

Ken Saro-Wiwa

*And the Discourse
of Ethnic Minority
In Nigeria*



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III.

Sound and Sense in Saro-Wiwa's *Songs in a Time of War*

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I.

Like music, poetry was originally meant to be sung or at least read aloud. 'The earliest form of poetry, the ballad, is a song; specifically, it is a dance song'¹. Poets, over the years, have tried to preserve this tradition of poetry in spite of the invention of printing which has tended to de-emphasize this aspect of poetry. Canon Dixon, for example, has described the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins as 'a matter of the ear'² while the poetry of the Symbolist Movement was described by the French poet, Paul Valery, as attempting 'to take back from music what poets had lost to it'.³ Since sound is an essential aspect of music and therefore poetry, poets over the ages whatever their poetic tradition have consciously given it a place in their poetry.

Sound in poetry refers in the first place to the various sounds of vowels, consonants and their clusters in certain portions of poetry as well as to the conventional devices of sound namely: onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance and repetition.⁴ Also, a poet may occasionally concentrate certain sounds in certain sections to suggest certain ideas. Stageberg and Anderson have discussed at length what they refer to as *sound symbolism* in poetry. The source identifies three kinds of sound symbolism: (i) speech sounds which imitate actual sounds, that is onomatopoeia (for example, bang, murmur, bark); (ii) speech sounds which are so arranged as to make them difficult or easy to articulate, that is, *Cacophony* and *Euphony* implying that harsh sounds suggest a difficult or

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unpleasant situation while smooth sounds suggest pleasant ones; (iii) speech sounds which in themselves suggest meaning and that is the phonetic intensive (for example flare, glitter, plump).⁵

Some scholars, on the other hand, argue that the most important function of sound in poetry is to generate pleasure through the beauty of its music besides its other functions which include suggesting both the emotion and the sense of the poem.⁶ We are not in any way trying to deny the fact that the primary function of the music in poetry like poetry itself is to give pleasure; we rather argue that poets choose their words not only because of their sounds but more importantly for their meaning.⁷ Quite often, the sound of the word in some way suggests the meaning.

Saro-Wiwa is one of those poets whose words are chosen both for their sounds and meaning. His *Songs in a Time of War* is a collection of twenty poems whose style illustrates an apt adaptation of sound to sense. The poems in this collection also demonstrate the capacity of the human mind to wander from one thought to the other even in a time of crisis which should occupy the mind. The poet's mind wanders from the awful happenings of the war through the peace and beauty of nature to the tenderness and therapeutic effect of love and ends on a note of criticism of some Nigerian attitudes while like a good child who recognizes the parent's shortcomings would want to see an improvement rather than want to abandon his motherland. The sound of words in many of the poems in *Songs in a Time of War* quite often suggests and reinforces the main idea in the poem. In this essay, we shall examine the correspondence of sound to sense in selected poems about war, some of which also describe aspects of nature, and some of the love poems.

II.

'Voices' is the title of Saro-Wiwa's first song. It identifies the voices heard in the Nigerian society just before and during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. These include those of the governing class speaking 'of taxes/ of oil and power'; those of the politicians speaking 'of honour/And pride of tribe'; those of soldiers speaking 'of bows and arrows' and 'of tanks/and putrid human flesh' (p. 13).⁸ Finally, the voice of the poet sings of his love for Maria. The idea of several voices singing at the same time and therefore breeding the disagreements which led to the war is captured by the parallel repetitions in four of the five stanzas of the poem. These parallel repetitions not only echo the song but also emphasize the diversity of the singing voices. The music of the poem is also reinforced by the mellifluous effect of the long vowels /i:/, /ɔ au, aI, ɜ:/, /w /combined with the liquids [r, l] the nasals /m, n / and the semi-vowel /w/ which abound in the poem.

Also writing about the civil war and its effect on Nigerians, J. P. Clark had identified the reason why we were all casualties of the war thus:

Because we cannot hear each other speak,
Because eyes have ceased to see the
face from the crowd.⁹

When brothers start singing in different voices dissension begins. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the next poem in *Songs in a Time of War* suggests 'silence' because

... the vows of silence
Must be kept
Or else ...
Where silence will be kept. (14)

The poet's reason for counselling silence is:

For you cannot speak
while the guns roar
And you cannot cry
Where you'll not be heard
For the loud resonance
Of an empty lie. (14)

The parallel repetitions in this second poem again suggest that this is a song while the horror of war is suggested by the use of the onomatopoeic word 'roar' to describe the sound of guns which fill the air. Like hearing a lion roar, the horror of hearing gunshots is aptly suggested by the use of onomatopoeia. Also, the presence of the sibilant /s/ in eleven out of the fourteen lines of the poem aptly suggests the silence that the poet appeals for so that once again there may be peace.

In 'Moratorium' the psychological effect of living in a war torn environment is enumerated to include: 'pervert consciences' and an inability to exhibit 'objective detachment/sound judgement/ And charity' (15). It is for this reason that a period of general moral laxity, 'a moratorium, is allowed:

For the meantime
Only the meantime. (15)

It is believed that

In mean times
We assume coats ...

and that

After the meantime
We have a system. (15)

Here, aside from the telling image of anathesia in the first stanza:

Emotional pressures
Frequent and facile demands
Anaesthetize, (15)

the sibilant sounds /l/ and /s/ in the three lines above reinforce the idea of the silencing effect on the senses of pressures of the time while the parallel repetitions of 'meantime' enact the music. There is also a play on the meanings of 'meantime' and 'mean times,' a change brought about by juncture but which gives an alternative description of war times as 'mean times' therefore stressing the necessity of the moratorium. The point of interest is that 'meantime' and 'mean times' sound alike.

'Near the Front' presents the horrors of a night spent near the war front. These consist of harsh noises of the banging and grating of 'metal doors/harsh boots on stones.' The sounds are so harsh and discordant that they are described as 'the clang and clangour;' an expression which is at once alliterative and onomatopoeic. Its effect, added to the echoing effect of 'banging' and 'grating' together with the continuity of the sound suggested by the /l/ ending of the present progressive tense of the verbs capture the harsh sounds which went on all night making one have the feeling that the world was coming to an end.

And you hear the curse of doom
On man since time began. (17)

'Were You There' is another poem in this group which presents sights associated with the war. These include: 'balls of fire' which 'ascend the sky at dusk/ Then fall into thick copses/Where the youthful enemy lay'; (22).

... the stump,
of the sergeant's leg borne dutifully
into the young doctor's room;

and

... sticking out
Of the shallow sandy grave
As though in supplication
The bony palms of the bombed soldier, (22).

The poem begins each stanza with 'Were you there to see' . . . and ends with one revolting picture or the other which is a characteristic sight in time of war. The last two lines of the poem say:

You would not smile at the radio account
of victories and smashed battalions. (22).

The striking thing about this poem is that in spite of the revolting pictures it presents, it maintains its songlike nature by the presence of parallel repetitions at the beginning of each stanza and emphasizes each revolting picture with an alliteration as in . . . 'see the stump' and in ' . . . bony palms of the bombed soldier' which are 'seen sticking' out etc.' Aside from these sound devices which reinforce the subject matter, the poem may have been too sorrowful to be enjoyed. Thus, apart from reinforcing the idea in the poem the sound devices in this poem adorn it and divert attention from its unpleasant subject matter.

Occasionally, Saro-Wiwa contrasts the beauty and peace of nature with the desolation and tumult of war. In the poem 'The Escape', a contrast is drawn between the beautiful and peaceful sea; the snaky creeks of Bonny; the bright morning sun which comes with the morning after a 'storm-tossed night' and finally, the sands of Lagos with the deserted and bloodstained village of Bane from which the protagonist and his team were fleeing. Particularly memorable is the music of the lines describing the Andoni river:

But after the storm came brilliance
As we rowed down miles of calm
On the Andoni river.
Swimming on beyond the canoe
A lone fish dived and resurfaced
Leading on, so it seemed
To the realms of peace. (p. 19)

The music of this stanza is created largely by the euphonious effect of the long vowel sounds /a: ɔ:, eɪ, i:, aɪ / combined with the smoothness of the liquid consonants /r, l/ and the nasals /n, m/ which are lavishly used while the peace and calm is suggested by the consonance of the sibilants /l/ and /s/ in the last three lines.

Earlier in the poem, the unpleasant conditions the protagonist was fleeing from notwithstanding, sound devices were used to create a musical effect which distracts attention from the unpleasant subject matter as for example in the following lines from stanza 1:

The dwellings of the village
Faded out of *sight* and *mind*

and in stanza 11 the following lines:

We *drank* in long *draughts*, half unconscious
And *drained* the red night *drop* by *drop*

continue the attempt which is carried to stanza 111 in the lines:

With the turning tide, night waned
Its crude details faded away (p. 19)

Thus, even the first three sections which describe the horrors the poet is escaping from is described in language full of rhyme, alliteration, consonance and assonance. This stresses the lyric nature of the poem.

In section 11 what engaged the attention of the poet more was the fact that even away from Bane, the gunshots were still heard though from a distance. The sounds of naval guns are said to 'boom as of yore' while the river 'roars a throaty, welcome'. The onomatopoeic words 'boom' and 'roar' are used here to suggest the frightful nature of the sounds; frightful to the citizens because the soldier in the trench could afford to 'relax' having 'gone through his cigar'.

The fugitives continue on their way to 'ESCRAVOS BAY' which is to him

Nature's own beauty
Joy on wrong!
And the gentle lap-lapping of wavelets
Against the ironsides of the Bode
Thomas. (20)

This beautiful natural environment contrasts with the horror of the poet's mind:

All night we dreamt of horror and death
How on the ruin of old
A greater story would be told . . . (21)

The rhyming sound of the vowel in 'old' and 'told' /ə/ as well as the vowels sounds in 'horror' /ɔ:/ and 'how' /ə/ echo typical sounds made when one wonders at the disaster that has befallen one. The poet's real ecstasy is shown in sections of the poem where the fleeing crew arrive Lagos:

Ariya! Ariya! After the storm-tossed sea
The sands of Lagos
And cohorts of bathers
Peace? (21)

The music can almost be heard in the above lines where aside from the repetition of 'Ariya!' (an exclamation of joy), the vowel sounds /i: a: ei / are long and melodious. Combined with the musical effect of the soft consonants /l/ and /h/, the alliteration and consonance of the sibilant /s/, the pleasure and relief of the poet is very aptly suggested by the sound of the words. The sounds of the vowels and consonants in this section seem to enact the shouts of joy at finally escaping from

the tumultuous world of strife and death.

Even the war poems which rely more on imagery than sound devices to suggest the subject matter still make use of some sound devices to reinforce the subject treated. In 'Thoughts in a time of war,' for instance, the poet's preoccupation is with the waste of war that takes so many lives of young vibrant men cajoled into the war by the vain promises of honour that lie in dying for one's country. The poem argues that only the living know

that honour and sweet we preach
To them that are to die . . . (24)

Much is made of the vowel sound /ai/ in 'lie' and 'die' which are repeated many times in the poem; a sound sometimes uttered in moments of pain and regret in many languages. At other times, the poet uses assonance and rhyme to create music as in

Ye bakers and hawkers of lies
Who bare your jaws and call for wars (24)

and in

How until the lies
...
When the departed made wise . . . (25)

The poet's thoughts which come to him while he sits on the machine (typewriter) all day are such that rain, the only aspect of nature around, does not give him pleasure. Its 'monotonous rhythm' only reminds him of

the bumping thud of bombs
at the warfront where
. . . young men
Clubber one another to the din
Of mortal shells and rockets. (24)

The onomatopoeic words 'bumping thud of bombs' are also alliterative and have the combined duty of suggesting the sounds of rockets shelling destruction on the land. These words by their very sound suggest sporadic sound that contrasts with the continuous sounds of the rain which should have been soothing to the poet being a natural phenomenon but this time is 'monotonous' because of his pre-occupation with the killings at the warfront. The word 'Clubber,' also suggests the painful ways the soldiers are killing themselves.

It is in the poem 'Ogale—An Evacuated Town' that the poet appears to forget his

task of creating music with poetry and becomes taken in by the job of portraying the awful images of destruction of the town but even here the long vowel sounds in

Cars cannibalized
Amputated
Lie by the roadside
Abandoned
Forgotten (29)

suggest some kind of shout of horror at what has happened. Also, the alliteration of the 'liquid /l/ in 'a lone lean dog' together with the long vowels /oo/and /i:/ continue the sounds this time of more horror because the dog

Scrounging for food
Reaps human skulls
In a shallow gutter. (29)

The music this time reinforces the horror of the sensory appeal suggested by the sight of human skulls in a shallow gutter.

Finally, in the last stanza, the town is said to weep for her lost sons and daughters:

Ogale lies in broken images
Astride the narrow tarmac
Moaning insensate
Her lost sons and daughters
Whose wails I hear
This e-erie night
For Ogale out in the dreary rain
Her legs apart like a cheap prostitute
Exposed, utterly exposed
Ogale is a ravished woman. (29)

The long vowel sounds /ai, oo, er / in this stanza together with the soft sounds of the smooth consonants /m, w, l, r, s / suggest the 'moaning' of the town for her lost children. The choice of the vowels and consonants in the lines underlined: the short vowels sounds /l/ combined with the harsh sounds /p, k/ create a situation of cacophony where the sound of the words suggest a deliberate attempt to spit out such awful things that have happened. Aside from suggesting this unpleasant situation, the sound devices in this section of the poem reinforce the meaning suggested by the 'telling'¹⁰ images employed by the poet.

III.

Saro-Wiwa's love poems 'For Maria' and 'For Her' are unique in the depths of

tenderness with which the poet remembers a loved one identified as Maria in the first poem. The poet sings his love in remembered memories. The mere thought of Maria brings 'silent extasies.' The consonance of the sibilant /s/ combined with the musical effect of /ai/ and /i:/ suggest the pleasure the poet derives from remembering her voice: 'soft as silk' and the youthful appearance as 'a cob of maize in May.' The above images which describe Maria are expressed in alliterative language viz: /s/ and /m/ are repeated. Both consonants are easy to articulate and create a musical effect which please the ear as memories of Maria please the poet. The poet wishes that every time he feels downcast he should be allowed to relax in the comfort and joy of her presence or at least of memories of her described in very musical terms as 'softnesses you shed':

When clouds invade my sky
And stars cannot peep out of doors
Be the moon and stars
And let me play still
In the softnesses you shed (26)

The repetition of the sibilants /s/ and /i/ in this expression suggests not only the delight of the poet but also the beauty and peace that memories of her can give. This effect is heightened by the pluralization of 'softness' to 'softnesses' which triples the sound /s/ already present in softness. It also suggests that the happiness the poet derives from memories of Maria is enormous.

Besides the ones cited, the whole poem abounds with consonance and assonance as in 'all night long my beloved' and 'gentle breeze of a Bonny eve'-stanza 1; therefore giving the poem its song-like nature. Here, sound is aptly adapted to sense because it enables the poet to sing his love to Maria.

In 'For Her' these remembered sweet memories continue. In a highly alliterative line followed by consonance and assonance:

Darling, do you dream the dreams
I dream
And do you walk the gardens of suave
redolence
Through which I walk as I think of you? (27)

the poet wants to know whether the feelings he has are shared by the loved one. His certainly are beautiful feelings; this is why they are communicated in highly adorned lines which please the ear.

Aside from the use of conventional sound devices, the poet creates a situation of euphony throughout the poem as he remembers his pleasant times with the loved one:

From every Coign of this loved room
 Loved because we in it have lived
 I see you soft as the twilight
 That now caresses our soul
 Uniting us in an eternity of love. (p. 27)

There is hardly any harsh consonant sound in the stanza above except for /k/ in 'Coign' and /t/ in 'twilight' which have been softened by the following sound /w/. The effects of the harsh sound /t/ is also reduced in final positions in 'soft', 'that' and 'twilight' because they are unreleased while the same sound between vowels in 'eternity' and 'uniting' do not sound harsh because of the effect of the vowel sounds. Those exceptions aside, the passage is made up of soft smooth sounds namely: the fricativess /f, v, h /; the sibilant /s/ and /z/; the nasals /n/, /m/ and /l/ and liquids /l/ and /r/. Added to the long vowel sounds / i, u:, ai/ a musical effect is created depicting the tender feelings of love which are even felt as one reads the lines. This tendency is maintained throughout the poem.

In 'Midnight' the poet is no longer in an erotic mood. The poem addressed to his little child 'Young innocence' whom he undoubtedly loves very much contrasts the peaceful sleep of a young innocent mind with the troubled sleep of a tormented mind:

How I envy you, brown eyes
 That you can laugh and sing
 And sleep in bliss
 While I, I'm storm-tossed
 In tormenting billows that lash me
 Furiously from shore to shore
 My smile a quirkish mirthless grin
 My sleep a garish closing of the eyes.

Here, sound is still adapted to sense as the young innocent child can 'sleep in bliss' while the troubled person is 'storm-tossed'. An attempt to pronounce the expressions 'sleep in bliss' and 'storm-tossed' can by themselves suggest the meaning of what the words denote: one a peaceful rest and the other a state of worry caused by problems. The tormented smile is also described as a "quirkish, mirthless, grin" and the sleep a 'garish closing of the eye'. A quirkish smile by the sound of the word would not be a smooth natural broad smile but a forced one while a 'garish' closing of the eye suggests a sleep that is superficial and easily disturbed. Sound is adapted to sense here as the sense of the passage is suggested by the sound of the words which in some way by their very sound suggests their meaning—phonetic intensives.

IV.

Although it has not been possible in this essay to discuss every poem in the collection *Songs in a Time of War*, an attempt has been made to select the poems which most demonstrate the poet's use of sound. It has been shown that sound is adapted to sense either to suggest the subject matter presented or to reinforce the subject matter suggested in some other way; in this case by the imagery or grammatical device used. At other times, sound is used to create music just to reflect the lyrical nature of the poem.

When the subject matter is so distasteful, sound devices are used to divert attention from the sordidness of the subject and call attention to the beauty of the music. It has also been shown that in the love poems as well as in the poems about nature sound devices are used to create beauty and pleasant feelings. Occasionally, sound depicts difficult and unpleasant situations. In such cases, recourse is made not only to the conventional devices of sound but also to the total effect of vowel and consonant sounds used in a particular section of poetry as well as to phonetic intensives.

Notes

1. Romanus Egudu, *The Study of Poetry* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 53.
2. Letter from Dixon to Hopkins, November, 1880.
3. See C. M. Boura, *The Heritage of Symbolism* (London: Macmillan, 1959) p. 9.
4. See Egudu, *The Study of Poetry*, pp. 53-68 for a more detailed discussion of the nature and functions of sound devices in poetry.
5. Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973) p. 134.
6. See for instance Egudu, *The Study of Poetry*, pp. 65-67.
7. See also Perrine, *Sound and Sense*, pp. 95-96.
8. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Songs in a Time of War* (Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1985), p. 13. All further quotations from this text are from this edition.
9. J. P. Clark, *Casualties: Poems 1966-68* (London: Longmans, 1970), p. 28.
10. Theo Vincent, Introduction to *Songs in a Time of War*, p. 11.

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