

War front and ‘War back’: Women and Nigeria-Biafra War in Iroh’s *Forty-eight Guns for the General* and Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*

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Abstract

*The periods of 1967-1970 recorded a secession of Eastern region of Nigeria which birthed a new state of Biafra and the eventual bitter war dubbed Nigeria-Biafra war. In the said war every participant, men women, youths and even children, played varied roles and these roles were fictionally captured by various African literary authors. Using Iroh’s *Forty-eight Guns for the General* and Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*, this study examined how these roles were recorded by the African narrators of the armed conflict experiences with particular attention on how male and female writers adequately represented and interpreted the roles played by women and men, paying attention on how the chosen writers depicted the genders’ activities in their works. The study also examined the extent of the influence of the narrators’ socio-cultural background are reflected in their narration especially on their representation of the women and men’s activities during the deadly armed conflict. This investigation equally tried to find out if the genders of the writers in any way influenced their level of representation of the opposite sex in their narrations and the reason for that. To achieve these, the principles of hermeneutics will be adopted as both the theory and approach in the examination.*

Keywords: War front, ‘War back’, Women, Hermeneutics, Nigeria-Biafra war

The carefully structured system of chauvinism in African cultures in general and Nigeria in particular has persevered not only in real life terms but also in male-authored fictional and non-fictional narratives of Nigeria-Biafra war where male dominated heroic gallantry are replete while women and their contributions are rather peripheralized and treated with preconceived stereotypes. “Such works tend to ‘promote a form of heroism’ drawn directly from the involvement of men just as they highlight and exaggerate women’s moral laxity and sensationalize their marital infidelities.”¹In recreating the social and political experiences of the said war, male writers being the trailblazers in African literary creativity, conspicuously obviate the significant life-supporting/saving efforts as well as life threatening roles women undertook during the war. Most male novelists trivialize and exhibit obvious repudiation of the roles of women in wars as the same works manifest, principally, the dispositions of exalted and highly proclaimed macho heroism of men in wars like that of Nigeria-Biafra. This attitude can picture the near frustrating and discouraging experiences of African female writers who blazed the trail of fiction writing but were ignored by literary critics, while their male colleagues’ works were enthusiastically reviewed and critiqued. In line with this, Femi Ojo-Ade submits that “the male writer, like the male social animals, is more fortunate than the female. His presence is taken for granted. The publisher seeks him out unlike the woman whose silence is taken for granted”.²In the same line, Lloyed Brown notes that the women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictable male-oriented studies in the field.³

This situation is remotely and normally transferred from the already deeply internalized African patriarchal practices where women are second classed and meant not to be heard. A society of firmly-rooted male liberty which compels the female to adhere to endorsed demeaning social norms of behaviours. This vexing social condition reflects the historic educational inequality and imbalance between African men and women and which translates to women lateness in creative writing. The reflection of the male writers’ attitude in depicting women’s roles in Nigeria-Biafra war in African literary creativity as insignificant and unworthy of adequate and encouraging attention, particularly relating to Nigeria-Biafra war narratives may, therefore, not be surprising. Nevertheless, during this horrifying social experience in Nigeria, few women were already educated and had acquired tertiary education.

Some had become novelists and were later to become prominent in the area. Part of the worry then is why this class of women, though numerically very low comparatively, chose to do a rather response narrative years after the war, while the men wrote either during the war or immediately after? Is this response linked to their later realized social marginalization by their male counterparts in not sufficiently representing the roles of women during the war in their writings? What actually informed the men-women divergent timing and views and perspectives in chronicling the male-female socio-political involvement in the war?

Needless to point out that a typical imaging of the African woman in a male written creative works, especially war related ones, is of a woman who “often acts within the framework of her traditional roles and values as wife and mother and their infamous sexual immorality. So strong are these social values that the respect and love which a woman earns is relative to the degree of her adaptation to these roles.”⁴ It may however be inaccurate to state that all male creative writers portray women derogatorily. Some male writers actually deviate from this trend and go on to narrate stories in which central and visible spaces are created for women but not necessarily revealing their strength clearly as observed by Modupe Kolawole. Kolawole notes that “such male writers have presented women ambiguously. From Elechi Amadi’s pathetic portrait of Ihuoma in *The Concubine*, to more realistic works by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Senbene Ousmane, Ola Rotimi, AyiKweiAma, DrissChraibi, and Femi Osofisan, one identifies male writers who are consistent in their positive attitudes to women while others are rather ambivalent in depicting women.”⁵

Within the scope of this paper therefore, the representation of the roles played by both men and women during Nigeria-Biafra war in Eddie Iroh and Buchi Emechetas’ perspectives as depicted in their books, *Forty-eight Guns for the General* and *Destination Biafra* are examined. It further explores the socio-cultural aspects of their lives associated with their background in their attempts to recapture the armed conflict of Nigeria-Biafra war and what actually inform their varied inclinations. Moreover, the glaring paucity of African female writers in creatively chronicling the experiences of Nigeria-Biafra war as the war rages raises some social and cultural questions. My choice of the two novels is informed by the glaring disparity in the unbalanced and biased representation of both genders in their fictional recreation of Nigeria-Biafra war. Both writers, in their historical account of the Nigeria-Biafra war, portray their protagonists as hero and heroine of their ‘cultural constant’⁶ and ‘corrected view’⁷ of the women-men roles during the said war to the extent that the chief characters’ experiences mainly expose the authors’ socio-cultural dispositions.

Eddie Iroh’s book squally focuses on the heroic activities of Colonel Charles Chumah, the Principal Staff Officer at Army Headquarters and the Commander of ‘V’ –for Vengeance, with his gallant forces and the self-serving forty-eight French mercenaries who are flown in to help Biafrans. Iroh also concentrates on Colonel Chuma’s military activities after his release from detention and how he later becomes a good match for the leader of the French mercenaries(deceptively called ‘Christian Brothers’), Colonel Rudolf whose primary reason for involvement in the war is profit oriented rather than objectively leading the Biafran troupe to successfully winning the war. Iroh devotedly displays the men’s bravery and gallantry in the war fronts. They become formidable forces exhibiting fearless and creative dispositions as they defend Biafra. The men display heroic and gallant moves in their bid to win the war. The great exploits by both Biafran and Nigerian soldiers filled the novel. On the contrary, his portrayal of his female characters is sadly sporadic, stereotypical and disproportional. For example, apart from the detailed account of the sad, gruesome and forceful sexual violation of Miss Britta Wender, a Swedish Red Cross volunteer and her Igbo volunteer colleague, Ebele, which was narrated in barely a page, out of the two hundred and eighteen pages of the harrowing and horror-filled Nigeria-Biafra war which propagate the gallant involvement of men, only twelve pages mentioned women involvement, some passively so and in most cases, in a way to portray their sexual laxity and vain love for money, targeting not only the Biafran and Nigerian soldiers but the expatriates and war mercenaries as well: “... Their officers flew about in the best cars, which they drove like land-jets. They drank the best liquor, smoked foreign cigarettes and wore new clothes. They were loved dearly by the girls for their generosity with foreign currency.”⁸ It took one hundred and ninety-two pages before the admirable and dangerous sacrifice of Miss Wender with her half a dozen volunteers from the Swedish Red Cross and her “team of five local nurses and the unskilled hands of a dozen native volunteers, mainly, semi-literate teenage girls with no capital to start up flourishing war-time trade in scarce good”⁹ to be recognized. Buchi Emecheta, on the other hand, presents a more balanced account of the activities of both men and women during the war. Coincidentally, women are given first mention on page twelve of the two novels. The difference being that Emecheta’s involvement of women is done in pre-independent Nigeria and Debbie, the protagonist and women of various classes are to play varied vital roles in the war ravaged Nigeria and Biafra.

Conversely, Iroh 's women, with exception of Miss Britta Wenda and her team, are often passively mentioned as mere victims of war who hardly wriggle out of the society imposed stereotypical standard they found themselves rather than being active participants in the Civil war.

In plotting the story line of *Destination Biafra* there is a visible sign of the Victorian attitude as displayed by the colonial masters represented by Governor Macdonald and Captain Alan Grey, son of the previous governor-general and Sir Fergus as well as the Arabic Feudal culture represented by the Sadauna. Emecheta vitrines the Igbo cultural background obscurely juxtaposed with the arrogance of Victorian and Feudal cultures where women are relegated as the narrative begins and progressed with mainly the men in power. She also covertly but artfully weaves in the Igbo socio-cultural practice in which women exercised some vested power before the advent of colonialism which initiates the demeaning practice of patriarchy into Igbo culture. While discussing women as presented in Flora Nwapa's novels, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo notes that Igbo women "... have a history of economic autonomy and political influence outside male control. This derives from the dual-sex division of labour in Igboland which Ezeigbo and several other Nigerian writers believe to have been partially compromised by the colonial encounter."¹⁰This eroded historic position of Igbo women expresses itself in Emecheta's ability to place women in active and visible roles in her Civil war narrative. Through Teteku, for example, Emecheta states that "in the distant past in that part of Africa women were treated almost as men's equals, but with the arrival of colonialism their frail claim to equality had been taken away"¹¹

In narrating the gallant exploits of both the Biafran and Nigerian soldiers including every other person that are involved in one way or the other in the war including the expatriates, Buchi Emecheta indiscriminately appreciates the contributions of both women and men. One therefore meets women of varied classes carrying out various activities during the war. They are determined to take the surviving members of their families back to the east notwithstanding life threatening encounters they have with both Nigerian and Biafran soldiers on the way. The protagonist, Debbie, in company with other women and children who have lost their husbands, children and other relations while some suffered child labour and gave birth in the bush, remains resolute against humiliating and frightful odds to accomplish her delicately dangerous mission of meeting with Chijioke Abosi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Biafra. Her mission is to convince Abosi 'to back down without losing face'¹²as requested by Saka Momoh, the Nigerian Commander-in- Chief. In her unwavering determination to carry out this mission, Debbie was gang raped by the Nigerian soldiers, the very people she set out to help. When she is at the verge of getting demoralized by the experience, her mother instantly becomes her nurse, counselor and prayerfully encourages her to put the experience behind her.¹³Mrs Ogedemgbe, her age notwithstanding, is before then forced by soldiers to undress to her skin in public. Debbie is later to be raped again by her male soldier colleague. Dora, a seventeen year old mother of a child by an unknown soldier is another unfortunate victim who suffers stigmatization by the same society that deprived her of her 'dignity'. The old Reverend Mother Superior of the Roman Catholic Church, Mother Francisca, who devoted her life in company with other nuns, to cater for the sick, the hungry and the displaced is also raped and killed.¹⁴The common globally known scarcity of women in war fronts with the resultant lack of sex over a period of time may have supported soldiers' sexual misconducts, brutality and infidelity that even the married victims, the aged like Mrs Ogedemgbe and the religious like Reverend Mother Superior Francisca and other nuns are not spared by their sexual abuses. Unfortunately, women are often blamed for such acts even in rape situations as often happens in war times including situations where women are arranged for high ranked officers and are sexually preyed. The irony in soldiers' ill behaviours is that those entrusted with the duty of providing protection and guidance are those who become terrors and abusers of women and girls. Soldiering rather becomes avenue for wanton lecherous tendencies and destruction of women dignity. In spite of this awful and debasing experiences, Debbie and her surviving company made it to the East and insist on the noble assignment and other engagements in helping the already war devastated Biafran nation. Debbie does not see the Nigeria/Biafra social experience as "something between two ambitious soldiers."¹⁵(160). She sees it as people's war of freedom, a purging tool for ridding the country of corruption and exploitation. Also, while reacting to the triumphant entry and conquering of Ore, a town in Yoruba land, when it fell to Biafran soldiers, Emecheta makes Nwokolo senior, the father to Captain John Nwokolo to enthuse that "we may not have many arms or ammunition at our disposal but we do have men and women prepared to lay down their lives for the cause and that determines almost everything."¹⁶Emecheta also notes that women enrolled in Biafran army. Apart from enrolling in the armed combat during the war and as pointed out by Bab "... in Biafra all women with degrees want to fight."¹⁷

Women's placement at the rear does not deter them from engaging meaningfully in humanitarian and economic activities during the war with the accompanying risk to their lives. Flora Nwapa in *Never Again* corroborates this when she observes that "The women especially were very active, more active than the men in fact. They made uniforms for the soldiers; they cooked for the soldiers and gave expensive presents to the officers. And they organized women who prayed every Wednesday for Biafra..."¹⁸ She goes on to assert that...it was the civilians who organized 'kitchens' to cook for the soldiers. The lucky soldiers who survived the first battle at Nsukka returned to the base only to discover that there was no food to eat. It was the women, the women alone who organized these 'kitchens'. They do not only cook and make clothes for the soldiers but also farmed and engaged in catering for the aged and the sick especially children who had contracted the Biafran sickness, Kwashiorko, in homes and refugee camps. Women practically experienced lack and devised many ways of keeping their children and husbands alive in the face of death. Mrs Ogedemgbe, even when she manages to travel out of the warring nations to London finds means of smuggling in food to Biafra through the creeks. She has four strong canoe men in her employ and is ready to accept the not too valued Biafran money. This is one of the efforts to provide essential commodities to war ravaged Biafra. Chimamanda Adichie, in her *Half of a Yellow Sun* confirms women's efforts during the said war. According to her, Mrs Muokelu always trades at enemy line. When Kainene can no longer bear the sight of the dying kwashiorko struck children and the elderly she and her group are taking care of in one of the numerous refugee camps in Biafra, she decides with Inatimi, her assistant, to embark on the border line trade which she describes as an "honest free enterprise"¹⁹, and popularly known as 'Afia attack' in Biafra in search of whatever food she could buy for the refugees. She never came back²⁰. Flora Nwapa also exposes the contributions of Biafran women in her collection *Wives at War* when a woman leader protests against non-recognition of their efforts by the male power brokers. She laments:

Your offense is that you bypassed us. Without the women, the Nigerian vandals would have overrun Biafra; without women, our gallant Biafran soldiers would have died on the war front. Without the women, the Biafran soldiers Red Cross would have collapsed.²¹

Adichie also notes the efforts of village women who sustain soldiers and provided them succor with the merger provisions they could produce in the mist of the severe lack: "... when the village women came with wraps of *garri*, thin soup, and, once in a while, win-the-war rice cooked with some palm oil and little else..."²² Jane Bryce also notes that women "joined civil defense militia units and, in May 1969, formed a women's Front and called on the Biafran leader to allow them to enlist in the infantry."²³ Bryce goes on to cite Amadume's submission: Women fed and sustained the economy of Biafra through 'attack' trade, which involved market trips through enemy lines. Women mobilized Biafrans for all public occasions. Women formed a strong core of the militia task forces, etc., while mothers cooked for and fed the whole Biafran nation. Women became the cohesive force in a shifting, diminishing people who were slowly losing what they saw as war of survival.²³

The above recorded narrations of active women war involvement reveal obvious distancing and inclusion in the way Iroh and Emecheta view the roles of men and women in Nigeria-Biafra war. While Iroh concentrates more on the bravery of men and gave women a sparse space in his work, Emecheta is able to give both genders considerable equal space in her work. Iroh's perception draws directly from the historic African patriarchal based perception of their women where the women's roles are restricted to preconceived cultural and stereotyped lifestyle of wifedom and motherhood and their operations are moderated by and restricted to domestic matters, very marginal roles indeed. This situation aptly mirrors African cultural reality on gender relations. Iroh, unlike Emecheta, fails to see the transcending roles of women even in war situations which provided and enhanced survival rate for Biafrans including the soldiers. Noting that Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* was published in 1982, about eleven years after the war ended and Iroh's *Forty-eight Guns for the General* came out in 1976, merely six years after the war, Emecheta better captures less polarized and an all-inclusive narrative of the social experiences of the Civil war. One could sense some reactionary elements in Buchi Emecheta's narrative to the ill representation of women by male writers like Iroh. African literature generally has been a male dominated domain. Given factors as the historic female lateness to education in Africa and the overwhelming and cumbersome pressure of responsibilities of motherhood, wifedom and volunteer social services involvement during the war coupled with the women's deep involvement in the risky inter border trading (Afia attack) during the war upheavals, one could understand the gaping gulf in literary activities between men and women in retelling the story of the war.

Women later woke up to the reality of their exclusion, discrimination and negative colouring of their active involvement in the war by male writers such as Iroh, in Nigeria-Biafra armed-conflict-based literary works.

The female writers, like Emecheta, therefore attempt presenting a corrected perspective of the female roles in the war by their introduction of a concentrated and rounded vision of the female experience in which women play central roles “in the unfolding of the plot and in our appreciation of the story. Put in a position of importance, the female protagonist often displays enduring qualities of dignity and industry...”²⁴ Ezenwa-Ohaeto is of the view that “Scarcely any other African novelist has succeeded in probing the female mind and displaying the female personality with such precision.”²⁵ Ezenwa-Ohaeto goes on to observe that “Emecheta shows great psychological insight in the penetration of her character’s thought. She is particularly good at the penetration of the feminine psyche.”²⁶ Emecheta, just like Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, has therefore given female insight and consolidated consciousness of involvement of women in war literature and succeeded in making women feel appreciated in the sacrifices and risks they undertook in the war. They have, through their response war literature, restored the ‘stolen’ contributions which, in most of the literature, are distorted by the in-built socio-cultural subordination of African culture even those that worked with technical crew who served as engineers were neither mentioned nor acknowledged. Adichie also records that Olannastarts a school in war ravaged Biafra at the rear, the ‘war back’, to keep Biafran children still learning while the men are fighting at the war front.

One therefore wonders the reason for the conspicuous peripheral positioning of women in male written war novels as *Forty-eight Guns for the General*. Part of the reason, according to Amuta is that this generation of writers that constitute male war novelists “had been schooled for power, nurtured in the colonial education system as logical successors to the colonialist.”²⁷ Jane Bryce, on her part, is of the view that most male novelists are “repudiations of a specific phase of bourgeois hegemony in Nigerian history... and that war novel writers’ heroes reflect the class position of the writers, and also their frequently critical perspective on the war”²⁸ Conversely, and according to Van Allen and as recorded by Bryce: “the Missionaries avowed purpose in educating girls was to train them for Christian marriage and motherhood, not for jobs or citizenship.”²⁹ This reflects, years after and until recently, in the intrinsic understanding that the educational/professional appellations as Prof, Dr, Engr, even in politics, such positions as Governor (governing a state) and President (of a nation) and the like give the impression of a male (figure) terrain while professions such as Nursing, Seamstress, Governess (baby sitter) and the like are understandably feminine. These are pointers to early education opportunity the men enjoyed and which directly impacts on the early writing by men and females’ obvious lateness in creative writing.

Conclusion

The Nigeria-Biafra war upheaval has generated impressive gamut of war literature pioneered by men and in which the men’s gallantry and invincibility are explicitly proclaimed and promoted in some form of heroism while women’s involvement is treated with condescension. The subject of this paper borders on the extent of representation of male-female in the two war novels examining the variables of gender and the socio-cultural elements that may have informed the divergent perspectives taken by Iroh and Emecheta in handling gender involvement in the Civil war. As a cultural constant phenomenon, African patriarchal system inadvertently found its way into the creative narratives of African men while such works merely paid passive attention to active involve of women in varied roles other than the culturally preserved domain of wifehood and motherhood as they also are stereotyped. Emecheta in her work gave a corrected view of the biased and inadequate representation of women by pointing out other numerous and important roles women played even in harsh and unfriendly war ravaged environment in what I termed ‘war back’ which contributed to the survival of the Biafran nation as long as it could live.

Notes

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