



## SIGNS AND CODES IN ADAOKERE AGBASIMALO'S *THE FOREST DAMES*

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### Abstract

Right from time immemorial, man uses signs to complement spoken as well as written discourse. Sebeok (2001) explains that each species produces and understands certain kinds of specific signs for which it has been programmed by its biology. These can range from simple bodily signals to advanced symbolic structures such as words. A sign, therefore, helps to explain and concretize the speaker's or writer's message. So as important as these signs are to the human resources, literary and linguistic analysts often neglect them in the interpretations of literary texts which, to a large extent, makes such interpretations incomplete. The paper, therefore, was designed to do an in-depth study of signs and codes in Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* using the fusion of de Saussure's theory of sign and Barthes' theory of five codes in order to identify and explain the semiotic resources deployed in the texts that helped to project the message of war and its negative effects on women and children. The findings revealed that the author dexterously deployed pre-war, war and post-war signs within the semiotic universe of the text to project her message. Similarly, codes were deployed in the text for the extension of semantic import. It is thus concluded that literary semiotics remains a viable enterprise in the study of the second order text.

**Keywords:** sign, code, *The Forest Dames*, semiotics, literature and language

### Introduction

Language is to Literature what water, sand and cement are to the mason. Just as the shell of the coconut covers the coconut and its milk, so does language in the expression of literary contents. Invariably, language is the sole medium of

literary expedition. Literature, as an independent field of study, is expressed through the instrumentality of language (Ogenyi & Otagburuagu, 2014; Kadiri, 2014; Ekwueme, 2017; Onuigbo, 2019). One would have asked or imagined what would have become of literature if language

hadn't been in existence. The simple answer to that question or imagination is that there would have not been a field called "Literature." The importance of language in literary discourse, therefore, can never be overemphasized. Hence, we could argue validly that the relationship that exists between language and literature is closely knitted. So, because of this relationship, studies had been carried out by language scholars and researchers to establish the workings of language in literary texts.

One form of language which is often neglected in the interpretation of literary discourse is the sign. Signs are nuances of language that help readers to interpret meaning in discreet or implicit contextualized situations. Signs are, therefore, carriers of meaning in literary discourse. If signs are carriers of meaning then their importance in literary works remain sacrosanct. Codes are forms of signs. In short, they are subsets of signs that distinctively contribute to textual function within the semiotic universe of a text. Melefa (2019) explains that codes are procedural system of related convention which are deployed in certain domain (Literature) in order to organize signs into a meaningful system. Malik, Zaib and Bughio (2014) add that codes are a network that forms a space of meaning that the text runs through.

The science of sign is what de Saussure (1916) and Peirce (1992) call semiology and semiotics, respectively. Umberto (1986) views semiotics or semiology as a phenomenon that is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. Sebeok (2001) explains that "a sign is any physical form that has been imagined or made externally (through some physical medium) to stand for an object, event, feeling, etc., known as a referent, or for a class of similar (or related) objects, events, feelings, etc., known as a referential domain" (p. 3). De Saussure (1916), in his bipartite concept, argues that a sign consists of two components: signifier and the signified. According to de Saussure, the sign is the object; signifier is the components that convey the meaning, whereas the signified is message intended. Saussure's signifier is the form which the sign takes while the signified is the concept it represents in the material world. For Saussure, a

sign is made up of a 'sound image' and a 'concept', both of which are in the mind of the sign user. For reasons that are unclear, numerous interpreters of Saussure, in extending his work to other domains, have treated the 'sound image' as a material phenomenon rather than the mental one that he describes (Cobley, 2005, p.4). For Peirce, a sign has three components: representamen, semiotic object and interpretamen. The representamen is the form which the sign takes; the semiotic object is that which the sign relates; and interpretamen is what is taken as the sign's meaning. "The interpretamen relates to and mediates between the representamen and the semiotic object in such a way as to bring about an interrelation between them at the same time and in the same way that it brings itself into interrelation *with them*" (Marrell, 2005, p. 28). Peirce's classification is further sub-classified into icons, indexes and symbols (Ekwueme, 2019). Signs, in general, signify meaning in the real world, however, van Leeuwen (2005) argues that the theory of sign is not a self contained theory in its own right, it is better realized if it is applied to other disciplines such as Literature, Religion, History, etc.

The aforementioned drive us to conclude that the application of semiotic resources in investigating literary texts is a step in the right direction. African Female writers like Chimamanda Adichie, Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, Amma Darko to mention just these, had received much literary and linguistic attentions. Their texts had been widely read using different literary and linguistic tools but a handful of semiotic models. As if there was some sort of alienation, a female writer like Agbasimalo who had four literary works to her credit had scarcely been given any serious linguistic attention. To be precise, it appears that her novels, especially *The Forest Dames*, had not been subjected to any serious linguistic study. The few studies done on the text utilized the traditional stylistic tools. So, as upcoming an writer, there is the need to linguistically analyze her works from the viewpoints of semiotics, using the bipartite theory: de Saussure's theory of sign and Roland Barthes's theory of five codes in order to identify and catalogue the semiotic resources (signs and

codes) used in the text; to establish how these semiotic resources deployed in these texts help in thematic development; and to ascertain how easily these sign components contribute in the interpretation of meaning in the text.

### Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the fusion of de Saussure's theory of sign and Roland Barthes's theory of the five codes to drive the analysis for the study.

#### Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory of Sign

The Swiss linguist (de Saussure) is the first to start the formal study of semiotics and his book entitled "Cours de linguistique generale" was posthumously published in 1916 by his students. Semiotics or what de Saussure (1916) calls semiology is conceived as a science of signs. In other words, Umberto (1986) views it as a phenomenon that is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. By implication, a sign, therefore, is anything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. The concept of sign is better understood in Sebeok's (2001) elaborate view:

A sign is any physical form that has been imagined or made externally (through some physical medium) to stand for an object, event, feeling, etc., known as a referent, or for a class of similar (or related) objects, events, feelings, etc., known as a referential domain (p. 3).

De Saussure studies the meaning of sign in his theory of signifier and the signified. It has been established that there are arguments and counter-arguments as to what de Saussure meant by signifier and the signified. It is thus concluded that the signifier is the components that convey the meaning; while the signified is the message intended. In de Saussure's words, a sign is a "form made up (1) of something physical, letters, gestures, etc. - which he termed the signifier; and (2) of the image or concept to which the signifier refers - which he called the signified" (cited in Sebeok, 2001, p.6). A sign is the whole results gotten from the association of the signifier and the

signified. The signified is a mental construct which can be indirectly connected to the real world. Louis Hjelmslev's expression and content refers to de Saussure's signifier and the signified. De Saussure uses the concept 'signification' to explain the relationship that holds signifier and the signified together. Saussure considered the connection between the signifier and the signified an arbitrary one that human beings and/or societies have established at will.

#### Roland Barthes' Theory of Five Codes

Barthes (1974) proposed the theory of five codes to explain the basic underlying structure of all narratives. According to Barthes, there is always more than one way to read a text. He goes to argue that within any given text there is a plurality of meaning rather than one correct reading. "To interpret a text is not to give a (more or less justified, more or less free) but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it" (Barthes S/Z, 4). Barthes, therefore, identified five different kinds of semiotic elements that are common to all texts. He categorized these elements into five codes: hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic and cultural codes. These codes are briefly explained as follow:

#### The Hermeneutic Code

The hermeneutic code is also known as the enigmatic code. According to Barthes (1974), this code is used to refer to those elements of a text that are mysterious, puzzling and unexplained or incompletely explained in the narrative and so make the reader curious to know or understand them. The reader tries to unveil the mystery of these elements by raising different questions. In Barthes' terms, these elements are termed as 'snare', 'equivocation' and 'jamming'. The term 'snare' refers to the deliberate avoidance of the truth; 'equivocation' refers to partial and incomplete answer; while 'jamming' means to openly acknowledge that there is no answer to a problem. Some of the hermeneutic elements are answered in the end of the text while some of them remain a mystery for the reader. The reader uses his/her mental faculty to give meaning to the text.

**The Proairetic Code**

The proairetic code is also called the code of actions. This code refers to those elements that create suspense in the text and catches the interest of the reader. In other words, it is a code that indicates that something else is going to happen. Every action of suspense heralds what comes next. What happens next? In this way it keeps the interest of reader alive for the coming actions. Malik et al. (2014) maintain that hermeneutic and proairetic codes are the important parts of a traditional literary work because they are the codes that enable the reader to find a chronological sequence in the actions, situations and characterization of a story.

**The Semantic Code**

The semantic code is also known as connotative code. It refers to those elements that give some additional meaning over the basic denotative meaning of the word. The connotative meaning is often found in the characterization. This code is also related with theme (Barry, 2002, p. 151)

**The Symbolic Code**

Symbolic code could also be referred to as the antithetic code. The code is similar to the semantic code but differs in the sense that its function at a wider level. It refers to those elements that give opposite meanings, that is, have polarities and antithesis. The concept of polarities or binary oppositions is central to the theory of Structuralism.

**The Cultural Code**

The cultural code is also known as the referential code. It refers to the elements that give common knowledge. By this code, a reader gets the physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary or historical knowledge. "The gnomic code is one of the cultural codes and refers to those cultural codes that are tied to clichés, proverbs or popular sayings of various sorts" (Malik et al., 2014, p. 243).

**Justifying the Adopted Theories**

De Saussure's theory of sign and Barthes' theory of five codes provide a better and comprehensive analytic framework for the analysis of Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* because the theories take into account all the non-verbal behavioral features embedded in the texts used as a signification system. De Saussure's theory accounts for cultural and abstract signs; and Barthes' theory accounts for signs of code. Although these theories are mutually exclusive but they work in complementary distribution.

**Methods**

Data were extracted purposively from Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*. The researcher scanned for para-linguistic features or semiotic resources (signs and codes) deployed by the author in her novel to express meaning. These resources were analyzed in accordance with the tenets of de Saussure's theory of sign and Barthes' theory of five.

**Data Analysis****The Message of the Novel**

Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dame* is a fictitious account of the Nigeria-Biafra war and its double negative effects on women and children who appear to be mostly hit in every warring situation. Agbasimalo fictionalizes the characters with the hope of driving home the message of the futility of war and its double effects on women and children. This was truly the state of Nigeria between 1967 to 1970.

Agbasimalo explicates the plight of women and teenage girls in warring times through the characters of Deze, the heroine in the novel, Gonma, Sopuruchi and Lelenwa. This set of girls display physical courage and psychological strengths amidst hardship, suffering and death orchestrated by the civil war. Their actions are, however, unconnected with their quest to maintain purity, chastity and better still, avoid being sexually molested by the invaders, the Nigerian troops. So, with the help of Mrs. Phoebe Ofoegbu and Mrs. Dora Buno and with the special God's intervention,

the girls who Agbasimalo refers to as the Forest Dames, find themselves in a hideout in the forest which further exposes them to the danger of being devoured or harmed by the wild beasts of the forest and restless evil spirits. However, the dames choose to be devoured by the beasts if that is the last option; just to maintain the purity of their innocence.

Agbasimalo further exposes the plights of women as the direct victims of war and post-war experiences. The food that sustains the family is being provided by the women. Deze's mother, Mrs. Phoebe and Lilliana have to cover long distances to buy food items that are made scarce as a result of war. They resell some of these items to maximize profits which they in turn use in feeding the children, their husbands inclusive. In one of their routine walks to the distant market to and fro, they almost lost their lives in boat-wreck. They are, however, lucky to be alive. But in another trip, Lilliana, Gonma's mother pays the supreme price as she is hit by a bomb which Nigerian fighter-jets drop unjustly on innocent civilians. Gonma is, therefore, forced to take up the role of a mother to her younger siblings. Justin, Gonma's father despises Gonma right from birth because she is a girl. He has earlier expected Lilliana to give him a male child. He blames Lilliana for the whole disappointment. The roles of motherhood taken by Gonma after Lilliana's death is an uttermost surprise to Justin, her father.

The invading soldiers on many occasions abduct young girls, take them to their military camp at Alaowere, exploit them sexually and keep them in check for further sexual activities. This was the case of Rosa and her daughter, Uwadiogwu. To further expose the agony of women, the author recounts that after the recapturing of Alaowere by the Biafran troops; Madam Rosa is apprehended and labeled a saboteur. She is taken to Okolocha village and buried alive despite her pleas and explanations. Uwadiogwu's whereabouts is not known till now.

The invading soldiers make many attempts to abduct Deze but to no avail. Her bravery, instinct and God's grace shield her from the enemies.

However, Sopuruchi, one of the forest dames is captured and wheeled away few days to the end of the war. Even when the war is officially over, Agbasimalo recounts how female returnees are temporarily blockaded, taken into the tents, raped while the relatives wait for them to rejoin them. Some of the girls are not so lucky for they are held back while the relatives are coerced to leave in pains. The young women and girls who are abducted return with babies or pregnancies, a constant reminder of their agonies. This is why one of the female returnees commits suicide. Sopuruchi is whisked away to the Mid-Western State where she suffers rejection, humiliation and pain.

The author suggests, through Bika and Buno, the sustenance of the skills of the manufacturing of the 'Technical-Know-How' which the Biafran army engineers develop during the war. We are, however, told that the leaders of the winning side feel too shy to accept the sustenance of the knowledge because of inferiority complex. She ends her story with some hope left for the female gender, even though; the present men are all guilty until proven innocent. This is made known by Deze's rejection of the Vice Principal's love advances during her National Youth Service in the West. Agbasimalo uses olive branch to symbolize hope not only for the endangered species, the women but humanity as a whole.

### **Signs in the Text**

#### **Pre-war Signs**

Abrupt closure of schools (31), Igbo leaving the north in drove (31), the romour of people being killed (34), Buno and Bitrus' advice to Mama Deze (31 & 37), build-up of tension in the city (40), women at alert (37), the killing of Mama Gozi (37), the pogrom at homes and on train (43,49, 51), vulture (43), the coup d'état of 1966 (49), non-implementation of Ethiopia's agreement, declaration of Biafra (61), the images of blood and carcasses.

The author deploys both concrete and abstracts signs at the prewar stage to develop the plots of her novel as well as projecting the message of futility of war and its effects on women and

children. Many factors could trigger war in a multi-ethnic society. One of which is the selective killings of a particular tribe. This was made manifest in the text when the northern cities were extremely tensed up because of the pogrom. This alone is a signifier to that fact that war is eminent. The excerpt below sheds more light on this:

- i. The women continued to go the market place, keeping their ears and eyes open. Four days after that discussion, they got to the market and were told that Mama Gozi, whose stall was next to Mama Deze's, had been killed the previous night (37).

Mama Gozi's death and the death of many other southerners is an indication that the people who are perpetrating this heinous crime against humanity are serious and would do anything possible to extinct the other tribe (Igbo) with the support of those in authority. Bulus, a man from the north has a feeling that the pogrom would continue, advises the Igbo market women to go back to their ancestral homes in order avoid being killed because he has seen the signs that war and death are on the way. In his author's words:

- ii. Bulus's voice now quaked as he added, "Mama Deze, I beg, go home, dis thing serious well-well. No let dem kill you, I beg, go home." Bulus looked at the women and said "make una go home I beg" (37).

Bulus' plea is a sign that all is not well in the city of Kaduna and of course, other cities in northern Nigeria. Before then, Buno who has read these signs had advised his wife to lockup her stall and go home. The ugly stories and rumours he had heard made him to give her such an advice:

- iii. What started as a rumour later became real and fear gripped many. While the killing was still on a small scale, Daze's father advised his wife to close shop and return to their homeland with the rest of the children (34).

These verbal actions of Bulus and Buno are a pointer to the fact that war is brewing gradually. The general tension and uncertainty are also

signifiers to the civil war. This is recovered in Buno's words:

- iv. The whole city is heating up and nobody is sure what will happen next (34).

It's true that nobody knows what would happen next but the tension should be a strong signifier that war is looming. This tension leads to the selective killings of Igbos, including pregnant women. The text below explains more:

- v. Stories were told of pregnant women whose bellies were ripped open and their fetuses they were carrying shredded with machetes. (56).

It is reasonable to state that the genocide or pogrom could trigger the victims to seek for secession in order to steer clear of those who kill them at will.

Another strong sign that showed that the Nigerian supreme council is ready for war is the non implementation of the Ethiopia's agreement. This recovered in the text below:

- vi. "That's the man. He suggested confederation but they would not listen. They even went outside the country to deliberate and agree on all other issues, for the good of the people but on their return home, Gowon, The Nigerian Head of State, reneged." Buno felt disappointed (62).

What else does a Head of State want when he vehemently refused to implement what had been agreed on in the presence of International Powers? The simple answer to that question is 'war'. May be the agreement does not favor the north but the south seeking secession is not an option; all these signs boil down to that fact that war would soon be declared. Having sensed that Nigerian government isn't ready to implement this agreement and isn't ready to accept blames for the genocide, Ojukwu declared Biafra as an independent sovereign nation. This declaration which was broadcast on Radio Biafra is the strongest signifier of war.

- vii. "It has been declared that we have become a country of our own and will no

longer share the same country with those that people who killed our people so callously..." (60).

According to the author, Ojukwu declares Biafra but he does not declare war. This declaration may not be unconnected to the injustice meted on the Igbo; the selective killing at night in the north; the killings on the east-bound train, the looting and destruction of property and most painfully, the non-implementation of the Ethiopia's agreement. All these happenings or events are signifiers that the country is inching towards war. And finally Gowon declares war on the Igbos, thereby fulfilling the manifestation of these signs. van Leuween (2005) sees actions and artifacts as semiotic resources text producers deploy in order to communicate. Buno last comment after the declaration of Biafra is a sign that the war may be declared; in his words:

"My small bag is packed and I am ready to move anytime. Enyia, I trust you are more than capable of holding the fort." His wife nodded. Kwenga too. Everybody braced up for whatever situation that might arise (62).

### War Signs

The author deploys signs that depict the progress of a full fledged war. Some of the signs include: air raids, mortar bombs and guns (59 & 67), Chuka's mutilated arm, racing of military trucks and conscription into the army (65), the phrase "take cover" (67), the exodus (88), the sound of war (155), hunger and sickness (68), Lillian's, Sunday's and Orjay's daughter's deaths (95), the distant market.

The sound of the war jets and their unleashing of havocs on the innocent people is a sign of a full-fledged war; even though the killing of civilians in a war is a crime and against the rule of engagement. But that is what sends a strong signal to the people that the war has been declared not only on the secessionist's military power but on them. This is captured on the excerpt below:

viii. "Mummy Chuka, Chuka," Okezu and Nneoma were crying. "I stopped and saw Chuka's mutilated arm in my hand. I

screamed and I ran back. My son was on the ground. I picked him up and we continued running, loads still on my head. The shelling was too much and we needed to move faster, to at least, a place of shelter. I dropped the dead boy and his hand and we continued the race (66).

The air-raid or the shelling, even to the little ones, signifies war. Children, who should be oblivious of the happenings, know that the war has been declared on them. That's probably explains why Okezu, Nneoma and Chuka were all trying to avoid being hit by the flying parcels but eventually, Chuka had to pay the supreme price. Some of the children who already know the phrase "take cover" as a sign of the sound of an approaching bomber jet, jokingly use the phrase and send everybody heading to the bunker. The children were taught the lesson of their live in order to understand that the phrase is a sign used sparingly to save life. The excerpt below sheds more light:

ix. "Take cover!" someone shouted one morning and everybody, young and old, hurried into the bunker, waiting to decipher where the bomber was coming from. No sound of an aircraft was heard. Instead, they heard laughter from two naughty boy and they angrily crept out... they were indeed taught a lesson that was hard to forget (68).

One of the character metaphors who is a university professor, having read this sign laments, thus:

x. "Diala, this is shelling! How can these heartless people target civilians in this manner? See how we are being shelled, mauled down forced to take it all as our lot... They should target only the military," Prof. Benji, advocates of military versus military war game, howled, fifteen minutes later when the offensive ceased (88).

Air raid is a very powerful sign that indicates that the war has commenced and still in progress. The author deploys this sign to explain how civilians,

mostly women were killed in the war. The war has unleashed all forms of hardship on people, especially women and children. Men and adolescent males, irrespective of their marriage statuses, voluntarily or forcefully joined the home army when it was obvious to them the war has commenced.

- xi. A truck sped up to them raising a lot of dust, causing Kelechi to brake and drop one leg on the ground. Jide came off the bicycle, coughing. As some men jumped off the truck and rushed towards them... jideofor was hounded into the truck... (64-65).

The hounding of Jideofor and his likes is an indication that the business of this war is serious and more men are required to join the army in order to combat the invaders gallantly.

While the men are being conscripted into the home army, the women assume their roles which further exposed them to unprecedented hardship. They are now the breadwinners. Lilianna, Justin's wife, for example, meets her death on the way back from the distant market, a price she paid with her wife. This is explained in the excerpt below:

- xii. "Wait a minute," one of them shouted, "it looks like Lilliana has been hit by the 'death parcel.' There is blood all over her, oh my God!" Bits of Gonma's mother's flesh were strewn all over the ground (79).

The air raid is a signifier that the war is intense, both civilians and military are being targeted in order to crush the idea of secession. It still makes no sense to the author why the Nigerian military government still wants to share a country with the people they kill at will. One of the characters argues that it is the oil deposited in the south that is making them to fight on (p. 62).

Again, the sounds of guns and mortar bombs are also auditory signs that show that the war is raging on. These sounds are heard nearby so, these sounds forced men, women, children and even the aged to move further away from their homes to a

place where the war may not likely reach. This is recovered below:

- xiii. "You want the enemy soldiers to catch up with the entire community because of one dying child? Please, let's go! People are losing patience" (90-91).

Without these sounds of war, people would not risk to move away from the homes for they do not know what fates have in stock for them. But these sounds are signs that reveal the closeness of enemy soldiers. As the war lingers, it ushers in hunger and disease; a sign that the war is taken a tour on the war victims who are predominantly women and children. The route through which food and medicine are imported is blockaded as suggested by the Minister of finance. Although this act is strongly against the rules of war but the International Community allowed it to stand for their own selfish gains. Lazzie is an innocent child who was almost abandoned because he was considered very sick and half dead:

- xiv.... "what about Lazzie?" she sobbed. "He is still breathing." "Yes, but he has been like this for long, what can we do?" Reuben tried to lift the skinny boy but it looked like the boy would be better off in the sack (90).

Lazzies' condition is a sign that the war is on still ongoing. Many women lost their children as a result of hunger and disease. This is really traumatic and pathetic at the same time. This is recovered in the excerpt below:

- xv. The journey resumed. Orjay's wife sensed that the baby strapped on her back was now lifeless. She did not feel her daughter's heartbeat anymore... "Jonas, the girl is dead, what shall I do?" "We'll bury her," he replied (93)

The author uses hunger, disease and death as a signification system to communicate to the readers that the war is waxing even stronger and the Nigerian government was savoring their tongue in appreciation of their new found strategy that was against the rules of military warfare.

xvi. Lele and Gonma were pleased to have the company of Deze and Supueu. 'It won't be just two of us anymore,' they seemed to saying. Deze heaved a sigh of relief and was indeed grateful to her mother for moving her further away from the indecent soldiers, even though she was now exposed to ravenous inhabitants of the forest (179).

Finally but most importantly, Deze, Gonma, Lele and Sopuruchi, who the author refers to as the forest dames, escaped from the village to the forest and lived there in order not to be abducted and molested by the invading soldiers. They chose, through the help of their mothers, to maintain the purity of their innocence by absconding into the forest. They were exposed to the danger of wild animals' attacks but they remained resolved to face anything other than being sexually exploited. This remains a strong sign that indicates that the war is still in destructive progress.

#### Post-war Signs

The broadcast, green branches, twenty bucks, the journey back home, NYSC, "no victory, no vanquish" phrase, post war hostilities, the vandal's baby, the return of the home soldiers and the rebuilding of homes and resumption of the indigenous university.

Just the way the author deployed pre-war and war signs to tell her story, she, in a like manner, deployed post war signs to further extend the same story. The war lasted for over thirty months before it was declared that it has ended. The capturing of the second in command to Ojukwu, the leader of the home army hit the last nail on the coffin. This was immediately followed by a radio broadcast:

xvii. "Dora, the war has ended! Where is Buno? They say the war has ended." His breath came in quick, short and bursts.

"Dora, this cannot be mere propaganda; it was announced by Radio Biafra. They have been announcing it. People have surrounded Jonah's tiny transistor to hear for themselves." (217).

This broadcast is a pointer to the fact that war has ended. By this announcement, people were both happy and sad. Their happiness was demonstrated through the carrying of green branches, running and chanting. This is seen in the text below:

xviii. The war has ended. The offensive has ceased. Everybody happy survival, happy survival, they chanted, running along the road with leafy branches (219).

In traditional Africa society, the green leave signifies peace when it is raised above the head. These people were not happy because the war has ended but they were happy because they survived it. In a similar war, the same people wore long faces registering their displeasure by the defeat.

The movement of people back home is another sign that the war is indeed over. Buno and his family, of course, were set to return home.

xix. Bika stood still, face down, while Buno moved quickly from the scene. Others followed and the journey began. This time they did not go through the hidden paths because the danger had significantly reduced. Several other people were also journeying home from different directions and the roads were indeed busy (231).

If the war was truly not over, people would have still remained in exile in order to avoid being killed by the invading soldiers. The movement is a sign of the post war experience. Again, one of post war hostilities recorded in the text is the raping and abduction of girls by the conquerors. Innocently, as these people are returning home with hope that the war has indeed ended and all forms of hostilities, ceased, soldiers still took advantage of girls and women even in front of their relatives.

xx. Many soldiers seized the opportunity of the end-of-war confusion to abduct girls, and at times women, for short periods along the way as they returned... some they took along with them as they left and inherited thereafter... (234).

These dastardly acts, beside the ones the soldiers committed during the war, left many young female returnees with babies. The babies are constant signs of humiliation and subjugation they were subjected to in past and the sufferings that lie ahead in the future. The text below shed more light:

xxi. " ...Urenna has no ideas what troubles trail a vandal's baby." Ojiugo was bitter."

"The abduction is bad enough but more bearable if it does not produce a baby." Ojiugo was bitter (256).

The idea of having a baby whose paternity is unknown is, in itself, traumatizing. This explains why Ojiugo was bitter about the whole situation, eventually; she committed suicide (p. 260). Although suicide is a sin against God and humanity and in this case, it is somehow unjustifiably; no matter how the two groups (conqueror and the conquered) may stigmatize the victim.

More so, the returning of home soldiers who survived the war is another sign that shows the war is over. Even though those that did not return were higher in number but the few that returned had every reason to celebrate.

xxii. After Charlie, Njoemena, another son of the community, returned. Njoemena, also known as Emena, was clutching the boots of his kinsmen who unfortunately was among the soldiers from the other side killed before the end of the war (240).

While the likes of Charlie's parents were celebrating the return of their son, Udenba's mother was mourning the death of her son whose boots were handed over her. The boots symbolize the Udemba, the fallen hero. It is a sign of agony of war and uttermost sacrifice for the restoration of Biafra.

Other post war signs are the rebuilding of various homes, churches and markets. Plants were being cultivated, animals being reared. All these are signs that things were beginning to stabilize. Another negative sign that marks the end of war is

the remittance of twenty bucks to the Igbo irrespective of how much they had in the bank (p. 246). That policy was put in place to further cripple them financially. And finally, the resumption of schools and the introduction of the National Youth Service Scheme (NYSC) to further heal the wounds of the war.

#### Codes in the Text

##### The Hermeneutic Code

The author hasn't said much about the old man on the train who was obviously very sick but travelled unaccompanied. He was not only sick but he looked traumatized, however, the reader are left to infer where he is coming from and where he is going to, what had happened to him and why he was all alone when he needed to be with, may be, his children or wife. His presence on the train remained mysterious. If Luwis' father had not been selected and dragged out of the train, and with Luwis himself losing consciousness, no one would have taken notice of him. But even in his weakest moment, he advised wisely that nobody should do anything that would wake the boy up. This mysterious man later died on board. However the enigma was later resolved when Buno and Bika were informed that the old was one of the many very sick passengers who had died why running away from the pogrom in the north.

In another development, the first time Madam Rosa and Uwadiogwu were mentioned in the story. The author did not fully explain why they had decided to stay back instead of escaping with the rest to Okolochi during the exodus.

xxiii. "...Whether he is Lazzie or Lazy, nobody must delay us. After all, hale and hearty old maid Rosa and her daughter, who said they were going nowhere, have been left behind by her relatives, let alone a semi-dead child" (91).

At this point, the author through the character of Zacch, casually informs the readers that Rosa and her daughter were not coming but the author does not explain immediately why Rosa takes such a deadly decision. However, the enigma was resolved on page 127 when Madam was captured and

buried alive for colluding with the enemy soldiers. But the truth is that Madam Rosa was stigmatized because she birthed and raised her daughter as a single parent. With this kind of stigma from her own people, she decided to stay back and face whatever that may befall her. She and her daughter were abducted by the enemy soldiers who later turned them into sex slaves and domestic servants. The killing of Madam Rosa was an act of wickedness which can never be justified.

The author uses flashback technique to inform the audience about Justin's negative attitude towards Liliana and Gonma, his girl-child. It is rather puzzling to expect that the child Liliana was carrying in her womb would be a boy. That was Justin's expectation. So, when the child turned out to be a girl, he blamed his wife for bringing forth a girl instead of a boy. So when Liliana died on her way back from the distant market, Gonma stepped into her shoe and acted both mother and wife to Justin and her siblings. It was at this point the enigma was resolved because Justin had thought a girl-child had no value instead she is an object of sexual gratification to the man. That was his case with the gravel women.

#### **The Proairetic Code**

This is a code of action and suspense. From the title of this novel, the author keeps the minds of the readers in suspense. The phrase "the forest dames" is pregnant with meaning and at such; readers would want to know, from the outset, who these forest dames are and what makes them forest dames. The first chapter explains to the audience that the forest dames are girls who the raging war had forced them to escape into the forest in order to avoid being sexually exploited by the invading soldiers who found joy in raping girls and turning them into their sex toys. As the story unfolds, the audience gets to know more of these girls and why they take such a wise but deadly decision.

There are other actions which trigger suspense in the text. For example, the train ordeal leaves the hearts of reader bleeding and anxious. Many passengers of Igbo origin who were fleeing the pogrom from the north were selected and

brutally murdered (p. 41) but what keeps the readers wondering is their criteria for the selections. So anytime the train was to make a mandatory stop, readers would be too sympathetic and curious at the same time to know who would be selected. Many readers had thought that Buno would be selected but that suspense was resolved when the train crossed the border. This explains why one of the passengers shouted "we have reached our fatherland, glory be to God!" (p. 46).

In a similar vein, the minds of both readers and characters were left in suspense through the actions of the humanitarian workers. During the moment of reprieve, these humanitarians provided social and medical services to the war victims, especially women and children. Children who suffered kwashiorkor and other forms of ailments were taken to the organization's camp and to be returned the following week. But not all of them returned alive. Readers had expected Sunday, one of the victims, to be returned healthier than he left but Sunday was among many of the children who did not make it.

xxiv. "I am sorry. Mrs. Ejema, we did our best for Sunday he just did not make it," Dr. Harrison said softly to Julie, who flung herself on the ground and fainted (p. 151).

At this point, the suspense was painfully resolved. Sunday is dead and the mother had to take it. The actions of these workers bring both joy and sorrow at the same time.

#### **The Semantic Code**

This is a code of connotation. Some words, phrases, sentences, actions and signs give additional messages other than their literal meanings." Madam Rosa was addressed as an "Old maid" (p. 91). This is a derogatory phrase used to refer to women who are old enough to get married but remained unmarried. In African societies, women who decide not to get married are being looked at as prostitutes, faithless women and virago but the societies have failed to find out why some women take such a decision. In the case of Madam Rosa, the reason for her singleness may not

be unconnected to the child she birthed sixteen years ago. The society detests women who are single parents together with their daughters which the society calls 'bastards'. The phrase "old maid" is one of the remotes causes of Rosa's death and her daughter's abduction.

Another code which is pregnant with meaning is the code embedded in the phrase "killing his wife with work" (p. 33). The author uses this code to explain how the African society had divided gender roles at home. But Buno, being a modern man sees everything wrong with a woman doing particular domestic chores. He believes that a man should also help at home when the woman is busy with other things. This code, therefore, is instrumental in exposing the subjugation of women in Africa. Similarly, Binna's strolling to the river without fetching water is filled with connotations. Just as what Buno's friends had insinuated, Binna sees it as his right not to fetch water from the stream because he is a boy (p. 29). Lele and Supuruchi have been constrained to accept that the role as feminine; however, Binna and his brother use up the water fetched by these girls. Through this code, the author exposes what she considers as an unfair treatment meted on the girl-child. Nothing should have prevented Binna from, at least, fetching water from the stream since he had gone there to take his bath. The author uses the code "the dog soup" to relegate the woman to the background. During the funeral ceremony of Pa Zurika, it was speculated that it was only the men who would eat the "dog soup" because the women were not qualified to participate in the feast.

xxv. "Hmm! There goes the meal not for the fainthearted," Ajuka, one of the women, said.

"Yes – o, we are not qualified to partake of it," another added (118).

This tacit rule that women should not partake in the meal is just arbitrary. The author, through the character of Dora, questions the rule but in what seems like a child's talk, it was defended that any woman who partakes in it may never conceived. This is an assumption without any scientific or

medical backings. However, this is a code used in Africa to limit the exploration of women.

### **The Symbolic Codes**

This is a code of binary opposition. From the outset, the author deploys this code to draw a thick line between the south and the north. Although she does not register any regret for the amalgamation of the two protectorates but the killing of the southerners by northerners has put the regions in a binary opposite direction. The pogrom in the north causes the Igbo to flee to the south. The north, by implication, is a place of death, while the south, a place of safety. This classification was only temporal because when it was obvious the south would seek secession, the north unleashes gadgets of war on them right in their land of safety. This antithetical code is significant that it places the north and south apart till date.

Another code that stands binary opposite to each other is the code of "vandals" and "rebels." The author uses this code to describe those that vandalize the Biafrans, their property and their women, and those that rebel against this form vandalism. According to the author, the war was fought in back and forth manner. That is, both the vandals and the rebels experienced high casualties. Initially, the vandals boasted that the fight was a walk-over but the rebels took it as a serious business, the fight got intense and not really easy for either sides.

The author also uses the code of "sophisticate weapons" and "locally made guns and dynamites (Ogbunigwe)" to tell her story. The invaders used all forms of sophisticated weaponry to attack the Biafran troops. Biafran troops, in turn, repelled them using locally manufactured gun and dynamites. So, outwardly, it appeared that the side using the modern war gadgets, arms and ammunition would decimate the side with the locally manufactured guns and dynamites. But inwardly, it is not so. Perhaps this may be the reason the author deploys "no victor, no vanquish" to signal the end of the war. These codes are symbolic in the novel.

**The Cultural Code**

This code is preponderantly used in the text. There are many items that represent culture even in war situation. Some of which are kola nut, green leaves, Otamiri river, the sounding of canon, the goat and some proverbs.

**Kola nut**

The kola nut, in Igbo cosmology, symbolizes many things: life, marriage, peace, etc. In the context of this novel, the kola nut is used to symbolize marriage. In Igboland, no marriage can be conducted without the presentation of kola nut. The author informs that the war has made kola nut scarce therefore, young ladies weren't getting married because of this scarcity. Most potential suitors were at the war front thinking of how to win the war. They had no time to think of marriage. So, the scarcity of kola nut doesn't matter to them. But to the women who feel that their time is passing away, have to worry about this scarcity. To show us how the kola nut is dignified, Dora was rebuked by her fellow women for breaking the kola nut; they warned that women don't break kola nuts, that anytime she feels like eating one, she should find a boy to perform the ritual.

**Green Branches**

This code signifies, among many things, death and peace. In Nigeria, wherever one sees green branches on the road or homes, it points to the fact that some is dead or near dead. There are few instances where green branches were used in the text. Liliana's corpse was covered using green leaves or branches. This is a sign that she has died. However, in some instances, it suggests peace. This explains why the people were holding green branches when the war was declared over.

**The Sounding of the Canon**

In the Igbo traditional society, the sounding of the canon announces the death of someone. One of the place settings of the text is the Southeast; this explains why the canon was sounded at the funeral of Pa Zurike, the man that accommodated Dora and her children in Okolochi. The sound of the canon is believed to bid the final

farewell to the death without which the death could still hover among the living. Pa Zurike's death, the sound of the canon and other rituals are pointers to the fact that Igbo uphold tradition even in the face of war.

**Otamiri River**

This river is a code that represents safety for the natives. According to the author, anyone who uses the river as his source of water cannot be drowned by it. This was exemplified by Okedu, a war captive who dived into the river and swam back to his home (p.23).

**Proverbs and Idioms**

Proverbs are cultural codes deployed in the text to warn, reprimand, to show joy, to mourn, to praise, and to indicate failure. Some of the proverbs and idioms used in the text include:

- a. Many felt like fish out of water (56).
- b. Where you mourn others, there you mourn yourself (108).
- c. Cow wey not get tail, na God dey drive am fly (193).
- d. It was only a three that saw people coming with machetes to cut it down and remained still, not running away (36).

**Conclusion**

Signs and codes are semiotic resources Agbasimalo used in the text *The Forest Dames* to express the negative effects of war on women and children. Specifically, the author deployed the pre-war, war and post-war signs within the semiotic universe of the text to project the text's message. In a similar manner, she deployed codes to give the text a touch of reality. According to van Leeuwen (2005), semiotics is not a self-contained theory, however; its application in other domains fulfills its operation in language studies. So, the text has been read using the bipartite semiotic theories to confirm that assertion. It has been demonstrated, therefore, that Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* could be theorized using de Saussure's theory of sign and Barthes' theory of codes.

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