Abstract

The Nigerian Civil has provided writers with fecund source materials for creative writing that has witnessed great output. The writings are male dominated and focus largely on the causes of the war and the experiences and exploits of the writers. The activities and contributions of women are not recognized but whenever mentioned they usually carry the vision of weak, pitiable, vulnerable people who are best used as objects of titillation to ease tension in the heat of the conflict. In response, women writers have risen to challenge male dominance in recollecting history. Destination Biafra by Buchi Emecheta and Half of a Yellow Sun by Ngozi Adichie are examined in this study, using the feminist theory. It stresses that apart from re-telling the war story with the woman as a focal point, the authors empower their female characters. Female characters are also portrayed as strong, formidable, and industrious people who display great talents at fostering the home. It affirms that women's outstanding contributions during the war were facilitated by the reversal of gender roles usually evident in conflict situations.

Over the years, writers have used literature as a powerful instrument to highlight events at different times throughout the world. To some writers, literature affords them the opportunity to express in artistic forms some aspects of their own history. This is because historical recordings usually follow a strict pattern synonymous with the laboratory procedure that enables one to “sift straw from the chaff… of indifferent testimony that renders the story drab, often uninteresting to read and certainly difficult to remember for a long period” (Nevis, 1985: 225). The drab nature of history and the problems associated with recollecting it may explain why some people are better disposed to express their history artistically, using fiction as their tool since fiction is the clarifying agent that makes truth plausible (Achebe, Nwankwo, Ifejika and Nwapa, 1971). This implies that what historians collect usually long after the events are cold are skeletal facts, bereft of the warm flesh of the emotions that give life to such events. The artistic re-creation of those events in fictional form supplies the essential element of human warmth. This position signifies the relationship between history and literature.
Achebe and others explain why writers prefer fiction to direct historical account in recounting their history. They posit that fiction enables the writer to “discover and portray the constant in human character in order to leave behind a story that is timeless rather than timely and having among its principal motivations the search for understanding of the force of contemporary history …” (Achebe, Nwankwo, Ifejika and Nwap, 1971:vii).

This assertion is valid when a timeless literary endeavour like Virgil Aenied is considered. Such literatures enable readers to look into the past and examine the present in order to predict the future. The emphasis is that both history and literature draw their sources from a particular pool, which is the society.

The relationship between literature and warfare also is natural. John Ruskin contends that war is a prerequisite for a great work of art because, no society can produce a great work of art except that which is based on armed conflict (Ruskin, 1964:45). “No great art even yet rose on earth, but among a nation of soldiers. There is no art among a shepherd people, if it remains in peace” (Ruskin, 1964:45). The above discussion shows that there exists a close and symbiotic relationship between literature and history since each of them is a means of recording events and trends in the society. Thus an African writer should be conscious of his/her historical circumstances.

The Nigerian civil war lasted from 1967 to 1970. Up to the “mid-1980’s only a few women wrote about the war, among them Flora Nwapa with some short stories and the novel Never Again, Buchi Emecheta with the novel Destination Biafra, and Zulu Sofola with the play King Emene: A Tragedy of Rebellion (Pape, 2005). This paper on “War and Gender in Buchi Emecheta’s Destination Biafra and Ngozi Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun examines primarily the role of women in the Nigerian Civil War and the kinds of gender relationship that existed during the conflict. This will be done by identifying and analyzing the activities of some of the characters in the novels.

Objectives of Study
This paper aims at achieving the following objectives:-
1. To assess how gender roles may be influenced by war and vice versa.
2. To re-interpret women’s roles that are considered passive and less significant within the framework of the war.
3. To show relationship between literary creativity and history within the perspectives of the selected novels.

Theoretical Framework
This study is based on New Historicism and Feminism. New Historicism as a literary theory ‘suggests that literature must be studied within the contexts of both the
history of the author and history of the critic”. The theory arose in the 1980’s with Stephen Greenblatt as its main proponent.

This theory posits that a text must be analysed through research that assumes that history and fiction are inseparable” (Bressler, 2004:6). Its main focus is on the premise that a literary work should be considered a product of the time, place and historical circumstances of its composition rather than an isolated work of art.

Feminism is a collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women’s rights and women’s position in culture and society. As a theory, feminism deals with gender construction and the rights of women in diverse cultures of the world. Since gender construction is not fixed, but dependent on the social features and perception of a particular society, it may be inappropriate to categorize feminism using a single mould.

Feminism is also a broad term that is synonymous with female assertion or emancipation. According to Mary Swanson, feminism stresses that “women should have rights, responsibility and opportunities equal to those of men, that women’s rights are human rights” (Swanson, 1993, p.11). She further adds that women are continuously oppressed and this oppression is socially and not biologically determined. Akachi Ezeigbo in her essay “Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminine Perspective” defines feminism as “… an ideology that insists that society should recognize the claims of women’s rights, legal, political, social and economic equal to those held by men” (Ezeigbo, 1966:1). The above assertions indicate that feminism emerged as a response to oppressive and unjust laws and attitudes against women.

Bio-data of the Authors

Buchi Emecheta is from Ibusa in Delta State of Nigeria. She was born in Lagos in 1944. She obtained her primary and secondary education at Lagos. She had her first degree and later completed her Ph.D in 1991. She wrote several books but a few gained her international recognition. Among them are: *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second Class Citizen, The Slave Girl, The Joys of Motherhood, Double Yoke* (1981) and *Destination Biafra*.

Ngozi Adichie was born on 15th September, 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria. Adichie completed her secondary education in 1994. She read communication and completed a Masters degree in Creative Writing. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and her second novel is *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Buchi Emecheta is one of the most prolific female writers in Africa today. She has authored no fewer than nineteen novels (Holmes, 2005). Helen Chukwuma in her
essay “Positivism and the female crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta” describes Emecheta as “a welcome diversion from the canon” (Chukwuma, 1987:2). She further adds that with Emecheta, “the female character has emerged from her cocoon, basking free to a mixed surprise and wonder” (Chukwuma, 1987:2).

**Nigerian Civil War and the Role of Women**

*In times of war .... Women are permitted to enter the arena of violence – up to a point ... But as soon as the war is over, they are glad and led to believe on the need to go back to their natural roles.*

Eileen MacDonald (in *Shoot the Women First*)

The Nigerian Civil War has provided a lot of fertile ground for Nigerian writers to express the problem of the African nation. The contributions of female authors are unarguably impressive. Emecheta and Adichie in their novels asked a pertinent question about the war: “what were the historical reasons for the Nigeria Biafra civil war?” “What caused the upheaval? “How did family life fare during the war?” What were the roles of women during the conflict?” “What are the roles that women will be saddled with in a post-war Nigeria?”

Destination Biafra recreates the emotional trauma and violence that women and children had to go through in the Nigerian Civil War. Destination Biafra is the kind of political institution that was conceived, mid-wifed, groomed and handed down to Nigerians by the imperialists. These political institutions were designed not only to fail after independence but to be a harbinger of civil and political strife. The interest of the imperialists in this novel is in selecting who succeeds them when they leave. The criteria for selecting such, do not include attributes such as capability, dedication, ability, sincerity of purpose and loyalty to one’s country. All that mattered to the British was how their economic interest would be safe-guarded. It is not surprising when MacDonald concludes a discussion with some of his friends in the novel by saying “the thing is to back the Hausas with everything we have” (Emecheta, 1979:9).

Ngozi Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* squarely confronts Nigeria’s political history in order to give presumably valid notions such as nationalism, race, ethnic identity, truth, heroism and betrayal. The title is a reference to the symbol of Biafran flag, an ironic icon that asserted Biafra’s independence, while also suggesting its incompleteness and indebtedness to the other half.

We find in the novel where Odenigbo the male protagonist makes innuendoes to the kind of legacies that the imperialist Belgium had left in the Congo. The
colonialists are equally indicted for the kind of misleading education that they made the colonials to acquire. These are highlighted by Odenigbo who accuses the whites of distorting the world map by placing Europe on top of Africa to symbolically show that Europe, even as a continent stands above Africa (Adichie, 2006).

There are those, in *Half of a yellow Sun*, for example who feel that the Igbo people “want to control everything” in the country and wish that they would “stay in the east” (Adichie, 2006:227) Susan, a British expatriate and Richard’s former lover, feels that the Igbo are uppity, clannish and controlling the markets. She further described them as being Jewish” (Adichie, 2006:154). On the other hand, the Igbo feel discriminated against outside Igbo land. The largely Islamic northerners, for instance, refuse to admit Igbo children into schools in Kano. The civil war failed to effectively address the socio-political problems of the nation.

The significant thing about Destination Biafra is that the author endows women with unlikely roles in a war-torn country with men as the principal actors. Debbie, the protagonist of the story takes up a multi-faceted role of soldier, power broker, trouble shooter and mother. She undertakes a risky journey to Biafra, the secessionist stronghold, on a mission seeking safety, peace and an ideal society. The novel depicts the emotional trauma and violence experienced particularly by women and children during the Nigerian Civil War. The protagonist is a young female army officer, in fact the only female soldier among men, sent to make things right in the chaotic Nigeria. Though an officer, she is disrespected and raped by fellow officers; a pointer to the fact that any society that does injustice to women would be in chaos. It also stresses the author’s ethical concern with corruption and disorderliness in both Nigeria and Biafra and the position of women in such a dysfunctional state. As a romantic, Debbie desires a wholesome Nigeria without ethnic or gender sectionalism. Her journey towards Biafra thus becomes the collective desire of Nigerians.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie weaves her story around the love lives of two female fraternal twins, Olanna and Kainene and how the dystopia of the Nigerian State capped with the civil war affects their lives respectively. The twins like Debbie in Destination Biafra are well schooled both in Nigeria and in England. Their father is the wealthy Chief Ozobia who “owns half of Lagos” (Adichie, 2006: 59), but like his wife, has no formal education. The meanings of the twins names are instructive and symbolic. Olanna, whose name means ‘father’s jewel’, has smoothly skin with “the lush colour of rain-drenched earth” and “a curry, fleshy body” (Adichie, 2006:23) Olanna represents the beauty, naturalness, freshness of the joy of independence, and the intellectual wealth of Nigeria, while Kainene’s name means “let’s watch and see what next would happen”. Kainene is a symbol of the unfolding events that would plunge the country into chaos. Kainene plays the role of the son in the family,
expanding the family business in Port Harcourt, brokering military contracts and crunng refugee camps during the war.

At the beginning of the novel, Olanna and Kainene are strained by their phlegmatic relationship with their parents; they both rebel against their parents’ values but cannot recognize their similarities to the one another. Their personal conflict symbolizes the civil war between Nigeria and Biafra, and as well as warning to present day Nigerians to look beyond their differences before they descend into final destruction. The pointlessness of the disagreements between the twins is a pointer to the futility of Nigeria’s ethnic nationalism.

*Destination Biafra* is replete with power tussles that are orchestrated by the political legacy that was bequeathed to Nigerians by the British. After independence, the political legacy was not only bound to fail but also had the potential of leading into inevitable chaos.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie does not directly discuss the political events and tussles among the people. She uses the characters and their discussions to unfold the political developments in the society. Such intellectual discussions usually take place in Odenigbo’s parlour. A political event in which the Prime Minister ordered troops to quell an uprising in Tiv land is divulged to the reader through Odenigbo when he shouts from the living room “nobody is saying that burning government property is a good thing. But to send the army to kill in the name of order? There are Tiv people lying dead for nothing. For nothing! Balewa has lost his mind!” (Adichie, 2006:93).

**Gender and War**

The significant thing about *Destination Biafra* is that the author endows women with unlikely roles in a war – torn country with men as the principal actors. Debbie, the protagonist of the story plays a multi-faceted role of the soldier, power broker, trouble shooter and mother. She undertakes a risky journey to Biafra on a mission seeking safety, peace and an ideal society. The novel depicts the emotional trauma and violence experienced particularly by women and children during the Nigerian Civil War.

Debbie’s desire to conquer the disadvantages of being a woman in a patriarchal society is realized by her enlistment in the army. She has a vision directed towards exploring the new role that women could play in the survival of a nation and in reconciling their war ravaged communities. John Hawley notes that most female characters in Emecheta’s work can be described as “doubly rooted. They are women “who critically access their past and present to improve their situations; they do not
live between countries but Debbie is one of the doubly rooted women whose exile experience has meant enrichment instead of deprivation.

When Debbie decides to join the Nigerian Army, she seems to have been inspired by the present political uncertainty in her country and the desire for adventure. The bitter wrangling between the two western leading politicians escalates here, and she declares affirmatively to her parents that she is going to enlist in the army. By joining the army, Debbie intends to fight several battles. First and foremost, she fights corruption by disassociating herself with her father and by giving her loyalty to the future of a country that is free from corruption. Debbie also confronts the issue of gender and the distribution of power between armed men and unarmed men and women. This is why she:

> Adopts an uncharacteristically and ridiculously heartless and macho pose the first time she is left in charge of twenty soldiers. The barking of orders, the yelling at the top of her voice, the reckless trigger-pulling response to a harmless gesture like laughter from her victims all point to an insecure wish to prove that she can bully and intimidate just like men (Porter, 2006:310).

Debbie believes in the equality of the sexes and hopes to actualize these rights including the right to defend herself and the right to kill. She thus decides to “help the Nigerian Army not as a cook or a nurse but as a true officer” (Emecheta, 1979:45). Her exuberance is heightened when she shouts commands to captured military officers of Igbo extraction “at the top of her voice” (Emecheta, 1979, p. 79) in order to make her voice authoritative, revealing “the sinews of her thin neck” (Emecheta, 1979:79) in sharp lines. Confronted by a female officer, the captured officers are overwhelmed, as if to say, “whatever you do, however much you are armed and in command now, you are still a woman” (Emecheta, 1979:80). For this relegation to low status as a woman, she allows the officers to be tortured to death. Her actions do not only align her to the male ordained rules of engagement to death but allows her to assume the role of Electra in Greek mythology to indirectly avenge her father’s death.

In Sapele, she witnesses the havoc wreaked on other women by some soldiers and she and others are subjected to dizzying hatred by the so-called nationalists. As the war rages on, the horrors and injustices that the women experience provide them the strong urge to end the war on both the political and sexual context. The novel draws to an end with a series of events.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie does not directly discuss the political events and tussles among the people. She uses the characters and their discussions to unfold the political developments in the society. Such intellectual discussions usually take
place in Odenigbo’s parlour. A political event is divulged to the reader through Odenigbo when he shouts from his living room. Another part of Nigeria history is revealed by Odenigbo when they discuss the pogrom in the north. The pogrom starts with the killing of Igbo officers in the Army. Once again the author through Col. Madu escape the killings in the barracks. Also Olanna escaped lynching because she had left the Sabongari area of Kano.

Women’s reaction to and participation in war in *Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun* can be in two dimensions. Prominent domestic and inter-personal conflicts are drawn between the following characters in the novel; Olanna and Kainene, Olanna and Odenigbo’s mothers Olanna and Odenigbo. Olanna and Kainene are fraternal twins and the heroines in the novel. Kainene is more practical and realistic than her twin, Olanna. She oversees her father’s business empire. Chief Ozobia, her father affirms that Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two” (Adichie, 2006:32). The conflict between the twins escalates when Olanna, depressed after becoming aware of Odenigbo’s infidelity gets herself and Richard, Kainene’s lover, drunk with alcohol. However, when the war started, they are able to set aside their personal grievances and fight air raids, hunger and starvation. Kainene works first as a food supplier to a refugee camp, then starts a farm and subsequently sets up an orphanage where she takes care of dispossessed, hungry and devastated men, women and children. While discharging her duties in the refugee camp, “there was manic vibrancy about the way she left for the refugee camp each day about the exhaustion that shadowed her eyes when she returned in the evenings” (Adichie, 2006:324). The above extract does not only portray Kainene as a hardworking person but a committed womanist who is dedicated to the survival of humanity in time of crises.

Olanna’s conflict with Odenigbo’s mother is not on child-bearing but Mama calls Olanna “an abnormal woman” and a witch. She is against Olanna’s marriage to her son especially as her parents sent her to the university. Why? Too much schooling ruins a woman, everyone knows that. Mama’s trouble became so much that Odenigbo feared that Olanna’s womb can be tied most frightening of all, kill her (Adichie, 2006:98). In defence of his mother, Odenigbo tells Olanna that Mama is merely an uneducated victim of their post-colonial world. Within this context, Adichie makes a womanist mark on Olanna. Instead of becoming pitiful, derelict and confrontational in the face of such virulent and combative behaviour from Mama, Olanna’s response is to leave the university quarters and get back to her flat. This exhibition of strength and courage in the face of emotional danger deviates from male writers’ portrayal of female characters as weak and naïve characters who crumble under stress and despair.

Even though Olanna’s departure provides her emotional awareness, it is not without consequences as Mama has space to operate. Mama later arranged and the son
impregnated Amala. Although Mama meant bad, this act brought reconciliation, as Olanna accepts the baby. Olanna’s attitude further affirms the fact that she considers a good family life as the matrix for a good society.

When the war starts, the demands and pressure of the war forge strong relationships. At the peak of the war, Olanna agrees to marry Odenigbo. The women too are also deeply involved at the home front. Okanna and Mrs. Muokelu start a school for displaced and traumatized children. They become a beacon of enlightenment and comfort for those children. Even when the school is bombed and subsequently used as a refugee camp, Olanna creates space in her house to continue teaching the children.

Mrs. Muokelu and Kainene are involved in “attack trade”. Kainene transported goods across the frontline between Biafra and Nigeria. She does not return home even after the war. Her search for food becomes a metaphor for search for peace and unity in the Nigerian dystopia. The inability of Kainene to come back shows that she has given herself like Moremi the Yoruba mythic heroine, as sacrifice for the unity, peace of not only her family, friends, but the refugees and the entire Nigeria at large.

**Conclusion**

Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Adichie in their novels exposed the massacres that preceded and subsequently characterized the Nigerian Civil War. They poignantly described the air raids, shelling, starvation, rape and grief that defined the thirty month war. Both authors have described how the war robbed Biafrans of their normalcy and how they continued to live and love in the thick of the war.

Bravely, unlike many accounts of liberation struggles in Africa and beyond, Emecheta and Adichie foreground the experiences of women. They write about the role sex performed in the war, about how women on both sides of the conflict are violated by marauding or bored soldiers, about how women exchanged sex for safety, favours, food etc.

The two authors have made the language of feminism a unique, not only by their narrative but by celebrating womanhood in their stories. The woman is celebrated as a person as a unique individual. Through the provisions made by art and literature in particular, the woman has space to operate and freedom to create a more realistic woman.
References


