

# **Rallying against Dehumanization: Repudiating Military Brutality in Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Literary texts from Africa are seen by many critics as social documents concerned with the culture and politics of the continent. The Nigerian novel ostensibly belongs to this tradition, particularly those that were written in the realist mode. The fictional situations explored in them are often the writers' response to the often-harsh socio-political realities of contemporary society. In the pre-independence period and the 1960s, issues of colonialism were addressed. In more recent times, contemporary realities are treated in Nigerian fiction – the vexed issues of corruption, ethnic chauvinism, leadership crises and autocratic rule. This paper examines how Okey Ndibe in *Arrows of Rain*, frontally engages the evils of the latest incarnation of military rule and its civilian collaborators. This is indicative of a shift in theme and concern from the previous emphasis on the impact of colonization and the focus on the historical past to an examination of current socio-political problems of abuse of power by the ruling elite, as well as widespread brazen corruption and social inequality in contemporary Nigeria.

*Keywords:* rallying against, dehumanization, repudiating, military brutality, contemporary Nigeria, Okey Ndibe, *Arrows of Rain*.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Arrows of Rain* is a satirical and allegorical representation of Nigeria in the grip of dictatorship foisted upon it by the military in the last four decades. Contested views of painful history of Nigeria as a nation are the main issues in the novel. History's negotiability and the way in which this feature gives rise to the notion of protest is seen in the varying perspectives of different characters, as well as the contestation between official history and private memory. Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain* tackles headlong the evils of military rulers and their civilian collaborators. This orchestrates a shift of theme and concern away from the impact of colonisation and the historical past toward an examination of current socio-political problems of abuse of power by the ruling elite, corruption and pronounced social inequity.

The overt subscription to social concerns in *Arrows of Rain* reveals the extent of the determination of third-generation Nigerian writers to confront the social realities considered responsible for the failure of the country to live up to

its widely-acknowledged potential. In the novel, Ndibe imaginatively assesses endemic political problems aggravated by the military's incursion into the Nigerian political landscape. As John Elerius points out, literature provides a specific form of social consciousness to which the artist and the critic cannot be indifferent:

In apprehending observable reality and reflecting the findings in his literary creation, the African writer is not unaware of the real nature and objective of good literature which he sees as being largely determined by the needs of society. (2000: 195)

## 2. MEMORY AS SUBVERSION OF SILENCE IN *ARROWS OF RAIN*

*Arrows of Rain* is imbued with the capacity to remember what has happened, which in itself is a form of protest given the fact that what is being remembered is subversive of the existing order. Negotiated history and defiant protest coalesce in the experiences of the central character Ogugua, whose occupation as a journalist enables him to straddle both, thereby offering a complex interpretation of the way society, history and protest are all implicated within each other. Ogugua's narrative in *Arrows of Rain* echoes not only the ambivalence of a post-colonial Nigeria and the politics of remembering, but also the process of narrating and organising memories, and of evaluating the role of military in national development. Ogugua's narrative is a web of recollections from the distant past after it had undergone deliberate repression. His decision to narrate his turbulent past to his son, Femi Adero comes with the conviction that it will help him come to grips with his altered personality, a personality that has been dismembered by General Isa Pallat Bello:

I am here because many years ago I fooled myself that the counterfeit coin of silence was good enough to buy peace of mind. I forgot my grandmother's wisdom, that the mouth owes stories the debt of speech. (*Arrows of Rain*: 245)

Ogugua's decision to break out of the self-imposed silence of self-censorship clearly evaluates the power of narrating the brutality of the military in its assault on the collective sensibility of Nigerians. Ogugua's memory is a motif of interrogating Nigeria's chequered history in its struggle against military decapitation of its social and political values. In some sense, Ogugua in his nightmarish re-telling of the past presents himself as a bridge between the past and the present of Nigeria's history; he feels his disrupted history will provide the missing link in the life of Adero, who becomes a victim of controversial parentage, orchestrated by the military culture of gratuitous repression. The connection between Ogugua and post-colonial Nigeria is made more significant when his role in re-telling the historical past of Madia (Nigeria) is taken into consideration. His introspection not only empowers him as a chronicler of

events and circumstances in post-colonial Nigeria, but also makes him a compass for navigating Nigeria's future history.

Ogugua's narrative of military preoccupation with torture and repression led to his alienation. This strikes a parallel in the narrative of biological dislocation of Adero. This narrative was made to stand on its head when Adero, in his quest to trace his biological roots, traded his narrative of controversial parenthood with Ogugua:

That is my story. I am a man searching for his lost pebble. I am a stream cut off from its source. Tell me, if you know: where does such a stream go? (*Arrows of Rain*: 241)

This reveals the extent to which the military repression of the citizenry could fragment and damage the psyche of an individual and obliterate family roots in a post-colonial nation.

Ogugua and Adero are casualties of remembering the past. In recalling the past, the duo stumbled on the incontrovertible truth that they are two individuals "linked, by a strange intersection of fate and probability." (*Arrows of Rain*: 245) However, the apprehension of the reality of their oneness throws up despair and unmitigated cynicism in Ogugua. Such cynicism is borne out of the futility of existence to Ogugua whose life had lost enthusiasm for the celebration of fatherhood because of the transcendental frustration imposed on him by the armed forces of Madia. Hence, to Ogugua, nothing matters anymore:

Every familiar thing has become strange. Still, are not all humans, at bottom, mirages and mirrors? Mirages of faces in constant transfiguration, endlessly forming and reforming into multiple images. Mirrors of one another, reflecting now this stranger, now that, becoming one with every living person. (*Arrows of Rain*: 245)

Ogugua's reaction to Adero's narrative betrays the fact that in re-telling the past, there is bound to be contradiction between factual or forensic truth and the other shades of personal and social truths which constitute its problematics. Ogugua is conveniently disposed to remember and articulate a story in which his vulnerability to the military campaign of terror is sufficiently substantiated, rather than one in which he is indicted as a father who abdicated his responsibility. This realisation contests any sacrosanct subscription to the power of story-telling as a balm for healing the wounds of the past. *Arrows of Rain* examines the potential violence of both the processes and contexts of narration. This notion recalls the role of silence in the recollection of the past as explained by the anthropologist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance). (1995: 26)

Ogugua's narrative impinges on the silences, particularly in the construction of archives and narratives, suggesting that these are inter-related with "the making of history in the final instance."

In its form, *Arrows of Rain* evaluates the appurtenances of violence in recollection of the past, by indicating the silences in the narrative of Ogugua in parallel to the narrative of Adero. The narratives of Ogugua, Iyese and Adero are all intertwined, they interject into one another to indict the military in its torture and violence. The narratives, therefore, are woven around Ogugua, who has the narrative authority to decipher which story should be told from the ones that should not be told, since certain types of stories are more difficult to tell than others. The novel aligns with Ogugua's need to talk about the rape, killing, torture and dehumanisation of the generality of the citizenry by the military under the command of General Isa Pallat Bello, in order to portray the military as an institution which distils and perpetrates violence on its people in Third World countries. Ndibe protests these excesses through the use of irony, metaphor, fictional imaginings, proverbs and anecdotes.

Ogugua's narrative of self-isolation aligns its silences with narratives of Iyese's repeated rape by General Isa Pallat Bello, as a systemic violence which by extension reverberates a narration of subjugation of the state by the military. The novel's depiction of Ogugua's inability to recall and analyse certain parts of his past while deliberately shying away from others suggests that narrating the past also recalls violence that could disrupt the present. The end of the novel submits that the exploitation of memory to recall the past is susceptible to the dispensation of violence by those who oppose such re-telling of the past for the purpose of avoiding indictment. Hence, towards the end of the novel, Ogugua hangs himself to avoid being sentenced to life imprisonment by General Bello's obtrusion into the court trial whose entire processes have been subverted, with the compromise of Justice Kayode. Kayode, as an agent of the state has to carry out the script of the military junta of Madia, if he wishes to keep his job. The dilemma of Ogugua at the end of the novel is a symptom of self-hate caused by his delay in heeding the advice of his grandmother that "stories never forgive silence." His prolonged silence had created a lot of damage, and his regrets know no bounds:

My silence has no hope of redemption. It is too late in the day for me to look for grand insights. What I know are simple truths.

I know that the fabric of memory is reinforced by stories, rent by silences. I know that power dreads memory.

I know that memory outlasts power's viciousness. (*Arrows of Rain*: 248)

Ogugua's decision to take his own life is sufficient to save him from being traumatised afterwards by the nemesis of narrating the past when the relevance of such narrative has become somewhat belated. His death is an affirmation of the consequences of his choice to recall and narrate his politically disrupted past. Ogugua's narrative is a signification that in some situations, the need for re-

telling the past leaves in its wake its own kind of forgetting, not so much of violence perpetrated on an individual or community of the past, but of the violence that continues into the present.

Ogugua's narrative of military brutality is subsumed in a narrative of injury, incorporating both physical and emotional injuries. The wounds inflicted by the military authorities on both the individuals and society of Madia can be felt both on the small and larger scales, inscribing in its wake, indelible weals on communities, political structures and individuals. Teresa Brennan has argued that the process of recollecting a narrative of injury is dismembering, because it stifles whatever relationships bind people together in the past:

Having denied that the "object" has any will of its own, the foundational fantasy also denies the effects of the object upon the subject. These effects become far more significant as developing technologies permit the subject to construct a world of objects which fulfil its fantasies. When the world is actually turned into a world of objects, the power of the fantasy, the extent to which it takes hold psychically is reinforced. (1993: 18)

Ogugua's narrative evaluates the violence of story-telling as it corresponds to the violence of the public sphere. In the view of Joseph Slaughter, the public sphere creates a site of a certain kind of discursive "ambivalence." This anomaly is an underpinning of the imagined locale for juxtaposing the essence of humanity and its negation. Slaughter argues furthermore that:

Historical assumptions about the civic virtues and emancipatory characters of publicness also make it a primary site of human rights violation – a place where citizens are exposed to each other and to the repressive potential of the state. (2007: 144)

Ogugua's incarceration at Bande's Maximum Security Prison is a reminder that material violence can stifle an individual's drive to tell their own stories. His perception as a security risk by the military authorities of Madia strikingly reiterates the danger that threatens storytellers when a social landscape is marked by insincerity, terror and violence. Ogugua's death in jail does not signify the death of his narrative, which constitutes a robust protest against military highhandedness, particularly in Madia and in Nigeria generally. His narrative typifies a moral assault against the military and an indictment of their dubious preoccupation with nation-building. Ndibe's protest against the meddlesomeness of the military in Nigeria's political project underlies his condemnation of the institutionalised and systematic extermination of dissenting voices and the general brutality against the captive population.

### 3. MOTIFS OF PROTEST IN *ARROWS OF RAIN*

Protest in *Arrows of Rain* is shaped by the political circumstances in Nigeria over the last twenty years. The novel reflects social situations mediated by the military regime's mode of governance in which they deploy disproportionate force in dealing with the people they purport to govern. The novel's depiction of protest is remarkably nuanced by its heavy dependence on imagination. Military rule in Nigeria is depicted in ways that highlight its inherently repressive and violent nature.

Ndibe utilises various motifs of protest to symbolise the frustration, anger and helplessness that characterise the individuals who engage in protest in the novel. These motifs include a variety of altered states (dreams, insanity and drunkenness), confinement (in jail and in rigid social convention). Acts of protest in *Arrows of Rain* are situated in characters rather than political context. What this means is that Ndibe is not interested in pushing the virtues of a particular ideology; but what he is most concerned with is the human cost of oppressive and incompetent governance. This is why the experiences of individual characters are so important to understanding both the nature of oppression and the ways in which it can be most effectively protested in the novel.

Ndibe apparently favours altered states in his portrayal of social, political and economic degeneration, and the inevitability of the need to protest against these. Ogugua is deemed insane, but he is insane in a special way. It is not the insanity of drug abuse, or spiritual oppression, or any of the usual reasons for sudden insanity: his madness is the result of a human inability to comprehend an impunity that is so brazen that it defies logical thought.

### 4. ALTERATION AND LOSS OF IDENTITY AS FALLOUT FROM THE MILITARY BRUTALITY

Brutality in *Arrows of Rain* is given impetus when Ogugua is compelled by circumstances to adopt a new name, Bukuru, in order to evade arrest by the military authorities. Ogugua's acquisition of a new name also signifies the attainment of a new identity which corresponds with the gradual loss of his personality at the B beach. Bukuru's acquisition of a new identity is employed by Ndibe, to obliquely protest the viciousness of the military administration who will not hesitate to hunt down its perceived enemies anywhere. Ogugua's internal conflict following the loss of his name is traumatising because he also needs to alter his personality and feign madness. Ogugua's transformation to the perceived demented Bukuru at the B beach implies a severance with the society to secure the much needed peace which was ruptured by his arrest:

Until my arrest and that ride in the back of a police car, I had lived under the illusion that nothing was misshapen about my life. It was the world that had gone mad, not me. (*Arrows of Rain*: 79)

Ogugua's split personality is employed by Ndibe, to symbolise the psychological cost of the pressure critics are subjected to during the various military regimes in post-independent Nigeria.

## 5. IMPRISONMENT AS A SUBVERSION OF INDIVIDUAL'S IDENTITY

Imprisonment is employed as a technique for subverting individual's identity in *Arrows of Rain*. Imprisonment constitutes one of the methods usually adopted by the military to weaken and dehumanise its critics who are usually academics, lawyers, journalists and civil rights activists in the postcolonial Africa. The graphic portrayal of the deplorable state of the prison condition in Madia, underscores Ndibe's condemnation of the lack of sensitivity to human conditions by the military. The continuous incarceration of civilian population at the run-down, Bande maximum security prison, is a signifier of the viciousness of the military in the novel:

The prison compound was deadly quiet, bare and barren. Grass lay about the surface like sun-dried algae churned out by the sea .... A horrible stench flowed out of each door we passed, the stink of unwashed bodies mingled with the foulness of things that come from within them: faeces, urine, vomit, blood. (*Arrows of Rain*: 47)

These descriptions of the prison conditions are vivid and frightening; they portray a Madia in which the values of human decency have been abandoned. The prison conditions provide a locale for criticising a society reeling under the yoke of the military. The whole system is laid out to expose the inner workings of the military regime as a system which mirrors the narratives of emotional and physical violence. These narratives intend not only to criticise the oppressive military establishment, but to humanise and restore the dignity of men and women held under these disturbing circumstances.

## 6. RAPE AS MOTIF OF PROTEST

Ndibe utilises the motif of rape to protest the sexual depravity of the military, and the novel is crowded with the obscene pages in which women are randomly raped by the soldiers. The physical and psychological injury that rape causes the victims in the novel, provide a convenient platform for the condemnation of the

military as barbaric and inhuman. In *Arrows of Rain*, Iyese is repeatedly violated by then, Major Bello, her refusal to marry him eventually led to her murder. Prostitutes were also raped by soldiers attached to the vice task force. These women are helpless and cannot fight off the soldiers who constantly attack them. Ndibe's portrayal of the Madia dictator, now General Bello, and the bizarre way his sexual exploitation has occasioned the death of Iyese, further reiterates the negative perception of the soldiers in postcolonial African nations, reeling under the military regimes, as living above the law, and they carelessly operate as predatory sex maniacs, who violate women in order to satisfy their warped sexual desires.

## 7. CRITICIZING PHYSICAL ASSAULT IN *ARROWS OF RAIN*

Ndibe condemns the physical brutalisation of characters in the novel, torture, beating and killing constitute the basic instruments of repression by the military establishment. *Arrows of Rain* is crowded with scenes of killing and brutality. This is graphically articulated when Ndibe decries the military authority's celebration of wanton killing as a mode of power retention. The dispensation of physical assault in the novel is underscored by the power-drunkenness of General Bello, whose propensity for battering knows no limitations, as he embarks on macabre and grotesque brutality of his victims. The accounts of this viciousness are showpieces in foreign newspapers' headlines:

MADIAN WRITER HANGED

- He was a critic of the dictatorship

MADIAN MINISTER'S DEATH SUSPICIOUS

Dictator said to be having an affair with deceased's wife

120 STUDENT PROTESTERS REPORTED KILLED

DESPOT CANES VICE-CHANCELLOR IN PUBLIC

DIPLOMATS SAY AFRICAN DICTATOR BEHIND DISAPPEARANCE OF  
OPPONENTS – Victims may have been fed to lions

*(Arrows of Rain: 213)*

The representation of the military in *Arrows of Rain* as an army of occupation whose delight in violence defies comparison is not primarily targeted at demonising the military as an institution, but rather at the leadership of Madia military, whose state of mind becomes a source of concern to the nation.



## 8. ORATURE AS MOTIF OF PROTEST

Ndibe's confrontation with the evils of military rule in the text is further reiterated in employment of the motif of orality, such as proverbs, anecdotes and folklore. The foregrounding of his novel's political theme of the frustration and dispossession of the Nigerian populace by successive military leaderships is explored against the backdrop of Igbo mythical symbolism. Ndibe's exaltation of Igbo folklore and beliefs provides an enduring background for mediating literature, culture and social preoccupation in the novel to challenge the distortion of human values by the military leadership of General Bello.

Ndibe's appropriation of folklore material to discuss the military's flagrant abuse of power in *Arrows of Rain* is what has been articulately evaluated by Eldred Durosimi Jones:

Although African writers draw inspiration from their particular ethnic bases, their ultimate vision is national, even global. The ethnic background offers them the metaphor for their vision. What the writers see around them as they survey their political and social environment since independence is a recurring cycle of misrule, mismanagement, corruption, violent upheaval and general misery. (1988: 6)

Ndibe's subscription to African traditional world view through the specificity of Igbo orature is demonstrated in terms of character presentation. He uses irony to delineate the individuality of Bukuru, whose original name is Oguguamakwa, which literarily means "the wiper of tears, a consoler, a vindicator and comforter." However, there is an ironic twist of the name in the novel. "Ogugua," as used in the novel, typifies a harbinger of ill luck and deep-seated misfortunes. This notion is underscored by the sudden death of Ogugua's (Bukuru's) mother at childbirth. The potency of the ironic twist of Ogugua as a name is also repeated at the birth of Olufemi Adero, who is originally christened Ogugua by his biological mother, Iyese. Rather than consoling or being a comforter to his mother, Ogugua (Junior) actually hastens the death of his mother who is stabbed by her lover, General Bello. In spite of the fact that in Africa, a name is considered an epitome of an individual, a compendium of an individual's prospects in life, Ndibe's subversion of Oguguamakwa to mean ill luck, misfortune and loss of identity is deliberately done to present a metaphor of the biological and social dislocation characteristic of military rule in post-independence African states. Ndibe seems to assert that an individual's life can be negatively altered by a vicious military regime which mindlessly tortures, rapes and kills its citizens at will.

Ndibe appropriates the elements of Igbo orature in *Arrows of Rain* in a subversive manner by exploiting the considerable power inherent in its onomastic exegesis to protest the military interventionist destruction of individuals and societal structures. Ogugua, by serving as a name for both Bukuru and Adero, reiterates a symbolic reminder of the ruination of cultural

ethos by the military establishment in contemporary Nigeria. A lot of journalists and scores of politicians as well as academics have been incarcerated and killed, thereby disrupting the lives of the family members they leave behind. Oguqua evinces a symbolic structure anchored on objects as an emerging post-colonial nation, an aborted hope and stultified growth. The Oguqua symbol, as subverted by Ndibe, goes beyond its onomastic essence to encompass other metaphoric significations. The latter includes meddlesomeness in an individual's life by the military regime. It also stands for the gradual erosion of the expectations and promises of independence, which in turn generates despair and self-doubt in the citizens, borne out of a political emasculation by the military regime.

The blending of the myth and symbolism of rain in *Arrows of Rain* is employed to create an ambivalent image of the military. Rain, like the military, can perform the two paradoxical roles of being a "sustainer of the earth's plentitude, but also the harbinger of malaise" (195). This is similar to the military, which is capable of ousting a corrupt civilian administration with ease, but also has the tendency to unleash unlimited terror and grief on the members of the public.

The motif of rain becomes the controlling motif of the novel. The mythological contextualisation of rain underscores the image of the military in *Arrows of Rain*. Using a narrative framework drawn from the Igbo oral tradition, Ndibe satirically describes the adventure of the military into the political life of Nigeria couched as Madia in the novel. But such adventure, although overwhelmingly applauded at first because it marks an end to the tyranny of civilian government of the debauched prime minister Askia Amin and his kleptomaniac ministers, soon bares its fangs against the citizens, thereby justifying its condemnation as an aberration of democratic orderliness.

The military as paralleled against the rain can be seen within the context of two conflicting concepts of human development which are discernible throughout the novel: the one imagines the military as a rescue platform for liberating a depraved country from the grip of its civilian political elite; the other, typified by the gratuitous brutality and mass killing, imagines the military as representing a degeneration from human civilisation to the abyss of human degradation. In a military regime, the soldiers justify their rule with the explanation that it intervened in the political affairs of the country as to save it from the economic and political ruination caused by the corrupt civilian government. In contrast, Ndibe sees the military as a scavenger which has come to obliterate all pretence to human civilisation left behind by the displaced democratic government. Consequently, the military, just like the metaphorical rain, "has two faces." "It can give life but its arrows can also cause death." (*Arrows of Rain*: 196)

## 9. MYTHOLOGIZING IGBO MYSTICISM IN *ARROWS OF RAIN*

The motif of mysticism is appropriated through clairvoyance in *Arrows of Rain*. Ogugua's grandmother typifies a sage who is imbued with the gift of prophecy in the novel. She stands between the past and the modern. She travels the paths of the world, seeking answers to knotty questions and solutions to complex situations. She is a manifestation of a new myth which has the knack of gazing into the future. Ndibe uses her clairvoyance as a binocular for seeing into the future of Madia reeling under the throes of military subjugation. She warns Ogugua about the need for him to "wash his face" so that he would be able to decipher between good and evil men when he comes in contact with them.

The grandmother's ability to see the forthcoming and its attendant occurrences distinguishes her as a mystical receptacle of the future. Lurking beneath the futuristic delineation of the evil men that the grandmother warned Ogugua stridently about is General Bello and his minions. However, Ogugua was too naïve to decode the signification of his grandmother's warning. Ndibe uses this motif to emphasise the need to mine the past for the purpose of securing signals against the future emergence of military tyranny in post-independence Nigeria. As Ndibe draws on the vitality of Igbo orature, aesthetics and mysticism are inextricably interwoven, and military tyranny has the power to overwhelm neither.

Ndibe's appropriation of mysticism as a corollary of orature in *Arrows of Rain* is designed to challenge the fraudulent narrative of military as a stabilising agent in a political crisis-ridden nation like Nigeria. This appropriation drives home the point that the military scourge has assumed a monstrous propensity and its exorcism will need to be negotiated from within the locales of physical and spiritual. This fittingly conforms to Heidegger's notion of art:

Art, as the setting-into-work of truth, is poetry. Not only the creation of the work is poetic, but equally poetic, though in its own way, is the preserving of the work; for a work is in actual effect as a work only when we remove ourselves from our commonplace routine and move into what is disclosed by the work, so as to bring our own nature itself to take a stand in the truth of what is (1971: 74).

Heidegger argues that the artist should be flexible enough to move between the interstices of the external and the internal so as to create a balanced world, which Heidegger calls "the open." He argues further that in "the open" things are presented in their "unifying oneness" and "that oneness, as the integral globe of Being, encircles all pure forces of what is." (136) It suffices to say that Ndibe's mediation of mysticism and orature has sufficiently portrayed the military in post-independence Nigeria as bloodthirsty, and life under a military regime as precarious.

## 10. NATIONAL NARRATIVE IN *ARROWS OF RAIN*

Ndibe examines Nigeria from the perspective of the kaleidoscope of political upheavals that it has undergone. Though Nigeria attained independence in 1960, its journey towards the attainment of self-development has been tortuous. It is a trajectory strewn with economic mismanagement, ethnicity, cultural devaluation, moral decrepitude and political potholes which have claimed scores of lives.

The 1980s and the 1990s witnessed an unprecedented surge in writing about issues of power, prison and incarceration, political resistance and confrontation with military regimes in Nigeria. As the Nigerian political landscape becomes more and more desperate, so also does it breed a strident reaction grounded in protest literature from a younger generation of writers, among whom is Ndibe. Disillusioned by the pretentious benevolence associated with the military regime and its corresponding notoriety for human rights abuses, Ndibe employs varied imaginative techniques of satire, faction and political discourse to narrate Nigeria in relation to its vicious military rulers.

In *Arrows of Rain*, Africa generally and Nigeria in particular have been portrayed simultaneously as a failed continent and a failed country, betrayed by rulers who have mismanaged its economy and destroyed its political ethos in their bid to cling on to power at all cost. This has been vividly captured by Kenneth W. Harrow:

The nation-state in Africa today is in crisis. Misrule and corruption have danced across the land, provoking widespread skepticism towards the mechanisms of government and a sense of resignation over the inevitable indifference of the wealthy and powerful to the enormous social problems at hand. Globalization and AIDS have spread their pandemic effects; war and anomy have gained the terrain, so that walking downtown or driving at night have become risky undertakings in many areas; one has merely to mention the words southern Sudan or eastern Congo to elicit a shrug of despair. (2001: 33)

In *Arrows of Rain* Ndibe depicts Madia as a country experiencing internal colonisation under the military ruler, General Isa Palat Bello, who is grotesquely portrayed as General Sanni Abacha, a vicious, psychotic military ruler whose preoccupation with brutality and repression leads inevitably to the killing of intellectuals, journalists and other watchdogs of society in the fictionalised country known as Madia. In his narrative of the country from the time of independence in 1960, Ndibe goes beyond a conventional nationalist ideology towards the pressing problem of military rule. The nation as a pariah constitutes the focal point of Ndibe's analysis of the Nigerian state. The novel evolves from the experiences he encountered during the Abacha military regime, when he was a journalist in the country.

Ndibe also examines the role of the military in Nigerian politics and nation-building. His exploration of the issue of military brutality underscores the notion that Nigeria is a nebulous structure whose collective destiny can be determined by a particular military ruler who feels compelled to enforce artificial cohesion through coercion. This reiterates Nuruddin Farah's argument of a nation which he considers to be no more than "working hypotheses portals opening on assumption of allegiance to an idea." As he further explains:

At times, though, one's loyalty may be owed to another idea equally valid ... During the long travel out of one hypothesis to another ... a refugee is born who lives in a country too amorphous to be favoured with a name. (1995: 16–20)

Farah's idea of a nation provides a striking counterpoint to the explanation of the dilemma of Bukuru, the central character of the novel, who suffers internal alienation when he appears as a mad man and lives on the B beach during the repressive regime of General Bello. Bukuru's disguise as a man running away from the viciousness of Bello highlights the irony of an ostensibly independent nation where the very existence of its citizens is determined by the whims and caprices of its ruler.

National narratives in *Arrows of Rain* echo Benedict Anderson's concept of a nation in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, where he controversially describes a state as "an imagined political community" (1991: 15). It is imperative to state that the amorphousness of the Nigerian state is what creates Abacha and his military regime. The characters in *Arrows of Rain* who are imbued with the consciousness of Anderson's concept of the state are Bukuru, Adero, Iyese and Dr. Mandi.

## 11. LITERARY TECHNIQUES

In *Arrows of Rain*, Ndibe chronicles the dark history of Nigeria during the military regimes of Babangida and Abacha. Their unique subject matter, as inscribed in the narratives of military brutality and viciousness, draw their sources from past accounts of the chequered military misadventure in governance in Nigeria's recent past. These narratives are mediated by the appropriation of varied literary techniques, including the following:

### 11.1 MEMORY

The narrative of military brutality in *Arrows of Rain* is anchored on memory. Bukuru, the central character stands outside time, recounting the past and the present of Nigeria (Madia). Bukuru, a casualty of the viciousness of the military maximum ruler, General Bello, retrospectively records the dehumanizing

conditions unleashed upon the citizens of Madia by the military establishment. He constantly relates past events to subsequent events in a retrospective future tense because the actions and other inanities of the military are already known to him. For Bukuru, future is past. He also relates past events to an even more remote past, revealing the national tragedy of Madia in correspondence to the traumatising of her citizens with sweeping totality. Thus, at the beach which provides Bukuru with the much-needed anonymity, the past, present and future are rolled into one another.

Rather than cyclical, the structure of *Arrows of Rain* is basically rectilinear. Ndibe manages to convey in words the vagaries of disrupted lives of individuals, the unpredictable whimsy of time which makes moments seem endless and ages like moments. This makes the narrative of military siege on Nigeria seem to double back upon itself and describe circles in time. This is accentuated by the sadistic growth of Bello and his psychotic disposition to life; Iyese's fragmented life; Adero's loss of identity and the general subjugation of the people of Madia by the military regime.

Just as the whole history of Madia is revealed, so is the whole history of several characters, and their beginnings are constantly related to their ends by Bukuru from his point of view beyond the end. Bello's repressive regime is summarized before its exposition in the novel: long before his military regime is inaugurated, Bukuru exposes the readers to the psychopathic personality of Bello. Iyese's brutalisation and subsequent killing provide the linking device for harnessing the psychoanalytic reading of the personality of Bello. All the characters in the novel feel the pressures of time from two directions: past and future, memories and premonitions burden the present and separate the characters from one another. Starting with Bukuru to Adero's narratives of their past in relation to their present, Ndibe's characters underscore the fact that they are inextricably bound to their past. This past is constantly mediated by memory.

Memories are very important to the Madians, for they offer the illusory possibility of transcending the momentary to the future. It is, however, ironic in *Arrows of Rain* that memories are associated not with duration but with death. The characters' most vivid memories are recounted as they realise that they are about to die: the novel begins with Bukuru's first memory as he awaits trial which will eventually lead to his death in prison. The memories of Iyese, TayTay and Bukuru's grandmother also irrupt as they face death. Memories constitute a special source of isolation for Bukuru, for he recollects with agonising clarity the killing of Iyese by Bello before becoming the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces of Madia.

The characters' memories at the point of death only underlie their realisation that the past is lost and irretrievable, and can only be narrated as a retrospection to the turbulent history of Nigeria. If *Arrows of Rain* is about the tortuous history of Nigeria under the regime of Abacha, it is also about the deciphering of the period-by-period recordings of Nigeria's idyllic past from independence in 1960 to the political misfortunes of the 1990s, orchestrated by the military rule.

Bukuru's mediation of the past with the present objectifies the destruction of the social and political equilibrium of Nigeria by successive military regimes. As much as Bukuru's narrative startlingly objectifies these situations, it also chronicles Nigeria's past as a sad reminder of an uncertain future.

## 12. NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN *ARROWS OF RAIN*

Ndibe adopts various strategies of narration in the *Arrows of Rain*. These range from satire, burlesque, metaphor and metonyms to irony. The adoption of these strategies of narrative further strengthens the representation of the military in Nigeria's social and political landscape.

### 12.1 FACTION

The key narrative strategy to reverberate military repression in *Arrows of Rain* consists of appropriating the true story of Abacha, the army general who ruled Nigeria between 1994 and 1998. In *Arrows of Rain*, Madia represents Nigeria, while Bello is a metaphor for the depiction of Abacha. His rule depicts a chaotic and violent period in Nigeria's history. Nigeria, as a setting of the novel, is suffocating under his evil domination. Abacha's regime is a metaphor of the most grotesque nightmare: disorder and dislocation of man's personal and social relationships, utter confusion of truth and falsehood, reality and appearance, and abject fear of the future are its features. A loss of human society constitutes the locale of the novel which presents the protagonist searching endlessly for justice and fair play. This narrative design implicitly justifies Bukuru's ceaseless flirtation with memory to restore his lost humanity, which the continuous absence of justice and fair play have permanently denied him: "I know that power dreads memory. I know that memory outlasts power's viciousness ..."  
(*Arrows of Rain*: 248)

Bukuru's narrative of military repression elicits the reader's collaboration, the account from which the reader cannot escape responsibility. It is the account that refuses to leave the reader out of it, the account where the past is not distanced from their lives, and where the consequences are not over for them, that refuses the comfortable position of distance and mere observation. It is the account that implicates the readers because it not only attempts to convey what happened, but also requires readers to recognise the need for involvement and action because of their emotional involvement.

## 12.2 NARRATIVE STYLE

The narration of events and action in *Arrows of Rain* is mediated by a huge cast of characters. The salient issues are presented through self-narration, while other events are narrated through multiple narration. The major narrative of military repression in the novel is done by Bukuru. The story of such repression is told from his viewpoint as he is trying to make meaning out of his experience. Ndibe invests considerable understanding in the narrator of the real and historical details of military rule and its problems in postcolonial Africa. Bukuru's narrative is complimented by the narratives of Iyese, Adero and TayTay. While Bukuru himself is preoccupied with the narration of contemporary issues as they impact on the lives of people in Madia, his grandmother is imbued with the revivalism of the past mediated by the web of anecdotes, folklore and proverbs. Ndibe details circumstances and events of repression and dehumanisation carried out by the military authorities. Ndibe through his narrative methods, has been able to establish that literature has the capacity to personalise and make immediate what the great scale of history cannot. This recalls Richard Priebe's argument about how literature mediates society:

In fiction, unlike real life, we are given a sense of distance and control, and it is a basic aesthetic principle that those things that are most threatening in real life give us pleasure when encapsulated in play (artistic form). The unthinkable, the unimaginable, the unspeakable can be thought, imagined, and spoken in literature with an impunity not granted us in real life, yielding an understanding we find hard to abstract from real events. (2005: 50)

The military oppression represented in the novel establishes that the portrayal of brutality has to do with the individual in relation to the community. Such brutality reinforces the fact that repression and other psychological devaluation of human beings are inseparable part of shared humanity; its application is inimical to the individual and community alike; no one person or group can own or control it; no one or person or group can use it with impunity. Ndibe in the *Arrows of Rain* sacrosanctly establishes that repression /individual/ community nexus is the interrogation it forces regarding membership in a community.

## 12.3 HUMOUR

The narrative of military repression in *Arrows of Rain* is interspersed with humour. Humour in the *Arrows of Rain* is used to satirise abuse of power. For instance, following the overthrow of the former prime minister, Askia Amin, Ndibe employs humour to satirise the debauchery of Amin and his cabinet to depict their insatiable appetite for sex:



The prime minister slowly lifted himself off the girl, who seemed for the first time to recognise the awkwardness of lying in bed with a man who was losing power. Amin sat down at the edge of the bed, looked sternly at the soldiers and sighed. Then he muttered, ‘only bastards would interrupt an orgasm!’ (*Arrows of Rain*: 198)

Amin is being presented here as an irresponsible prime minister who fails to uphold the integrity of his political office, which demands he focus his attention on the affairs of running the state, but who chooses instead to engage in sexual sessions. This constitutes an indictment of Nigerian leaders whose preoccupation with ruling their respective states is shaped by the frivolities of sex and drunkenness they engage in.

## 12.4 IRONY

Irony constitutes a vibrant literary technique in *Arrows of Rain*. In the novel, the ambivalence inherent in Marxism as a political ideology is significantly portrayed. Ndibe does not subscribe to the use of Marxism to effect political change in Nigeria. Marxism is ridiculed in *Arrows of Rain*, when the extent to which its aesthetic could be appropriated for the well-being of both the individual and the society is circumscribed. This is depicted in a conversation between two characters in the novel:

‘What is this thing you call Komanizim?’ his companion, Iji, asked.  
‘Communism,’ Buzuuzu corrected.  
‘What does it mean?’  
‘It means that people own everything in common,’ explained Buzuuzu.  
‘Everything?’  
‘Everything.’  
‘Even houses?’  
‘Even houses.’  
‘Let me ask you,’ he said, his eyes shining with mischief.  
‘Can I go and fuck one of the Chief’s wives, when you bring this Komanizim?’  
‘No!’ snapped Buzuuzu. ‘Communism isn’t about sex. Sex is decadent.’  
Iji looked dejected. ‘Leave the world as it is,’ he said. (*Arrows of Rain*: 83–84)

This scenario is juxtaposed against Professor Sogon Yaw’s hypocrisy as a Marxist teacher at Madia University. He “cultivated a Marx-like beard and wore military fatigues that accorded well with his table-pounding ranting style.” His hypocrisy as a committed Marxist is depicted in the novel, when he accepted his appointment as Madia’s Minister of External Affairs. “Within a few hours Yaw

presented himself to be sworn in. He arrived for the ceremony clean-shaven and made his vows in a quiet, even voice”. (*Arrows of Rain*: 83)

## 12.5 METAPHOR

The degradation of the military as a symbol of national cohesion constitutes the central axis running through the significations of the very title of *Arrows of Rain*. Brutality, repression, torture, rape and killing as grounded in the locale of the novel, tellingly provide appropriate metaphors for the demystification of the military in the title. The military is seen as an avalanche of arrows of rain, devoid of succour, and which sting people mercilessly.

## 13. CONCLUSION

Okey Ndibe has tenuously articulated the narratives of military repression in *Arrows of Rain*. The social chaos stemming from the subjugation of civilians by the military fills practically every page of the novel. Repression in the novel is a signification of a wave of the political apocalypse which engulfed Nigeria’s socio-political landscape between 1994 and 1998, and greedily fuelled by the military’s penchant for power. The deaths of Bukuru, Iyese and the photo journalist in *Arrows of Rain*, further allegorise the viciousness of the military. Drawing on the nebulous political and economic policies of the military which cannot move the nation forward, Ndibe vulgarises the insensitivity of the military to human and national development.

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