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Broken Lives and Other Stories. Anthonia C. Kalu. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003. 183 pp.

If literature has the power to touch and, in the words of Rainer Maria Rilke in his poem, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” teach us to change our lives”, then the latest stories from Nigeria have set out to do exactly that. Anthonia C. Kalu’s *Broken Lives and Other Stories* is in the vein of Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, which exposes the dire human condition during the Sani Abacha military regime and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Purple Hibiscus*, which retells the Biafran war story.

While a lot of the fictional stories we have read about the Biafran war are colored by the writer’s ideological sentiments, the above-mentioned works aspire to be as neutral as possible. And this is the special merit of Anthonia C. Kalu’s stories. The stories in the collection do not aspire to be pacifist, pro-Biafra or pro-Nigerian; rather they focus on the more humanistic sense of loss.

One of the more moving moments in “Angelus,” the second story, is when the narrator is sent for by her father in the heat of the war. “My father had sent an army for me... As he drove off, I looked back and started to wave at the few remaining groups of students waiting for transportation to their different homes. None of them smiled or waved at me as the jeep took me through the school gates” (43). This is the dreaded moment of rupture when the hitherto known world thins away into nothingness while you look. The blankness in the faces of the young women, their inability to wave back at their colleague is a story in itself. And in pictorial bits, we are led to the devastations of the war whose cause or justification the people never understood and might never understand. The scene of incest in “Camwood” (84), which, like the next story, “Broken Lives,” documents incidences of broken lives; these move us to sympathy in the Aristotelian sense of empathy. We are introduced to the pain of women being torn from their families and used as sex objects in the military camps, the pain of husbands watching their wives taken from them by other men.

Nonetheless, “Broken lives” does not claim to be a sophisticated narrative and it is not. Many of the stories are filtered so that the author inadvertently comes in-between the reader and the stories. The greater part of “Angelus” is chatty. One has the impression that the story is trying to be many things all at once: a story about the Biafran war and a history lesson on European colonial plundering of Africa (20-27).

Because of the absence of the desired narrative immediacy, the reader tends to forget the characters regardless of how touching their fates are. The stories seem a bit too programmatic both in conception and execution. There is a conscious, albeit too conscious, effort to initiate a discourse with them, and this effort overrides the aesthetic project of honing in on the specificities of the character and allowing those specificities to speak to the reader. In short, we are missing what J.M. Coetzee would call the “dreamlike state of realistic narratives.”¹

But all these do not take away the importance of the stories especially as means of re-interrogating, and abrogating the pervasive absolutist discourse about wars. If the former Biafrans tend to mystify the perceived glories of the Biafran age and thereby justify their having waged a war that could have been avoided, they should take up Kalu's book. Every one of the stories cries and cries, and then whispers: never again.

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Note

Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Viking, 2003, p.16.