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## Eddie Iroh: The Writer of War

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In 1976, Iroh published *Forty-eight Guns for the General*, the first of his three novels based on the events and aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War. The plot and structure of the novel are conceived and executed according to the demands of the thriller convention. In the novel, Iroh examines the disastrous use of mercenaries by Biafra and in the process reveals the brutal, opportunistic and corrupt nature of all soldiers of fortune. In a well-conceived plot and employing a narrative voice and technique that manage to sustain continuous excitement, Iroh unravels the selfish and criminal plan of the mercenaries to exploit the new nation. Under the leadership of the soulless Colonel Jacques Rudolph, the mercenaries' act of sabotage, which nearly causes the collapse of Biafra at the early stage of the War, is countered by the patriotism of Colonel Charles Chumah and other dedicated officers who save Biafra from Rudolph's treachery and blackmail. The novel is a classic case of evil pitted against good; treachery in opposition to patriotism.

*Forty-eight Guns* is the story of two opposing military commanders, one a patriot, the other a traitor. Always a master in the evocative use of antithesis, Iroh brings out succinctly the difference in the two men pitted against each other. We are told that Rudolph belongs to a

Powerful army adventurers whose career knew no territorial or moral boundaries or political ideologies, was blind to colour lines, owed no loyalties or allegiance to anyone, and was motivated by a single ideal – the life was a fight and you fought to live, not to die. (p. 40)

To Rudolph's image Chumah presents a perfect contrast. He is a disciplined soldier with 'total dedication to the cause and his reputation is built around the fiery drive that manifested itself in ruthless bravery.

The final action-packed scene of the novel is played out in the last open confrontation between Chumah and Rudolph, the outcome of which would either spell doom or survival for Biafra at that point, depending on which of the two commanders triumphs. Chumah's triumph means not only his reinstatement in the High Command but also the permanent removal of the treacherous mercenaries. The important lesson that comes out of this well-crafted novel is a confirmation of the Igbo adage that it is the owner of the corpse that carries it. It is only the Biafrans themselves who should fight if they hope to win the War.

Iroh's second novel, *The Siren in the Night*, is an imaginative and dramatic recreation of the period of post-War reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. Like *Forty eight Guns*, *The Siren* is based on a historical moment in the history of Nigeria – the aftermath of the Civil War – after surrender of the Biafran Armed Forces to the Federal Forces. It is, as in the earlier novel, the military who dictate the pace of action and the turn of events in this novel.

*The Siren* opens on a note of excitement and suspense characteristic of a thriller. As a *Forty-eight Guns* the opening scene sets the atmosphere for a clandestine operation. The use of a flashback to begin the novel serves the useful purpose of introducing the two opposed protagonists as well as linking this story with the previous recreation of the War in Iroh's earlier novels *Forty eight Guns* and *Toads of War*. In fact, between them, the three novels recreate the chronological unfolding of events during the War and immediately after it. The early period of the War is portrayed in *Forty-eight Guns*, *Toads of War* is the recreation of the last days of Biafra before the surrender, and the period directly following the end of the War is treated in *The Siren*. The novels constitute a depiction of three specific periods in the chain of historical events that took place in the Nigeria from 1967-70.

There are two major characters in *The Siren* as in *Forty-eight Guns*; each of them has a very strong personality which shapes and affects the course of events in the novel. The idea of two strong characters whose interests clash with tragic consequences is an established device of the thriller mode and Iroh puts it to use with skill. Ben Udaja was the creator and former Director of Biafra Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) whose disillusionment with Biafra compels him to defect to Nigeria where he is put in charge of Civil rehabilitation in Enugu, the capital of the state. The second man, Colonel Mike Kolawole, having proved his mettle and ruthlessness during the War, is appointed director of a new intelligence unit set up after the War to monitor state security. The unit which performs its duty in secret is called the State Security and Intelligence Directorate.

What Udaja and Kolawole have in common is courage and they are also ruthless. Udaja is a deserter and traitor to Biafra for which crime he now lives in constant and mortal fear of reprisals from the former members of the dreaded BOFF. His total dedication to his new assignment as Director of Civil rehabilitation in the state is partly a result of his desire to make amends for his defection before the surrender of Biafra. Kolawole's patriotic actions are misguided and soon degenerate to mindless sadism towards innocent and harmless ex-Biafrans. His most important victim is Udaja against whom he unleashes a form of psychological warfare which practically destroys him.

Characterization is not usually given primary focus in a thriller as it is always subordinated to the plot. Any Ian Fleming or Frederick Forsyth thriller can illustrate this point. Their major characters are usually types representing evil or good and their activities in the novel are conceived and manipulated to suit either role. Hence James Bond, the secret agent in Fleming's thrillers, is always pitted against the destructive element represented by his opponent,

the arch-villain. But characterization in Iroh's thrillers is more subtle and sophisticated than this. His achievement in character delineation is comparable to John Le Caree's or Edgar Wallace's. But perhaps what makes Iroh's characterization so successful and meaningful to his to his audience is his remarkable ability to create and portray human personalities and cultural context in which they are placed.

Iroh's major preoccupation in the *Siren* is to recreate the suffering and humiliation that marked the post-War period, and to show how the Federal Government's noble policy to general amnesty became distorted in implementation by a few selfish and sadistic officers. This is revealed in the novel to be largely because of the existence of two opposing factions in the army. One faction is anxious to effect reconciliation while the other – represented by Kolawole – is bent on punishing the ex-rebels by applying a double-standard interpretation to the official policy of general amnesty for those misled into rebellion. Kolawole and his group have no second thoughts at all in persecuting Udaja as a so-called potential leader of a non-existent guerrilla army against the Federal Government, or in destroying innocent ex-rebels like Ulo Amadi, Ukachi Okoro, Enyeribe Madu and the rest of them. It is only through the counter-intelligence role and espionage activities of the humane Major Ola Dele that Kolawole and his vicious group are brought to book, having over-reached themselves by planning an abortive coup against the legitimate government.

In *The Siren*, Iroh demonstrates once more his competence in plotting and executing a successful thriller. The language of narration is fresh and Iroh captures the actions, thoughts and conversations of his characters most convincingly. We watch the progressive and total disintegration of courageous and strong characters like Ulo Amadi and Ben Udaja through relentless psychological harassment and mental and physical intimidation. Here, for instance, is a passage describing Kolawole's method of extracting information from a victim and the result of this brutality:

There in the centre of the room was welding tank, filled with oxide-acetylene. Next to the tank was a huge gas cylinder out of which grew twin hoses that terminated into two regulators above which was the crooked nozzle ... Kolawole raised the hissing nozzle to the centre of the metal plate and pointed it steadily, delicately. In a few seconds the blue laser hissed ... leaping towards Amadi. He winced and leaned back quickly, both hands flying protectively to his face ... The next day ... the prisoner was a heap on the floor of the narrow cell ... His face was an ugly mosaic of black bruises, burns, blotches of dried blood and tears that would not stop. (pp.58,59,60)

Iroh's use of the thriller mode is very successful and compasses most favourably with the best writing of this kind from anywhere. He has elevated the thriller to a serious art form as a means of achieving the dramatization of the socio-political and cultural problems that plagued his society at a particular period of its existence. His use of a local setting and historical and

culturally validated characters has given his novels credibility. His narrative restraint and judicious recreation of historical events bring to his work the qualities of maturity and seriousness. By using the thriller mode, he has successfully distanced his material from himself and assisted his reader in doing so too, so that both writer and reader can contemplate the reality of the tragic events of the Civil War with a reasonable degree of equanimity and a firm control of emotions that might otherwise break loose at such a contemplation. Iroh's thrillers have a cathartic effect on his readers especially those of them that experienced the harrowing events of the War first-hand in beleaguered Biafra.

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