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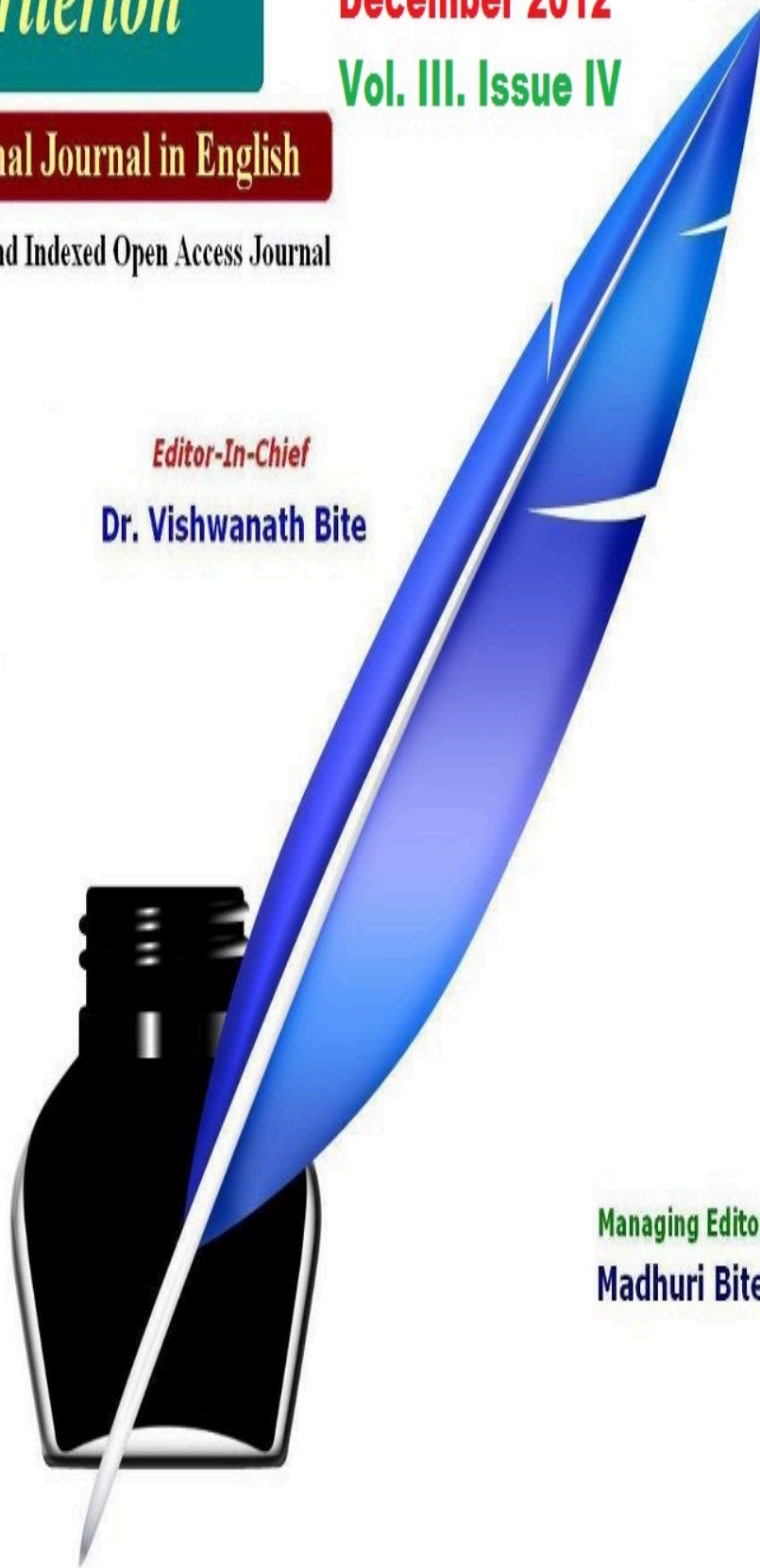
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BOOK REVIEW

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* (2011). Place of Publication: Lagos, Nigeria. Publisher: Jaala Books. Number of Pages: 507. ISBN: 9789789125302.

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Roses and Bullets is a tale of young lovers caught up in the vortex of war; it is also a story of a nation reeling in the bangs and pains of ethnic irredentism and primordial sentiment; it refracts a real situation, where a nation's future and hope (roses) were brought down by incendiary bullets of hate and disunity; and it deals with a nation's saga in which its fallen roses (children, the brightest and most talented) inexorably stare the people in the face as well as engraft moral scare on the conscience of this nation. The 'roses' symbolise the generation to come as well as future of the nation, while bullets imagine war and fierce battle. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's thematic preoccupation in this long novel is to paint picturesquely the futility of Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-1970), which killed millions of Nigerian people, and children as well as its attendant upshot in Nigeria's nation-building project and the costly price two innocent lovers paid for this human error.

It is about the love story of two students: Eloka and Ginika, who have found love in each other's eyes and desperately wanted to keep it in spite of the searing influence of war and bullets as well as existentialist pressures that were constantly buffeting them. But very sadly, their dream never materialised! Eloka and Ginika's love was sealed when they got married as man and wife. However, their marriage as well as love to each other was plunged onto quicksand when Eloka got enlisted in the army; his absence animated ugly occurrences that put a knife at the heart of the marriage. In Eloka's absence, Ginika in order to run away from her mother-in-law's cantankerous attitude towards her, had to go partying with a friend and got drugged and sexually molested in the process by another army officer. Enquiring about Ginika's pregnancy, her mother in-law bellowed: "I asked you this question before and I want to ask you again because of Eloka's visit home. Are you pregnant?" (p. 84). This question puts her on edge and anxiety! As Ginika got pregnant for this anonymous officer, her mother in-law's family as well as everybody abandons her for such "sacrilege". In the end, the child that Ginika gave birth to died. She lost all even her love, Eloka, except her precious life and hope.

Beyond a tale of two lovers, *Roses and Bullets* chronicles a story of didacticism, moralising philosophy and exercise in alerting humanity about the futility in seeking for social change and justice through the prism of war. This is crucially important for the young generations, children and people unborn, who might be affected by the tragic landscape reconstructed in the novel. One of Africa's best novelist (in fact the doyen of African novel), Chinua Achebe, testifies to the consequences of the war on creative writing in Nigeria: "Biafran writers are committed to the revolutionary struggle of their people for justice and true independence" (1977). Thus, the

reverberation of the conflict (Nigeria-Biafra war) led to the creation of a rich crop of literary works on the war, including memoirs, novels, short stories, poems, and plays among others that calibrate the grisly repercussions of this inhuman, collective error. So, *Roses and Bullets* is cast that mould.

As the author turns this Yeatsian “terrible beauty” into aesthetic potential, what comes out is a product of realist writing responding to the pressures of the social facts in the writer’s environment, which Adimora-Ezeigbo has done. In doing this, the author engages with the Nigeria-Biafra dilemma and its aftermaths in the remaking of Nigeria as a nation given the cultural, ethnic, political, and as socio-economic undertones of this bloody, cruel war in the nation’s body politic as well as its sustainable peace challenge that is being aestheticised in the novel.

One of the flaws of the novel is the predictability of events: Eloka abandons Ginika because she was pregnant for another man, which is typical of events in the traditional African setting, given the pressure of traditional African mores and norms. The author, in my thinking, should have allowed readers to make their own judgement thereby facilitating sense of conscientisation, a concept Paulo Friere, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) considers to be awareness raising and making critical judgement based on what one experiences in their own wavelength, rather than forcing opinion on readers. This would have also helped in revving up dénouement. Another clay foot of the novel is that events got resolved in too long a time, which decreases or rather kills interest of readers. Though not a pot-boiler given the length of time it took the author to write the novel, it is however not close to perfection: as a work of art that should play on the emotion, there should be tinges of humour, which should have flavoured the piece. There is also preponderance of exactitude compared to verisimilitude that stifles the power of imaginativeness; this is done as the writer tries to unpack real events in the Nigeria-Biafra war, which in her analysis could help give the novel a critical realist bent. However, *Roses and Bullets* is a bold attempt to bring to our memories once again the futility of war and the need to follow the path of dialogue.