’s disposition suggests a background of someone who originated from the masses, who will do anything to dissociate himself from them and therefore treats the people with contempt, especially because they remind him of his roots. He rose through the ranks like Ali but fails to rise above his hard past to his current position as a senior officer. Psychologically, he remains fearful of the rich and is easily intimidated by the affluent in society whom he regarded as his superiors in peacetime. This is why he strives to please Toje, the prime symbol of manipulation and oppression in Uruke. His type is common in the Nigerian military. They offer themselves as willing agents to the powerful in society to intimidate and repress the people, hoping to advance their careers through political patronage of those they serve.

V

Private Okumagba mirrors another kind of Nigerian soldier. He is the type in the military for personal conceit and ethnic pride rather than national commitment and fights mainly in defense of those ideals. For instance he gets angry when he receives orders to protect Aku, the woman being exploited by Chief Toje, whom he (Okumagba) regards as a rebel. While he guards her grudgingly, he is tempted many times to kill her and blame her death on attacks by opposing Biafran soldiers. He reveals his mindset thus:

Only the consequences of such an action deter me from sticking the barrel of my gun through the window and blasting the brains clean out of that woman and her child. For that is what they deserve, like all rebels. But I know what a crazy major we have here. Get only so near as to touch the hair on the body of anyone who doesn’t wear a gun, and he makes haste to tie you to the stake and dispatch you with a spray of burning lead. Justice, even the swift justice of the gun, has gone mad in his head. I went into the army by my own choice . . . nobody conscripted me. I swore loyalty to defend this country, with my own life if need be, against any form of violation . . . . Now look where I ended up. A lone and ineffective guard, performing not the duty that I pledged myself to but a most unbecoming chore: detailed to preserve the life of a rebel and her child . . . . (TLD, p. 130)

However, the pulse of his ethnic ego turned him into a fighting machine in defense of both his pride and the woman he is mandated to protect with his life. Okumagba’s is also the type that likes the action of battle. In the novel, in spite of his loathing for Aku, he dives headlong into the fights to repel the attacks on his position even though he could have sabotaged the whole mission of protecting her (TLD, pp. 200–201).

Okumagba’s profile is unambiguously connected to a background of deprivation and frustrated aspiration to rise above his low class status in society. His type has been persuaded to believe that his lack of progress up the social ladder is caused by the “other” ethnic group, the Simbians, who seem to thrive better in the country than others. His seeming zealousness to fight to keep Nigeria together is actually driven by a craving to subdue the industrious ethnic group “responsible” for his ignominious condition of penury and unending struggle to get off the poverty lane. His type are many in the Nigerian military, fueling the ambers of ethnic tensions, divisions, and bitterness. They are antithetical to national unity and cohesion.

TLD further reveals a fundamental aspect of military behavior in society. The way the average Nigerian soldier relates to people is dependent on whether they consider such persons as friends or enemies. Predictably, they are hostile to “enemies” and treat “friends” amiably. However, their tag of who are friends or enemies shifts with events and time. Thus, a soldier that is antagonistic in one situation could be very sociable and friendly in another to the same individual. An instance in TLD is the transformation in the attitude of the soldiers that guarded Oshevire during his detention when he was set free. Oshevire narrates the experience and his impression of them this way:

When it was announced to me that I was free and should go home, and I told them [the soldiers] that I had no money to pay the fare to my home town, one of the guards put a hand in his
Thus, Oshevire’s perception of the Nigerian soldier changes immediately as a result of what he witnesses. The soldiers who brutalized him during his trial when they considered him an enemy of the state transform and accord him respect and courtesy as soon as he is “cleared” of treasonable conduct by the tribunal. Again, when two army officers give him a ride back to his town, he is so impressed by their civility that he prays: “God bless you both, good people” (TLD, p. 225). These events show that the average Nigerian soldier is not rigidly antagonistic to civilians in all situations; instead, their behaviour to persons is dependent on whether they perceive them as friends or enemies.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the perception of Nigerian soldiers in the same civil war in TLD is at variance with what obtains in Heroes. A significant quality in their portrayal in TLD is the profuse exploration of their inner thoughts. Unlike in Heroes where they are mainly projected through impressions of civilian characters, soldiers are given a significant voice in TLD. Major Ali and Private Okumagba especially are explored so extensively that they come out distinctly as credible characters. There is no overt ideology in TLD as in Heroes where the perception of the Nigerian soldiers is so colored by its ideological slant that the element of verisimilitude is stretched to the limits in their characterization. This explains why there is no military character in Heroes comparable to either Major Ali or Private Okumagba in terms of character development. Brigadier Otunshi, Sergeants Kesh Kesh and Audu, and all the other soldiers portrayed in Heroes are at best flat characters when compared to the complex attributes that the two major military characters reflect in TLD.

Conclusion

This study has carried out a descriptive and interpretative assessment of significant military characters in Heroes and TLD, appraising them as individual soldiers rather than the military as a group. It highlights and describes five character types among soldiers in the Nigerian military using the resource of characterization in the two novels under analysis. It identifies Brigadier Otunshi as a soldier representing the privileged class who treats the majority of soldiers who are the rank and file as well as civilians disdainfully; Sergeants Audu and Kesh Kesh along with Corporal Kolawole are part of the downtrodden and impoverished masses with a pragmatic view of society and the war; Major Ali, who has risen through the ranks to the officer corps to imbibe traits of accommodation, restraint, respect for those under his command, and fairness in his dealings with both his military colleagues and civilians; Major Bello the gullible kind that emerged from the masses but panders to the caprices of the elite in society to advance his career; and Private Okumagba, who comes from a background of deprivation among the masses but retains his personal and ethnic pride and willingly fights for his fatherland even if he were prompted by ethnic bias or nepotistic considerations. Though these characters have different backgrounds, aspirations, and ambitions, they are all part of the Nigerian military which is a microcosm of the Nigerian society.

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Notes

1. The term “military units” is used in this context in a loose sense to include groups of persons in ancient times that performed such functions as those executed by modern militaries.
2. Harry Coles makes a distinction between the motives of the militaries of the early and primitive societies and those of modern ones. For the former, “militarism was simply a better organized and more efficient means of plundering or conquering one’s neighbors” while in modern times, “militarism was associated with the consolidation and extension of national goals.” See his article, “Militarism” in Encyclopedia Americana (1994), pp.107–108.
3. Nkrumah’s statement was elicited by the overthrow of Patrice Lumumba’s government on September 14 1960 by the Congolese military. Nkrumah himself was overthrown by the Ghanaian military a few years later in 1966 while he was on a visit to China.
4. Okey Achike traces the earliest force that eventually transformed into the Nigerian army to a body that was known as “Clover’s Hausas” formed in 1862 by Lt. John Clover (who later became an administrator of Lagos). This body was part of the troops that Sir Fredrick Lugard turned into the “West African Frontier Force” (W.A.F.F) in 1897 and later into “Northern Nigerian Regiment” and “Southern Nigerian Regiment” in 1900. With the amalgamation in 1914, the two regiments became the “Nigeria Regiment” of the “West African Frontier Force.” On 13th December 1928, the W.A.F.F became the “Royal West African Frontier Force” (R.W.A.F.F), the eventual precursor of “The Nigerian Army” (NA) so named in 1956. See Achike (1980, pp. 6–16).
5. This notion of power is Foucaultian where power is viewed in human relationships and the perception of such relationships by persons or institutions involved in them. Power in this sense is synonymous with influence and control, especially the type
achieved through manipulation. “Hegemony” is often a term associated with this form of power. Soldiers are often portrayed in Nigerian novels as a hegemonic group with an insatiable lust for power, even when they are not directly involved in politics.

6. The propositions of E. M. Forster inform the basis of assessing characters in this study, while those of Henry James influence characterization; however, they have been deployed in new historical appraisal of the subject matter.

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