CHAPTER V

GIRLS AT WAR AND OTHER STORIES: UNFURLING AFRICAN ISSUES AND EXPERIENCES
Achebe’s *Girls at War and Other Stories* is a collection of thirteen stories written over a period of twenty years ranging from his early student days to the Civil War. This collection is a ‘bitter vignette’ of the Biafran disillusionment in the Civil War. Achebe refers to it as ‘a pretty lean harvest’. The earliest short stories were published in the Ibadan student magazine, *The University Herald*. The stories of *Girls at War and Other Stories* explore the essence of the Nigerian way of life and its social and moral retrogression displaying a wide range of experience where ideals and pride of the people must scuffle with the zeal to survive.

As far as the writing of novels is concerned, Achebe didn’t and couldn’t write novel for more than two decades that is between 1966 and 1987, the years
witnessed the publications of his two novels, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. He ascribes his prolonged silence to the Biafra war which lasted from 1967-1970 and its aftermath. The horrendous effect of the civil war left an indelible mark in him and it disturbed the mental balance of the writer. But it would be wrong to say that the effect of the civil war deadened the creativity of Achebe altogether. Now he turned to writing shorter fictional and poetical works instead. His collection of poems, *Beware, Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1971), a children book, *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (with John Iroaganachi (1972), and a volume of short stories, *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972), were published immediately after the war time experience. The short stories were first printed in a volume entitled *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories* (1962) published in the Ibadan student magazine, the *University Herald* at University College, Ibadan in *Black Orpheus* and more recently in *Okike*. In the second edition of the collection of short stories, Achebe deleted two of his early student pieces, “Polar Undergraduate” and “In a Village Church” and instead of these stories he included a story of the Nigeria – Biafra War, “Sugar Baby”.

It is interesting to note that the short stories have a very close affinity with the novels of Achebe. The short stories, like the novels, reveal the same
thematic concerns, stylistic techniques and even the same interests for that matter. The shades of the fictional worlds of the novels like, *A Man of the People* and *No Longer at Ease* can be clearly traced in stories like, “The Voter” and “Marriage Is a Private Affair”. While the novels of Achebe, with the exception of *Anthills of the Savannah*, are mainly concerned with the cream of the society, the powerful Igbomen but what is peculiar of the short stories is that Achebe is concerned with the state of the affairs of the common and marginalized people in almost all his stories. Igbo culture has gone into complete transformation due to the traumatic contact with the West and the stories realistically capture and chronicle the change in the African way of life and values. For better understanding and thematic concern, the stories can be classified into four categories – stories that explore Igbo culture being contested from within due to exclusionary practices as in “The Madman” and “Akueke”; stories that reveal the formation of hybrid identities due to cultural encounter and to this group may belong stories like “Chike’s School Days”, “Marriage Is a Private Affair”, “Uncle Ben’s Choice”, “The Sacrificial Egg” and “Dead Men’s Path”; stories dealing with the emerging class and nation such as – “The Voter” and “The Vengeful Creditor”; last group bears the shadow of Nigeria – Biafran war and to this group belong “Girls at War”, “Sugar Baby” and “Civil Peace”. 
In all his fictional works, be it novels or short stories, Achebe tries to establish the fact that Igbo culture is of a flexible kind not totally fixed and rigid. He repudiates the notion of the cultural and racial inferiority as exemplified in the stereotypical European imaginations about Africa as we find in the writings of Western writers like Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad who have been sharply retorted by African writers in general, and Achebe and Ngugi in particular. In many of his writings Achebe stresses the point that any culture, especially his own, is not free from weaknesses. He goes on to say that traditions and values “are not rigid and codified but in a continual process of change and examination”² In two of his short stories – “The Madman” and “Akueke”, Achebe points out the fact that cultures too are subject to internal conflicts, contesting elements.

“The Madman” which is the first story in the collection is suggestive of the practice which is being employed to marginalize members of the community perceived as different. The story is about village life set at an unspecified time. The hero of the story, Nwibe has a close reminiscence with Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart. Like Okonkwo, Nwibe has carved a niche for himself by dint of hard work. He has fame, wealth, several wives and many children all of which are signs of a successful man in Igbo set-up. Nwibe, a respected member of the
village aspires to take the title of ozo, one of the highest titles of the land. A conflict between individual ambitious drive and the cultural rules governing the social conduct and life of Igbo is discernible in the story, and this is illustrated through the two characters, a nameless “madman” and Nwibe who vie for a ‘valid subject position’. The madman leads an isolated life on the highways, wandering in-between spaces and even sleeping in deserted market stalls once the daily activities are over. He has been maltreated everywhere, in the market places, on the roads and the highways where children “threw stones at him and made fun of their mothers’ nakedness, not his own”(4). He views the world’s sanity as something antipathetic to the kind of sanity he cherishes. He tries to construct his own sense of reality and his attempt comes to an abrupt halt when he steals Nwibe’s cloth while Nwibe is taking bath in a village stream. Nwibe, a victim of his own fierce temper, chases the madman in stark naked which is a taboo in Igbo society. The members of Nwibe’s village and even the strangers alike consider Nwibe a madman. Nwibe enters the market when he tries to catch the madman. In Igbo society, a market is not only a place for trade and commerce conducted at different locations on the four market days of Afo, Nkwo, Eke and Oye but it is also a sacred place where the various deities reside, “an occult territory of the powers of the market (10). Thus, entering the market naked defiles the place and is so taken very seriously. Nwibe, thus, “delivers
himself to the divinities of the market place" (10) and surrenders himself to the world of the supernatural.

Nwibe, because of flaring temper, has transgressed a strict cultural boundary and is excluded from society because he inadvertently commits an offence against the deity. This mars his chances of taking the *ozo* title even after he is cured of his madness by a local medicine because "madness may indeed sometimes depart but never with all his clamorous train" (11). Nwibe couldn't and didn't apply for the *ozo* title by default, he remains helpless and offers no resistance against the rules as these are an indispensable part of his cultural identity and he is not to question them under any circumstances. The story which is like a fable leaves undefined the notion of sanity and madness. The story raises the question what madness is about, what just conduct is and the story is more than just about ambition and pride. The viewer is to decide such questions, indeed.

Another story from the collection, "Akueke" reveals the conflicting attitudes shown to women in Igbo culture so that women are on the one hand isolated and denigrated thereby denying control over their own lives, and on the other they are treated as mother figure and carrier of spiritual meaning. "Akueke" is a story about a young woman, the youngest in the family of six
brothers and the only girl unfortunately contracts the “swelling disease which was an abomination to the land”(34). Akueke’s illness becomes a grave concern for the brothers as they fear the communal reprisal for keeping a woman inside the house with an abominated disease and at the same time they do not want to leave their sister in the ‘bad bush’ to die.

... Akueke had been stricken with the swelling disease which was an abomination to the land. Akueke knew the purpose of her brothers’ consultation. As soon as the eldest set foot in her sick room she began to scream at him, and he fled. This went on for a whole day, and there was a real danger that she might die in the house and bring down the anger of Ani on the whole family, if not the entire village. Neighbours came in and warned the brothers of the grave dangers to which they were exposing the nine villages of Umuofia (34).

As Akueke cannot be cured of the disease, the villagers being afraid of the anger of the earth goddess Ani, urge her brothers to keep her isolated from the village of Umuofia and leave her in the ‘bad bush’ to die. The bush is the home of the ancestors and the spirits and is a holy place kept separately from the rest of the land. Though reluctantly, the brothers left their sister in the ‘bad bush’.
challenging the cruel fate meted out to her, escapes to Ezi, the village of her maternal grandfather and she resurrects her life once under a new name and identity as Matefi. In the early part of the story Akueke’s moral courage is also revealed when she transgresses the moral principle of the society by refusing to marry any of her suitors who would have secured her brothers a hefty bride price. The brothers return to the bush the next day and to their dismay, the sister has disappeared and the brothers conclude their sister was carried by an animal. Three months after that, their grandfather sends for the brothers and they are made to confront their misdeeds and made to convince that they had lost the claim of the bride price of their sister in future. The grandfather even assures that Akueke is no more:

The old man gnashed his teeth, and then rose painfully three quarters erect and tottered towards his sleeping room, moved back the carved door and the ghost of Akueke stood before them, unsmiling and implacable. Everyone sprang to his feet and one or two were already outside (35).

Like the madman expelled from his culture in “The Madman” to lead an isolated life of his own, Akueke is also left to the bush which would definitely result in her death. But here the long established cultural tradition has been contested
from within. The story itself is contradictory because on the one hand it seems to criticize certain practice like casting a helpless woman into the 'bad bush' simply because she has contracted an abominated disease. It is a daring feat she revolts against the dehumanization of her culture, and she is once more reborn with a new name and a new identity. But it is the woman's fate that she is eternally bound to a man by which she has to lose her original identity. This happens when Akueke chooses to live with a man at the instance of her grandfather. A woman is always related not to her but to a man. A critic says, in this connection:

She [Akueke] might have changed her name to Matefi and committed an act of rebellion by not dying willingly but there is still no identity for her outside the hegemonic discourse, which relegates women to the margins and allow them to define their identities only in relation to men denying them an alternative space.³

In both the stories, "Akueke" and "The Madman", Achebe is critical of the exclusionary practices prevalent in Igbo society that suppresses individual aspirations just for the sake of a society that fails to shield itself from certain arbitrariness in sanctioning and defining the transgression of moral principle and cultural boundaries. Akueke’s refusal to die willingly in the ‘bad bush’ and
Nwibe’s regained ‘sanity’ are shown as positive steps towards bringing a change in the norms and rules that govern individuals in the culture.

In “Chike’s School Days” Achebe shows how even the institution of marriage suffers a major set-back due to the conversion of the native people to Christianity. The story relates Chike’s birth and his growing up years. In a flashback the story also reveals that Chike’s father, Amos, after converting to Christianity has married Sarah, an *osu*. The *osu* are the outcasts in Igbo society and are regarded as mere slaves and becoming an *osu* oneself by marrying an *osu* is totally “unheard of for a man” (38) as it is a taboo against the social norms of the people. The conflict between Christian and traditional cultural practices is shown in the story by an incident happening before the marriage of Amos and Sarah. Elizabeth, also a convert and the mother of Amos is shocked that her son should marry an *osu* and in order to stop the marriage she consults a diviner. When there is no way out, she “renounced her new religion and returned to the faith of her people” (39). Amos, who has adopted and imbibed the ‘white ways’ is regarded to be off his mind by the village community who thinks that the “new religion had gone to his head” (38). The ‘insanity’ of Amos of marrying an *osu* is no longer considered as exclusionary practice as the community, by and large, has undergone a tremendous change so as to embrace all the changes the new religion has brought. This conflicting trend is an inevitable aspect of cultural
change when the native culture is hybridized in the post-colonial world. Many of Achebe's novels bear testimony to this state of change.

In the story, interestingly, Chike, a product of two conflicting cultures, begins to look down upon his own tradition and even refuses to eat yams offered by the neighbours and even presumes 'Otherness' in school. The English language taught at the local missionary school fascinates him to the extent of being crazy. The sounds of English words particularly, "Periwinkle" and "Constellation" excite Chike even though he hardly knows the meaning of those words and to him these English words are just "like a window through which he saw in the distance a strange, magical new world" (42). The new world which Chike finds so beautiful and so promising will belie him "as the arbitrary conflation made between far-flung colonies in Chike's elementary reader hints at:

'Once there was a wizard. He lived in Africa.' He went to China to get a lamp' (40)."
the alien language makes him different from his own people which means his own alienation in his own culture, and also he becomes the "Other" of the colonial master more prominently. The hybrid identity he assumes now makes him an uprooted person.

"Marriage Is a Private Affair", like the novel, *No Longer at Ease* takes as its theme the conflict between traditional Igbo and European concepts of marriage, the one bound to family and community, and the other asserting individual rights to self determination, not having any social and family obligation. Nnaemeka, a young Iboman living in Lagos, falls in love with an Ibibio girl, a woman school-teacher of a different tribe. The father is hurt that his son marries somebody from outside the ethnic group of the Igbo for two obvious reasons, one that this kind of marriage "has never been heard" (26) of, two, it violates the vital function of marriage in traditional Igbo society that is the creation of affiliations. As a result, Okeke, the father of Nnaemeka, refuses to speak about his son for long eight years. Eventually his daughter-in-law writes to him:

'.... Our two sons, from the day they learnt that they have a grandfather, have insisted on being taken to him. I find it impossible to tell them that you will not see them. I implore you to
allow Nnaemeka to bring them home for a short time during his leave next month. I shall remain here in Lagos …’ (29).

Reconciliation comes only when Okeke comes to know that he has two grandsons. Okeke begins to waver his resolution and this is symbolized by a thunderstorm which is described as “one of those rare occasions when even Nature takes a hand in a human fight” (29). The feeling of remorse of Okeke is described by Achebe thus:

The old man at once felt the resolution he had built up over so many years falling in. He was telling himself that he must not give in. He tried to steel his heart against all emotional appeals … He leaned against a window and looked out … Okeke was trying hard not to think of his two grandsons. But he knew he was now fighting a losing battle. He tried to hum a favourite hymn but the pattering of large rain drops on the roof broke up the tune. His mind immediately returned to the children. How could he shut his door against them? By a curious mental process he imagined them standing, sad and forsaken, under the harsh angry weather-shut out from his house.

That night he hardly slept, from remorse …….. 29-30).
Thus, reconciliation is reached when traditional cultural values which emphasize the continuation of lineage is slightly made compatible so as to adjust to the new social milieu just for the sake of reconciliation with the third generation. In this story Achebe is concerned to show that the village and the city are not opposed to each other as ‘binary oppositions’ and the behavior of the city (Lagos) is not purely urbanized as is shown when Nene is not accepted warmly by Lagos’s Igbo community because “she was not one of them” (28). The emergence of the hybrid culture and the predicament of the people at the crossroads of culture is the main concern of Achebe in this story. Ultimately, it is neither tradition nor Christian that makes a reconciliation but the essence of human heart where lies humanity and blood consciousness. Even though Okeke is a new convert by which sense he becomes a hybridized man, he is still governed by his native traditional values in respect of marriage etc., meaning that he cannot accept a girl from another tribe for his son. So, within culture, inner contradictions do occur in Achebe’s creative world.

“Uncle Ben’s Choice” is “a comic account of life among the uncertainties of Umuru”. The story is narrated by a first person narrator (Uncle Ben) in the form of a flashback, and he narrates an episode that happened to him in 1919 while he was working as a young clerk at Umuru for the Niger Company.
Like all progressive young men I joined the African Club. We played tennis and billiards. Every year we played a tournament with the European Club. But I was less concerned with that. What I liked was the Saturday night dances. Women were surplus. Not all the waw-waw women you see in townships today but beautiful things like this (75).

Ben's main interest is women though he has an ambivalent attitude towards them which veered and teetered on the brink of anxiety:

The women of Umura are very sharp; before you count A they count B. So I had to be very careful. I never showed any of them the way to my house and I never ate the food they cooked for fear of love medicines (76).

Here, it is discernible that the 'progressive' traits of Ben blend so well with his patriarchal views that lay emphasis on the manner of dealing women who can be a threat to male supremacy. In this story Achebe presents the reality in the natural and supernatural terms through the introspection of his central characters.

On the New Year's eve of 1919, Ben has been visited by Mami Wota, the Lady of the River Niger. Being a man who is so well informed of the modern and
traditional warnings against the menacing women, he instantly recognizes that the woman who appears in his bed is Mami Wota, not despite the fact that her hair "was soft like the hair of a European" (78). Ben refuses to sleep with Mami Wota despite her promises of offering abundant wealth to Ben because such a union with the Lady of the River Niger would rob Ben of fatherhood. But at the same time, Dr. J.M. Stuart Young, a white merchant happily gives in to the temptations of the wealth offered by Mami Wota, thereby becoming the richest man in the country while remaining childless. This implies that in the European cultural norms great importance is attributed to wealth rather than the continuation of lineage in contrast to the traditional African cultural norms where things are just the opposite. This point has been raised by Achebe in most of the poems in *Beware Soul Brother*. In the same way in this story, too, Ben, the central character of the story, confronts the world of the supernatural subverting the colonial discourse thereby reasserting the validity of traditional values.

"The Sacrificial Egg" presents another facet of the conflict between traditional and modern values. Colonialism has brought about changes in many forms. One is the appearance of the English trading company "which bought palm-kernels at its own price and cloth and metalware, also at its own price" (44-45). European colonialism not only introduced trade and commerce among the natives but also modernized the natives. But among the modernized Western
educated people also the influence of colonialism is not to create a strong
cracter. For many of the educated people suffer 'cultural split'. Julius Obi, the
central character of the story, his girlfriend Janet and her mother are still bound
by both the traditional and modern cultural norms. For instance, the outbreak of
smallpox in Umuru is considered the revenge of god Kitikpa. Even for Julius,
modern mission education cannot separate him from his traditional belief in the
mystery of the power of the night mask. He questions his own foundation of
education when he encounters the night masks during a walk home “for night-
maskes were not a matter of superstition; they were real” (47). Julius’s mental
split, a psychological phobia, is more apparent when he accidentally steps on a
sacrificial egg. Soon after this mishap, Janet and Ma suddenly are overcome by
smallpox. Julius connects his stepping on the sacrificial egg and the illness of
Janet and Ma who are ultimately carried away by small pox. Badly affected by
what he has experienced, Julius keeps his faith in his traditional values firmly
although many of the headstrong youngsters launch an attack on the sweep-
footed night masks. He becomes skeptical about the new cultural values
especially when they remain ineffective in face of the disease he has seen. He
believes that the new values have given a death blow to the traditional belief
system. The balance between the traditional cultural concepts and the European
ones is threatened until the public crisis turns into a private one in the case of
Religious belief cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny, so nothing is explained, and only the mystery remains thereby leaving a feeling of loss and desolation.

Another story that shows the conflict between traditional and colonial cultural values and norms is “Dead Men’s Path”. Set in 1949, the story accounts for Michael Obi, the newly appointed head-master of Ndume Central School who sees chance in his appointment to introduce modern ideas and methods in the school. He is in no way to make a compromise between the new ideas and the ancient customs. Obi wants to modernize the school in the European style and scorns “superannuated people in the teaching field who would be better employed as traders in the Onitsha market” (71). Obi wants to replace ‘old fashioned ways’ with ‘modern methods’. As part of his plan, Obi closes a pathway that leads to a traditional burial ground and on it he makes flower – beds more densely and has got fenced the area with barbed wire in order that the villagers stop using the path. The villagers want the pathway to be reserved as they believe that the path is used by the spirits of the ancestors as well as by the spirit of the babies to be born. When Michael remains persistent in his stand, the villagers send the priest of Ani to prevail upon Obi. The priest tries to make Obi understand the cultural significance of the path with the help of an old proverb “let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch” (74). As Obi remains unflinching,
the villagers have to resort to destroying the gardens and part of the school. The path, however, is symbolical for both Obi and the priest. Here, Killam’s view may be quoted:

For the priest it [the pathway] represents the continuity of life and religion: ‘The whole life of the village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born …’(81).

For Michael Obi it is a symbol of attitudes, out of date, which have no place in the modern world: ‘The whole purpose of our school … is to eradicate just such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic’.6

Michael Obi is portrayed by Achebe as a ‘mimic man’ who in his attempt to become westernized ends up being different from others. Obi’s identity of a ‘mimic man’ becomes problematic and unacceptable even to the colonial authorities as is evident when the English supervisor wrote “a nasty report on the state of the premises but more seriously about the tribal war situation developing between the school and the village arising in part from the misguided zeal of the new headmaster” (74). (as Achebe concludes). Obi is twice rejected by both his community and the colonizer when he thinks he will be pleased by what he has
done in the mode the whiteman wants. Achebe says that introduction of new ideas for the sake of change is absurd. Any change that is brought in should be in tune with traditional values and established customs. It seems Obi is out of water as he is cornered by both his own people and the colonizer, who is not going to accept Obi’s new plan imitating the Western way. His position, thus, becomes very ambivalent for the white man, who he implicitly tries to please think that Obi is crossing the barrier by becoming an imitator of the Western attitude. Although Achebe is highly objective in the treatment of his African culture and history he is not in favour of blind imitation of the western ways and life style while marginalizing the traditional beliefs and other practices native to Africa that have been existing over the centuries. The short story serves as a warning against his brethren who are educated and westernized. This story reechoes what is found in one of his poems “Beware Soul Brother”.

While the stories discussed above deal with the problem of Igbo culture and the emergence of hybrid identity, stories like “The Voter” and “Vengeful Creditor” highlight the problem of the emerging new society based on exploitation and the lack of personal integrity which is detrimental to health of the new nation. This hastens the march of the new nation to its nadir. Even after the formal end of colonial rule in Nigeria, the colonial legacy and the oppression it generates still lingers. The poignancy of failed leadership and Nigerian politics
is expressed emphatically by Achebe in his novels, *A Man of the People* and *Ant­hills of the Savannah*. In "The Voter", particularly Achebe recreates the fictional world of *A Man of the People*. The emerging new nation is shown to be no real departure from British colonial rule, it was simply the change of masters with no better prospect of a better fate of the people of Nigeria.

"The Voter" is a story where Achebe condemns the gullibility and the rampant corruption that became the order of the day in the post-independence period. The indirect rule introduced by British colonialism abolished the traditional practices of his society ruled by the village elders. This system robbed the Igbos of their initiations in matters of governing the society or community. In the absence of such initiatives and accountability, the leaders became corrupt. The new social order is marked by corruption and power hunger. "The Voter", is the story of the Rufus Okeke, also called Roof, who is a party organizer in a village at a time of national general election. Rufus, as an election campaigner, works for Chief the Honourable Marcus Ibe, Minister of Culture. He is a 'real expert' in election campaigning, and is 'deeply enmeshed in the chicaneries of Ibe's political life'.

Roof had to agree. He had lately been taking down a lot of firewood himself. Only yesterday he had asked Marcus for one of
his many rich robes — and had got it. Last Sunday Marcus’s wife (the teacher that nearly got him in trouble) had objected (like the woman she was) when Roof pulled out his fifth bottle of beer from the refrigerator; she was roundly and publicly rebuked by her husband. To cap it all Roof had won a land case recently because, among other things, he had been chauffeur – driven to the disputed site. So he understood the elders about the firewood (16).

Ibe has supplied money to his campaigners to be handed out to the reliable voters while the opposing party, Progressive Organization Party (POP) also follows the same trend. The foul means adopted by the corrupt politicians to remain in power and how democratic procedures are corrupted at various levels by the corrupt politicians and the people alike are what Achebe tries to expose in this story. The issue is money and votes are sold to the highest bidder. The new political system is far removed from the people and politics is considered as a means to provide, Achebe says “wealth, chieftaincy titles, doctorate degrees and other honours some of which, like the last, had still to be explained satisfactorily to them; for in their naivety they still expected a doctor to be able to heal the sick”(14). There is a widening gap between the elite rulers and the ruled and thus the event of voting serves only as an opportunity to enmesh one’s wealth and position. In the course
of the election campaign, Rufus is offered by the opposition party a hefty sum of money for his vote:

Up to last night everything had been “moving according to plan”, as Roof would have put it. Then he had received a strange visit from the leader of the POP campaign team. Although he and Roof were well known to each other, and might even be called friends, his visit was cold and business-like. No words were wasted. He placed five pounds on the floor before Roof and said, “we want your vote.” Roof got up from his chair, went to the outside door, closed it carefully and returned to his chair. The brief exercise gave him enough time to weigh the proposition. As he spoke his eyes never left the red notes on the floor. He seemed to be mesmerized by the picture of the cocoa farmer harvesting the crops (18).

Roof unable to resist the bribe succumbs to the deal and agrees to vote for Maduka, the candidate of the opposition party (POP). Roof receives money from both the Minister and his opponents by swearing on a magic *iyi*.

The man nudged his companion and he brought forward an object covered with a red cloth and proceeded to remove the cover. It was
a fearsome little affair contained in a clay pot with feathers stuck into it.

"The iyi comes from Mbanta. You know what that means. Swear that you will vote for Maduka. If you fail to do so, this iyi take note." (18).

On polling day Roof is caught in his dilemma and is unable to decide to whom he should cast his vote for. In an ironic twist he resolves his dilemma by tearing the ballot in half and casting vote for both candidates.

This is the predicament of the people involved in the 'dirty game' of politics. Not only Roof succumbs to temptation but in a society with no moral centre even the elders who are formerly a repository of traditional values also want a fair share of the "national cake" which is huge and sweet and they primarily believe that they "have climbed the iroko tree today and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need" (16). Even the politicians are also part of this game. This is exemplified in the character of the Minister, Marcus Ibe, who earlier was a mediocre mission school teacher but has built a mansion and even boasts of a private power plant while the rest of the village remains without electricity or running water. The political world depicted in "The Voter" has a close affinity with the 'fat-dripping gummy, eat-and-let eat
regime' of *A Man of the People*. In this story Achebe exposes the social and political malaise of the new nation of Nigeria.

Achebe is wary of the evil effect of western education, and colonial legacy. In fact, that is a crucial point of his society after independence bereft of all values. The new generation becomes the lost generation and its moral and spiritual degradation has affected all sections of the society, not only the educated elite class but also the commoner who wants to have a taste of fruit. There is no right purpose of life when the native cultural ethos collapsed. People have lost the sense of the meaning of life. They are at the crossroads unable to decide which way to go by. "The Vote" is just a representation of this social, cultural crisis and moral predicament of Africa.

"Vengeful Creditor", is a satirical attack on the discrepancy between the professed ideals and the detached and complacent attitudes and practices of the middle class people. The story is the longest and the most touching story in the volume. The story records how the politicians hurriedly introduced free primary education ("free primadu" as it was called) for three months as a 'vote-catcher' but having failed to meet the demands of the people, the government withdraws the scheme hurting the sentiments of the people, particularly the poor and lower-class pupils depriving them of a better future. At the outset of the story, the
Emenikes, who belong to upper middle class, are shown to be on the lookout for cheap labour. The lack of cheap labour is attributed to the scheme of free primary education which is highly criticized by the parliamentary opposition and the influential people of the society who opine that free “primary education is tantamount to naked Communism” (53-54). The withdrawal of the scheme of free primary education cannot affect the Emenikes as they can easily afford the schooling of their children. Mrs. Emenike, a social welfare officer is portrayed as a woman of self-interest whose actions are contradictory to her position of a social welfare officer.

The main action of the story deals with Veronica, a young girl of ten who is also the vengeful creditor of the title. Veronica becomes the victim of the faulty policy of ‘free primadu’ of the government as she has to leave school immediately after the withdrawal of the free primary education scheme that provides free education to the lower-class students. Mrs Emenike hires Veronica as a baby nurse to look after her youngest child in her absence with a strong promise that Veronica will be sent to school once the baby grows up. Veronica becomes the sole attendant of the child and she even earns herself the name of ‘Little Madam’ from Mrs Emenike. Veronica bakes herself in the false promise of Mrs Emenike that she would return to school someday. But as the promise of Mrs Emineke fades away with time, Vero becomes more and more frustrated and
impatient. She is filled with remorse and her resistance and anger find an outlet in songs like "Little noisy motor car/If you're going to the School/Please carry me" (63). So frustrated is Vero that ultimately she even tries to kill the child by giving the child red ink to drink so that the death of the baby would hasten her return to school. Mrs. Emenike, so embittered at Vero's vicious act, beats Vero violently and instantly sends her to her mother in a village some forty miles away. Vero's long cherished dream of returning to school someday crumbles.

In the final part of the story, Achebe tries to point out who is to blame for Vero's behavior - Vero's mother, Martha or Mrs Emenike. The two mothers shown in the story are quite representatives of the different class perspectives which women have been exposed to. The emergence of the new social class provides no 'gender solidarity' and this is quite evident in the unfeeling nature and attitude towards Veronica and her mother, Martha who occupy the lower strata of the society. Though Martha has not been empowered to question such a social order, the feeling of retaliation and rebellion boil inside her. Martha confronts Emenike and his wife and Emenike's statement sums up the horrible situation in the country.

I have always known that the craze for education in this country will one day ruin all of us. Now even children will commit murder in order to go to school (68-69).
Vero’s mother understands the hollowness of the statements made by Emenike. She says with a strong defiance –

All his [Emenike] children go to school, even the one that is only two years; but that is no craze. Rich people have no craze. It is only when the children of poor widows like me want to go with the rest that it becomes a craze. What is this life? (69).

Achebe makes clear the sinister disparity that exists between the people of two different classes – the privileged and the deprived. Even Vero has learnt by example from the Emenikes that the welfare and rights of others can be dispensed with if they stand in the way of her getting what she wants. The “red ink” itself is the symbol of education Veronica so avidly desires. The “stained red” spilt over the baby’s front is a potent image of the bloody revenge of the poor upon the middle class. Nevertheless, for the marginalized people like Veronica and her mother, Martha the emerging new nation offers no better prospect but simply denial of opportunities and perpetuation of oppression. Achebe makes a vehement attack on the rampant corrupt mentality of the individual and the new elite who cannot free themselves from the shackles of the legacy of colonialism.
Three stories in the volume *Girls at War and Other Stories* deal with the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, and its aftermath, the story title being one of them. The stories, “Girls at War”, “Civil Peace” and “Sugar Baby” raise questions pertaining to public and private morality, social injustice and inequality and how these issues affect the life of the people, and the social classes. “Girls at War” gives an elaborate account of life during Civil War and it chronicles the whole span of time of the Biafran war from “the first heady days of warlike preparation when thousands of young men (and sometimes women too) were daily turned away from enlistment centres because far too many of them were coming forward burning with readiness to bear arms in defense of the exciting new nation” (101). The story does not relate the action of the war or the destinies of the people fighting on the warfront because this “happened most times far, far below the eye-level of the people in this story” (104). Rather the story is centred round the relationship of Reginald Nwanko, who works for the Ministry of Justice, with sophisticated, well-educated Gladys, a girl in the militia. The story does not fail to show how women are relegated to the margin while male power becomes more pronounced in the new nation of Biafra. However, Reginald is struck with surprise when he sees Gladys in the militia despite his pronouncement in their first meeting that “girls were not required in the militia” (103). On the occasion of his second meeting with Gladys who insists on
searching his car irrespective of his rank, he feels rather shocked and insulted as the newly assumed responsibility of Gladys acts like a new knife, full of enthusiasm. On the other hand he cannot but appreciate such a woman as dutiful as she is ideal in her profession. But the third time he meets her she is no longer that duty conscious, smart young militia woman but one who casts off her garb of morality to be transgressed into an immoral/amoral prostitute. The situation is quite worse as Achebe narrates:

Death and starvation having long chased out the headiness of the early days, now left in some places blank resignation, in others a rock-like, even suicidal, defiance. But surprisingly enough there were many at this time who had no other desire than to corner whatever good things were still going and to enjoy themselves to the limit. For such people a strange normalcy had returned to the world. All those nervous checkpoints disappeared. Girls became girls once more and boys boys. It was a tight, blockaded and desperate world but none the less a world – with some goodness and some badness and plenty of heroism which, however, happened most times far, far below the eye-level of the people in this story-in-out-of-the-way refugee camps, in the damp tatters, in the hungry and bare-handed courage of the first line of fire (104).
Being built against this background the significant part of the story Nwanko now finds that Gladys is like “a mirror reflecting a society that had gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre” (116). What a shocking contrast, the change has betrayed his earlier experience with Gladys, who raised pseudo-military vocabulary during an intercourse, “You want to shell?” (115). The irony Achebe has brought in is that while Nwanko condemns the ‘amoral’ behavior in general, he is himself blind to the fact he, too, misuses his rank, and pilfers food, meant for many starving people. With a sudden spark of humanism, Nwanko tries to save Gladys by picking her up from the filth. While driving down along the road with Gladys he lends a helping hand to a wounded soldier.

In the story Nwanko is presented as an ambiguous man, affected by both time and place – the war time and the new nation in topsy-turvey – where a man cannot become just one man, but has to assume different identities – a conflicting crisis of identity in the post-colonial societies. No wonder, Nwanko is an example of that. Even Achebe’s position or stature as an African writer cannot be free from this kind of ambiguity. In the air raid that follows Nwanko’s drive with Gladys and the wounded soldier the latter have been killed, Gladys while trying to save the soldier, hence became the savior of her society. The situation in which Nwanko has survived is more confusing because Nwanko becomes the future generation of Africa – a man not so good not so bad, both mean and
This is the dilemma of the new nation to which all Africans belong including Achebe — a crisis point of human existence in Africa in hope and despair.

"Civil Peace" another story presents a delightful and touching comment on human resilience and it also records the after-effect of the Civil War, how people try to cope with the new situation good or bad, consequent upon the war. Jonathan Iwegbu, after the end of the Civil War returns to Enugu to start a new life with twenty Nigerian pounds which he has got from the Federal Government as 'ex gratia' (popularly called 'eggrasher' as very few people could well pronounce it). Jonathan has lost one son but by a sheer luck he has got his house undestroyed in the war; he even retrieved his bicycle. As usual his stock response is: "nothing puzzles God!" (83). Jonathan takes things as they come and his optimism in life receives a severe blow and is put to the test when on the fateful night he got his 'eggrasher, he was visited by thieves with an automatic rifle demanding one hundred pounds, an amount they thought Jonathan had received as compensation. Jonathan replies to the thieves in the most honest concern:

To God who made me; if you come inside and find one hundred pounds, take it and shoot me and shoot my wife and children. I
swear to God. The only money I have in this life is this twenty pounds egg-rasher they gave me today ... (88).

What the robbers, who speak Pidgin English, do is to make the post-war situation less different. From the war time situation Achebe says that during and after the war things hardly differ – worse things remain worse. Hardly there is any panacea. This atmosphere has been well conveyed by the thieves when they speak as in the following way: “We no be bad tief. We no like for make trouble. Trouble done finish war done finish and all the Katakata wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace” (87). Everything perhaps remains the same in all times is the message given here. Jonathan, too, experiences this – life has known no gain, it is only loss that is real. This is the hard reality – Nigeria has faced after the bloody and senseless killing and destruction during the Civil War. The irony is that loss is not only a part of war time crisis but also it is a characteristic feature of the post war African scenario. “Civil Peace”, the title of the short story itself is ironical as there is little to differentiate ‘civil peace’ from ‘civil war’.

“Sugar Baby” another story in the same grouping – war stories has, however, not exactly war-related horrendous experience as we find in Achebe’s war poems, like “Refugee Mother and Child” and “Christmas in Biafra”. It is
about a man who is highly obsessed with sugar so much so that he does not mind losing his very "nice, decent" girlfriend because he wouldn't part with half a dozen cubes of the sugar" his friend bought him (99). The narrator, Mike is telling of his friend Cletus, called at school "Sugar Baby" being a mean fellow who could insult a girl friend for grabbing a few of the sugar cubes Mike presented to his friend. What Mike feels rather strange is that Cletus did not find out Mercy, the girlfriend "a shameless grabber" (as he calls her) (99). "all these months you went with her and slept with her until I brought you a packet of sugar". Mike finds that open criticism incurs "irrational acrimonies" "when an angry word dropping in unannounced would start a fierce war" (100). Despite his obsessive fondness for sugar the substance has not produced anything good to remember by. Once they had to run when Father Doherty made for them when enraged by the demand of Cletus for a little sugar to be put in his coffee prepared by the former. They ran with the fear of being shot in a midday air raid in the withering heat for ten miles. "Sugar Baby" is to highlight sugar as a taboo in a strife-torn Biafra. Its chemistry is strange; it spoils faith and friendship, and is risky at all levels of relationship.

All the stories included in the volume *Girls at War* have fable-like structures with a profound moral tagged on them. The short stories share stylistic techniques and thematic concerns with the novels but what is striking in the short
swear to God. The only money I have in this life is this twenty pounds egg-rasher they gave me today ... (88).

What the robbers, who speak Pidgin English, do is to make the post-war situation less different. From the war time situation Achebe says that during and after the war things hardly differ – worse things remain worse. Hardly there is any panacea. This atmosphere has been well conveyed by the thieves when they speak as in the following way: “We no be bad tief. We no like for make trouble. Trouble done finish war done finish and all the Katakata wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace” (87). Everything perhaps remains the same in all times is the message given here. Jonathan, too, experiences this – life has known no gain, it is only loss that is real. This is the hard reality – Nigeria has faced after the bloody and senseless killing and destruction during the Civil War. The irony is that loss is not only a part of war time crisis but also it is a characteristic feature of the post war African scenario. “Civil Peace”, the title of the short story itself is ironical as there is little to differentiate ‘civil peace’ from ‘civil war’.

“Sugar Baby” another story in the same grouping – war stories has, however, not exactly war-related horrendous experience as we find in Achebe’s war poems, like “Refugee Mother and Child” and “Christmas in Biafra”. It is
about a man who is highly obsessed with sugar so much so that he does not mind losing his very "nice, decent" girlfriend because he wouldn't part with half a dozen cubes of the sugar" his friend bought him (99). The narrator, Mike is telling of his friend Cletus, called at school "Sugar Baby" being a mean fellow who could insult a girl friend for grabbing a few of the sugar cubes Mike presented to his friend. What Mike feels rather strange is that Cletus did not find out Mercy, the girlfriend "a shameless grabber" (as he calls her) (99). "all these months you went with her and slept with her until I brought you a packet of sugar". Mike finds that open criticism incurs "irrational acrimonies" "when an angry word dropping in unannounced would start a fierce war" (100). Despite his obsessive fondness for sugar the substance has not produced anything good to remember by. Once they had to run when Father Doherty made for them when enraged by the demand of Cletus for a little sugar to be put in his coffee prepared by the former. They ran with the fear of being shot in a midday air raid in the withering heat for ten miles. "Sugar Baby" is to highlight sugar as a taboo in a strife-torn Biafra. Its chemistry is strange; it spoils faith and friendship, and is risky at all levels of relationship.

All the stories included in the volume Girls at War have fable-like structures with a profound moral tagged on them. The short stories share stylistic techniques and thematic concerns with the novels but what is striking in the short
stories is that people who have been relegated to the margins of society are finally given a platform to raise their voice. The great social and political upheavals of the country exact a terrible price from the Igbo people making them faced with contested identities and cultures. Still then, Achebe, in all his stories, exude a kind of positive energy with a ray of hope that someday a better Africa will come into being when the masses have the moral courage to fight and challenge the corrupt leaders. On the whole, the stories present a Kaleidoscopic view of the Nigerian way of life, the predicament to which it has been exposed and the challenges that lie ahead to forge a new nation. With great authenticity Achebe re-creates in fiction the major issues of daily life in Africa and the plight of the people trying to exorcise the haunting stigma of racial inferiority. All the stories are technically superb with Achebe’s use of wit, irony, satire, proverbs, idioms and metaphors and Achebe’s maturity and craftsmanship as a writer are in full bloom in his short story writing.
NOTES


4 Ibid., p.169.
