International Journal of Latest Research in Humanities and Social Science (IJLRHSS)
Volume 06 - Issue 06, 2023
www.ijlrhss.com || PP. 317-324

Women in the Nigerian Civil War Literature: Facing the Politics of Representation

Dr. Emmanuel E. Akanwa
Department of Reading & English Language Arts
Frederick DouglassHigh School, Maryland, USA

Abstract: The Nigerian civil war, also known as the Nigerian-Biafran War, started in 1967 and lasted till 1970. It was three years of bitter existential experience, and since then, the Nigerian civil war has arguably remained the most written-about topic in Nigeria's literary and scholarly sphere. Although several works have been published on the Nigerian civil war, women's contributions in that war are yet to receive critical attention. This study examined a Nigerian civil war text, *Destination Biafra*, written by Buchi Emecheta (1994). The text highlighted the roles played by the female protagonist, Debbie; the paper argues that Debbie's role in the text is representative of the roles of women in that war and everyday life. Further, the paper questions the politics of representation, which downplays women's roles and argues the need for women to liberate themselves from all society's limitations to live to their full potential as Debbie didin *Destination Biafra*.

Key Words: Nigeria, Biafra, Civil war, Politics, Representation, Male-dominance, Patriarchal, Culture, Destination

Introduction

The Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) has attracted significant literary and critical attention. Various scholars have approached the theme of the war from diverse perspectives: Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* (1986) focuses on class struggle and inequitable distribution of Nigeria's resources; Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973) dwells on his personal experiences as a retired soldier working in Biafra as a civilian; Olusegun Obasanjo's *My Command* (1981) is the General's self-praise of how he "worked hard" to reorganize the Nigerian army and bring the war to an end. Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976) focuses on Dr. Amilo Kanu and his wife-Fatima, and their firm belief in the unity of Nigeria until the tragedies of the war forced them to change their views and accept the Biafran movement. Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) presents a complex account of the war by giving voice to the tragedy and trauma that characterized the war while also offering a humane perspective to the characters and their experiences—a balance that sustains the themes of love, hope, betrayal, loyalty, and resilience in the face of a horrific war. Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1976) details the quest for postwar survival as most people's lives were thrown upside down, with so many dead and many others thinking of the prospects for survival and a glimpse of normalcy.

However, despite the many works on the Nigerian civil war, not much critical attention has been paid to the women that lived in Nigeria and struggled in the war and everyday life. I seek to examine this lack of representation of women's struggles in this paper. The present study aims to bridge the gap in scholarship by primarily examining a Nigerian civil war text: Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1994), paying attention to how the writer represented the roles of women in the Nigerian civil war, which has otherwise received less critical attention. Arguably, the lack of or limited representation of women in the civil war discourse is due to the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society, and it is this system that Emecheta interrogates in her text, *Destination Biafra*.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first part, "The Nigerian Civil War and Literary Harvest," traces the Nigerian-Biafran war's historical promptings and the various literary works that have emerged due to the war to contextualize the literature. The second part of the paper, "The Civil War Literature: An Assessment, " examines existing scholarship on the Nigerian civil war. The final section, "Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* as representative of women's roles in the war," dwells on the heroine, Debbie, and her various roles in the civil war as representative of the roles of women in general during the Nigeria-Biafra war.

The Nigerian Civil War and Literary Harvest

Taking place seven years after Nigeria got her independence from Britain, the war was occasioned by the failure of the elite ruling class and the great disillusionment that characterized the Nigerian government following independence on October 1, 1960. Since then, the Nigerian civil war has remained a fit subject for literary scholarship, given its significant implications for Nigerians and the Nigerian cultural, social, and political reality. The many literary works that emerged due to the Nigerian civil war justify the axiom that literary creativity does not exist in a vacuum; a social situation actualizes and humanizes creativity. Similarly,

Ayi Kwei Armah— the Ghanaian writer, reminded us in *The Eloquence of the Scribes* (2006) that "the best professional works especially in the arts, grow out of the nurturing base of a tradition" (p.12). As such, the civil war experience in Nigeria has come to represent a literary tradition that will continue to draw from the experiences of those that took part in the war and those that learned of the war through literature.

The Nigerian civil war literature continues to serve as a mirror to reflect on the tragic experiences that accompanied the war. Chinyere Nwahunanya (2003) observed that:

> literature has always mirrored society, and writers have often shown concern for the convolutions that beset their societies . . . writers in the countries that have been involved in war have used the conflicts and their aftermath as source materials for creative literature" (p.125).

Here, Nwahunanya acknowledged the role of literature as a medium for recreating important societal experiences, especially tragic experiences such as war. He sees war as a veritable tool for writers' creative output and invariably implies that once there is war, there is bound to be a literary harvest recreating the tragedies of such war, and that is the case with the Nigeria civil war. Nwahunanya's exploration of the Nigerian civil war and its contributions to Nigeria's literature is published in *A Harvest From Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature* (1997). In addition to Nwahunanya's view of conflicts as a source of creative literature, Chinweizu contended that "it must be a strange war indeed that fails to produce a literature" (45). From the preceding, the civil war gave rise to various kinds of literature that reflect the experiences of the war, and this background is fundamental in understanding the context of the current study. A careful examination of Nwahunanya's and Chinweizu's assertions reveal that social events influence literary productions, be it tragic, as in the case of the civil war, or otherwise.

In his appraisal of the significance of the civil war literature, Nwahunanya concluded that "in projecting the tragic dimensions of that war as a social experience, these writers hope to make the novels perform for humanity a didactic function" (p.127). The implication, therefore, is that moral values and social relevance are essential components of the Nigerian literary experience that focus on the war. The Nigerian civil war increasingly remains an ongoing interest to writers because it has contributed significantly to the Nigerian literary scene, inspiring essays, poetry, prose, drama, and other genres. The endless list of publications about the civil war justifies why in his checklist, Craig McLuckie (1987) quoted Kole Omotoso as saying that the civil war "is the most important theme in Nigerian Literature" and even states further that "it is a period which continues to interest and thus initiate new artistic examinations of the nation's communal base. Indeed, to read Nigeria's war fiction is to observe the country's uncertainty and unease over the position and unity of a militarily won imagined community" (p. 510). The above checklist was written in 1987, but since then, many new works have emerged on the Nigeria civil war theme as writers continue to investigate the various dimensions of the war. The history of the Nigerian civil war is a fundamental aspect of Nigeria's collective history and national consciousness. In his affirmation of the dominance of the war theme, Chidi Amuta (1988) observed "that works, directly based on or indirectly deriving from the war experience, constitute the largest number of literary products on any single aspect of Nigerian history to date" (p. 85). Through literature, writers have continued to address nationhood and the issues of unresolved national tensions arising from the war as Nigeria continues to negotiate the prospects of her imagined community.

However, with the fast-growing body of Nigerian war literature, it is unfortunate that women's intellectual and physical contributions to the war have not received substantial critical attention. The contributions of women in the Nigerian civil war cut across many aspects of life in the war period, ranging from protecting their families to providing food for the soldiers, assisting with the distribution of war relief items, and working in hospitals. Flora Nwapa noted in *Never Again* (1975) that "the women especially were very active, more active than the men in fact. They made uniforms for the soldiers, cooked for the soldiers . . . and they organized the women who prayed every Wednesday for Biafra" (p.10). In addition, women struggled to survive the war despite their confrontations with existential, economic, social, and political hardships. I argue that the poor representation of women's roles in the Nigerian civil war discourse is due to the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society (Akanwa & Akanwa, 2022).

Like most African societies, Nigerian society is male-dominated, which may explain why visible contributions made by women are often overlooked. The bulk of literature written by male authors, either on the Nigerian civil war or other important social issues, consistently downplays the status of women to the sole advantage of male characters and their accomplishments. To this end, Marie Umeh (1996) bluntly asserted that "African women writers have not been treated as major contributors to the general output of war literature. In post-war writing in Nigeria, women writers are conspicuously absent . . . one does not get the impression that post-war writing comprises any other than the male sex" (quoted in Porter, p. 314). Although Umeh's focus is limited to women writers, it is important to note that Nigerian women in general (educated or not) are all involved in the experience of denied representation, misrepresentation, and underrepresentation. The poor

portrayal of female writers and characters in Nigerian literature is very troubling. Paul Zeleza's (2010) contemplation of the underrepresentation of women is informative, insightful, and thought-provokingto our understanding of the challenges of women. Zeleza explained thus:

> Despite the proliferation of literature on women, including women's history, women remain largely invisible or misrepresented in mainstream, or rather 'malestream' African history. They are either not present at all, or they are depicted as naturally inferior and subordinate, as eternal victims of male oppression" (p. 11).

Here, Zeleza observed society's deliberate silencing of women and the various efforts society puts in to ensure women are rendered inferior in Africa. Although Zeleza was referring to the African continent in general, it is crucial to note that his observation can as well be particular to the Nigerian situation, as women continue to face misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and outright sidelining. As Zeleza noted of African women, Nigerian women are often subjugated to the extent that they are "eternal victims of male oppression" (p. 11). As unfortunate as it seems, this dominant ideology exists even within literary studies and among intellectuals. According to Nwahunanya (2003), the following is true for women in literature:

> What this dominance of men in literature meant was that whenever women appeared in literature, they tended to occupy a peripheral position as wives, mothers, house-helps, prostitutes, etc, stereotypical roles which are not intended to improve the female image, but which rather underline the superiority of the male in the social structure (p.193)

The inglorious portrayal of women in this light is an extension of the various societal representations of women that have been fueled by the dictates of patriarchy for generations. Further, these stereotypical attitudes are perpetuated by male writers due to their membership in male-centered society strata. In their introduction to *Beyond Tradition: African Women and Cultural Spaces*, Toyin Falola and S.U Fwatshak (2011) assert "that African women live under deplorable conditions: they are dominated, oppressed, and exploited by men in the patriarchy-constructed world of Africa" (xv). The authors used "African women" as a generic term to represent women's experiences in the continent; however, their assertion holds firm, particularly in the Nigerian women's existential experiences. The authors argued that the biggest challenge facing women in Nigeria is the society's construction of their identity and its implication to how women are received and perceived. The tragedy of most Nigerian women is the cultural inhibitions that keep them in constant subjugation. Consequently, "the fate of characters become tied up either with their acquiescence in their society's cultural norms, their acceptance of its prescriptions, or even their questioning and rejection of such norms and prescriptions" (Nwahunanya, p.192).

Nigerian—women, like their African sisters, have constantly been confronted with a plethora of limiting factors ranging from colonialism, neocolonialism, and suppression by a cultural ideology that sees women as subordinates, incapable of assuming serious roles independent of the men. Violet Ekpe (2011) added that "the status of women in Africa has been often interpreted as that of beasts of burden, exploited, humiliated and denigrated through the bondage of multiple births, oppressive and exploitative wifery, social inequality and political nullification" (p. 89). Ekpe's description of the status of women in Africa, and arguably, Nigeria, is quite significant as she draws attention to most of the factors of oppression that characterize women in the dominant patriarchal culture. In her description, women are exploited in every aspect of their social life, thus denying them their very humanity. Like Ekpe, Carole Davies (1990) observed that "the condition of women in African society is fraught with contradictions, tensions and oppositions, most arising out of the colonial domination of Africa, others intrinsic to the organizational structures of particular societies" (p. 241). The contradictions and oppositions facing African women in general, and Nigerian women, embrace all aspects of life: political, religious, social, and economic, thereby placing women in marginal and subservient positions. With this prevailing culture of opposition and domination, the Nigerian woman is trapped in a complex struggle for self-emancipation. The journey toward this emancipation has not been an easy one.

Given the social ideology of patriarchy and its enslaving tendencies, women have responded by producing literary works that are, in part reactionary and revolutionary. This type of writing tends to reposition the status of women in a society characterized by imperial, colonial, postcolonial, cultural, racial, and gender restrictions. Their revolutionary writing is in keeping with the observation that literary creativity does not exist in a vacuum because there is a social situation that actualizes and humanizes creativity. Therefore, women have risen to their rightful place in society by ensuring their voices are loud and heard. While justifying the cause of women's agitations, Mary Kolawale (1997) stated:

> They are clearly deconstructing imperialistic images of the African, rejecting liminal negative images of women that are prevalent in African literature by men and they are reacting to mainstream Western feminism. Having broken the yoke of voicelessness,
>
> these women are speaking out (p.193)

Having moved beyond society's limitations and attained a new status, the Nigerian women (including Buchi Emecheta of *Destination Biafra*) are now speaking out against the existing patriarchal system and advocating for a peaceful, equitable co-existence while emphasizing women's abilities as agents of change and national unity. Despite these cultural and ideological practices that limit the prospects for women's emancipation, the twentieth century up to the twenty-first century has witnessed significant attention and recognition of the rights of women. Following the United Nations Decade for Women, Gloria Chukwu (1995) observed that:

> Attention was drawn not only to the need to grant great freedom and more privileges to womenfolk throughout the world, but also to the need to study the role of women in society, their problems, and the best way to enable them to participate effectively in their own self-actualization, as well as in their societies and in the world at large (p. 37).

Given the above background, the current study examines women and the politics of representation in Nigerian civil war literature. The study argues that in exploring the roles of women in war literature, Buchi Emecheta is, in the words of Carole Davies (1990), "telling one's own story . . . even further" (242). As such, the new wave of African feminism/womanism is a careful attempt to tell women's stories in their own voices. Added to the need to inscribe their identity and humanity devoid of stereotypes is the concerted effort to arrive at a point in women's history where Nigerian women would no longer be viewed as "facile lack-lustre human beings, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters" (Chukwuma, 1990, p. 131). Chukwuma captures the plight of the Nigerian woman against societal expectations of child-bearing and emphasizes the crucial need for Nigerian women to move beyond this construct. Thus, the female writer has succeeded in moving beyond history to *herstory* to reach "the perspective of African feminist discourse which seeks to deconstruct imperialistic images of the African, rejecting liminal and negative images of women prevalent in the fiction by men" (Emenyonu, 2004, p. xii). Within this context of Nigerian civil war literature, I examine Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. The following section briefly examines existing scholarship on civil war literature to which the present study seeks to contribute.

The Nigerian Civil War Literature: An Assessment

For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it must always be heard

__James Baldwin

Several writers have argued the need to justify civil war literature as a unique genre. John Harley (2011) asserted that in the absence of a similar forum like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "time and art, may by default have become the only effective means to digest the poison of the past and to slowly heal from within the damage that has been done" (p. 16). Harley's position points to the healing potentials of war literature, believing it helps survivors to move beyond the sad memories caused by war. Again, the literature on the Nigerian civil war is significant because, as Dominick LaCapra (2001) observed that "the past is significant in its bearing in the present and future to the extent that it makes contact with problems of memory" (p. 95). Here, LaCapra draws attention to the fact that memories from a traumatic past are essential in defining a people's past and determining their future. By implication, re-creating past experiences in literature helps the survivors of such traumatic experiences work through them and lead better lives. Therefore, war literature could also serve as a lesson for future generations. Beyond its healing tendencies, civil war literature is quintessential in that it sustains an ongoing process of national reconciliation/debate with the aggrieved and marginalized groups. To this end, Osaghae and Onwudiwe (2002) noted that "the war continues to be the point of reference in political discourses, not only on what has emerged as the 'Igbo Question' which some argue can only be fully resolved when the Igbo are allowed to have their independent state, but also on such issues as fiscal federalism, resource control and distribution, minority emancipation, and true federalism" (4). From their point of view, war literature serves as a constant reminder of the many issues of inequalities and marginalization that caused the war and how such national ills are still prevalent in the present times.

The Nigerian civil war has been recreated in all modes of literary representation—poetry, drama, prose, essays, and autobiographies. In all their various manifestations, the writers have succeeded in representing the war in part or its entirety. As indicated, the present study examines the status and roles of women in the civil war and argues that, unlike their male counterparts, women still are not given critical attention in the war narratives. In this section, I explored Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. Through her heroine, Debbie, Emecheta depicts the invaluable roles of women in the Nigerian civil war and posits a new status for Nigerian women. In her remarks on *Destination Biafra*, Grace Okereke (1994) asserted that in addition to "the sub themes that build

up the major theme of war—the corrupt Nigerian politics and neo-colonialism," another concern of Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* is "the new role of women in the survival of a nation" (p. 146). Although Okereke noted some flaws in the novel, she however, admitted that "Emecheta has successfully carved out a place for women writers and for women in general" (p. 156), and that observation is at the core of this paper which focuses on interrogating the politics of representation against the backdrop of male intellectual, cultural, historical, and political domination.

Similarly, while attesting to the significance of Emecheta's novel, Abioseh Porter (1996) unequivocally stated that "where most male writers devote attention to the events of the war and the aftermath of such events, Emecheta looks back to explain, albeit in fictional terms, the reason behind the war and the role of women in the war" (p. 314). Porter's argument is significant in that it speaks not only about the causes of the war but also pays attention to the various roles women played in the war effort, which the current paper seeks to investigate. Porter argued that women were central to the civil war through their intellectual and physical contributions; he aptly highlighted Emecheta's attribution of the war to failed male leadership and reinforced the revolutionary ideal that where Nigeria's male ruling class has failed, women were capable of stepping into the challenge of leadership, governance, and war, if need be.

In addition to Porter's position, Ann Adams (2001) asserted that "*Destination Biafra*, perhaps more than any other Anglophone work, attempts to redress the gendered bias of discourse on the war as well as the 'gender' of military warfare itself . . . it is a thinly fictionalized allegory that closely follows the rise and fall of military regimes" (p. 288). For Adams, Emecheta's work is a timely contribution, given that it presents the role of women in the military and points to the collapsing nature of male-dominated military regimes. Adams further noted that through this novel, Emecheta "clearly charts the various internal fissures and schisms within Nigeria and the recently formulated Biafra" and bewails how "foreign intervention" influenced this national tension (p. 288). Okereke, Porter, and Adams acknowledge *Destination Biafra* as a significant, timely contribution to the war genre. However, Nwachukwu-Agbada (1996) is critical of the work. In his criticism of *Destination Biafra*, Nwachukwu-Agbada argued that "Emecheta's portrayal of Debbie is quixotic and her actions hardly tenable in the real world" (393). From this critic's position, the success of *Destination Biafra* does not lie in the feminist endeavor of the author and her heroine. Hence, he sees Debbie's actions as unrealistic.

Beyond the causes of the war, other writers have recreated literary pieces that reflect the tragedy of that war and its traumatic effects on victims and survivors. For instance, Chris Abani's *Song For Night* (2007) presented the devastating nature of the war through the lenses of his Fifteen-year-old protagonist, My Luck. Abani's child soldier protagonist informs us as we follow his experiences and transformations in the war that "We are simply fighting to survive the war. It is a strange place to be at fifteen, bereft of hope and very nearly of your humanity" (19). As My Luck is drawn deeper into the tragedy of the civil war, he constantly feels the pain of losing his morality and humanity, and at the end of it, he tells us, "war and its attendant deviance hasn't made me braver, only more callous. If any of my men could see me now, they would spit at my feet. The sign for cowardice" (141), regrettably lamenting disappointment "fuck this war, I think. Fuck it all" (165). From his tone of hopelessness and sheer disappointment in the war, My Luck spent the remaining part of his life bewailing the losses and trauma that accompanied the war in which he was involved. He remained plagued by the trauma of the war until the ghost of his mother welcomed him to join her in the other world.

In *African Authenticity and the Biafran Experience* (2008), Chimamanda Adichie notes, "the war is not mere history to me, it is also a memory, for I grew up in the shadow of Biafra. I knew vaguely about the war as a child—that my grandparents had died, that my parents had lost everything they owned . . .. I was aware of how this war haunted my family, how it colored the paths our lives had taken" (6). Through these lines, Adichie creates a mental picture in her readers to enable them to understand and come to terms with the reality of existence during the Nigerian civil war. Though she was a child during the war, her memories are horrific, as her family's existence (just like others) was characterized by deaths, loss, and a future devoid of hope.

Similarly, in his reading of Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, Clement Okafor (2008) drew attention to the trajectories of sufferings that characterized the Igbo people's lives during the Nigerian civil war. Okafor stated that during the war, the Igbos suffered, among other things, hunger, deaths, displacement, insecurity, diseases, and several other pervading social *malaise*. Most works published on the Nigerian civil war bewailed the themes of hopelessness, dehumanization, and loss, which characterize the war. In *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Chukwuemeka Ike presented the disgusting and degenerate physical appearance of Halima, a woman whose husband was captured by the Nigerian troops, underscoring the horrific nature of the war on her as she experienced indescribable suffering, shame, and indignity. In their various accounts of the war, different writers used their works to paint a graphic picture of the unimaginable loss the Igbos experienced. By studying these works, people could learn from past mistakes, which could help prevent further wars in Nigeria. However, if not, the civil war literature can be studied for knowledge of Nigeria's history; for Michelle Foucault (1973) reminded us that "all knowledge is rooted in a life, a society, and a language that have a history; and it is in that

very history that knowledge finds the elements enabling it to communicate with other forms of life, other types of society, other significations" (p. 372).

The above literature and background are necessary as they presented not only some historical and literary explorations of the war, but they also touched on the traumatic implications of the war and the politics of representation that characterized the roles of women in that war. The next section discusses "Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* as representative of women's roles in the Nigerian-Biafran war."

Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* as Representative of Women's Roles in the Nigerian Biafra Civil War 1967-1970

Like most African countries, Nigeria is primarily patriarchal in nature, structure, and function. A unique characteristic of the patriarchal system is unequal power relations between males and females (Ekpenyong, 2017). In all patriarchal societies, women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. The males hold power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and property control (Obiora and Onwuyi 2018), and the more significant implication is that women end up playing subservient roles as second-class citizens. Notwithstanding the persistent influence of patriarchal and cultural practices in Nigeria and their impact on women, some progress has been made in the male-female relational dynamic. In a recent study, Offiong, Eyo, and Offiong (2021) argued:

> Despite the several progressive actions by various regimes and world organizations to redress women's conditions, the institutional environment dominated by men contradicts gender politics. The various acts perpetuated under customary laws have frustrated, discriminated, and impeded the social development of women in several communities across the nation. (85)

From all ramifications, women's voices have been historically silenced in crucial matters of politics and nationhood. Although this systemic practice may not be unique to Nigeria, it raises the question of gender as a constructed category. Further, it begs the question of what society gains by putting women down by institutionalizing barriers to women's advancement and assertion of their voices and humanity.

From the reviewed literature to the critical contributions of various authors and the over-arching patriarchal dominance of the Nigerian cultural and political landscape, it is evident that recognizing women's roles in Nigeria's historic and most important war has remained a herculean task to the political-cultural players. A careful reading of the novel *Destination Biafra* reveals the author's creation of a fully prepared female protagonist who was determined to engage in the war effort at a time and place when it was not socially acceptable for women to fight in wars due to ascribed gender roles and cultural inhibitions. While war is a holistic human experience witnessed by males and females, its tragedies experienced by all, and its aftermath leaves an enduring impression, it does appear that the re-creation of that experience in literature has remained a male prerogative, especially in the case of Nigeria. Jane Bryce (1991) had earlier raised the question, asking if the paucity of extensive literature on the war by women was because the 'social experience' of the war was not shared in the same way by men and women. Bryce further extended her question, "Does this, in turn, suggest a further questioning of the 'imagined community,' in the light of men's and women's experiences of the war, and their view of it as a fit subject for fiction? (p. 1).

In the novel, Emecheta engages the politics of representation and the cultural *status quo* that privileges the accomplishments of men and undermines those of women, not only in the war narrative but also in most aspects of social experience. The Nigerian civil war literature presents a divergent perspective as different authors approached the war theme from their unique experiences and perspectives; however, by creating and empowering her protagonist-heroine-soldier, Emecheta's account becomes unusual given that "Emecheta makes a daring choice to reconceptualise the home and/or battlefront dichotomy. By manipulating the representational genre convention of soldier-hero she subverts its archetypal masculinity" (Moji,2014, p. 1). Arguably, Debbie comes as a scathing shock to the society which expects women to play marginal-subservient roles—she embodied courage, charisma, intellect, and bravery needed to confront the challenges of the war. To that end, "Debbie entered the war scene to challenge the dominant culture and colonial notion of female inferiority and give voice and agency to women in the Nigerian patriarchal society" (Akanwa & Akanwa, 2022, p. 6). Given her roles in the novel, Debbie helped to rewrite the narrative of male dominance as the only actor in the Nigeria civil war literature and further situated the invaluable contributions of women in the war and even beyond.

In the author's reflection, Emecheta stated, "I am glad this work is at last published; it is different from my other books; the subject is, as they say, "masculine," but I feel a great sense of achievement in having completed it (p. viii). The joy of completing *Destination Biafra* as a text on "masculine" subject is arguably Emecheta's most significant achievement as a feminist scholar. However, that joy raises the question of why the text nearly did not see the light of publication. Why did she consider this book as one that had to be written?

Perhaps it had to be written because women writers were fed up with lopsided misrepresentations of the female gender in matters of social significance. Moreso, it had to be written because:

> Within the context of postcolonial African literature, women's writing is portrayed as a process of 'writing back' to a canon that represents women as apolitical conduits of tradition. In Debbie, Emecheta foregoes canonical markers of African 'authenticity' to create a liminal figure that negotiates her identity between modernity and tradition; masculinity and femininity (Moji, 2014, p. 1).

By negotiating her identify, navigating the civil war terrain, and contending with the politics of the civil war, Debbie aptly situated herself in readiness for the paradigm shift in the male-female relational dichotomy of the Nigerian state. And that was central to what Emecheta wanted to achieve with her character—an empowered woman, ready to take up the challenge to restructure and redraw the persisting relational-cultural-imbalanced dynamic. Further:

> Destination Biafra becomes a revolutionary text that projects the heroine's roles, celebrates women's contributions, questions the status quo, and serves as a catalyst to inspire other women to action. While the social systems of discrimination against women are primarily at play in today's Nigerian society, it is time women stood up to assert themselves and get involved in politics, governance, and leadership (Akanwa & Akanwa, 2022, p. 8).

Conclusion

For decades, the Nigerian-Biafran-civil war (1967-1970) has attracted scholarly and critical attention and has remained a ripe subject for literary productions and critical discourses, especially in the Nigerian literary sphere. While the civil war literature is primarily dominated by the voices and perspectives of male writers as actors, it is worth stating that women played significant roles in that war, and arguably, their roles and contributions have not been seriously explored and represented. This perceived underrepresentation of women in the civil war genre is what I have described as the politics of underrepresentation. Through the character Debbie, Emecheta challenged that underrepresentation and established the memorable roles of women transcending the civil war era and its political and literary discourse. By all implications, Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* depicted Debbie as an embodiment of critical values, virtues, and dispositions that characterize the modern-day educated woman who is opposed to the suppressive tendencies of male domination, and that character, by extension, represents all hard-working, socially-active, and intellectually-engaged women who are committed to sustaining the boundaries of social cohesion, despite all odds. By revisiting the stories of heroines such as Debbie and the critical contributions of female writers like Emecheta and others, it is hoped that the Nigerian society, albeit patriarchal, could begin the process of revisiting and rewriting its history to include a balance of voices and perspectives as both males and females played significant roles during Nigeria's most trying political and existential period.

References

[1]. Akanwa, E.E. & Akanwa, I. E. (2022). Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*: A Discourse on the Roles of Women in the Nigeria Civil War Literature and Contemporary Implications. *Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies, 9*(3), 1-11.

[2]. Armah, A. K. (2006). *The Eloquence of the Scribes: A Memoir on the Sources and Resources of African Literature*. Senegal: Per Ankh-The African Publishing Cooperative.

[3]. Adichie, C. N. (2008). African "Authenticity" and the Biafran Experience. *Transition, 99,* 42–53. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20204260

[4]. Amuta, C. (1988). Literature of the Nigerian civil war. *Perspectives in Nigerian Literature 1700 to the Present, 1*Lagos: Guardian Books, 85-92.

[5]. Adams, A.M. (2001). It's a Woman's War: Engendering Conflicts in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. *Callaloo, 24*(2), 287-300.

[6]. Abani, C. (2007). *Song for Night*. New York, NY: Akashic Books.

[7]. Bryce, J. (1991). Conflict and contradiction in women's writing on the Nigerian civil war. *African Languages and Cultures, 4*(1), 29–42. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1771679

[8]. Chukwu, G. (1995). Women in the Economy of Igboland, 1900 to 1970: A Survey. *African Economic History*, 23.

[9]. Chukwuma, H. (1990). Voices and choices: The feminist dilemma in four African novels. *Literature and Black Aesthetics, 5*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.

[10]. Davies, C.B. (1990). Motherhood in the works of male and female Igbo writers: Achebe, Emecheta, Nwapa and Nzekwu. *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. Ed. Carole B. Davies and Anne Adams. New Jersey, NJ: Africa World Press.

[11]. Emenyonu, E. N. (2004). *New Women's Writing in African Literature*. New Jersey, NJ: Africa World Press.
[12]. Ekpe, V.I. (2011). Colonialism and the Social Status of Women in Southeastern Nigeria: The Ibibio Women Experience. *Shaping our Struggles: Nigerian Women in History, Culture and Social Change.* Eds. Obioma Nnaemeka and Chima J. Korieh. New Jersey, NJ: Africa World Press.
[13]. Ekpenyong, V. O., Ebinyi, D. W., & Ushie, G. B. (2017). Gender equality and the empowerment of women for sustainable development in Nigeria. *Education for Today: Journal of Faculty of Education,13*(3), 10- 17.
[14]. Foucault, M. (1973). *The Order of Things*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
[15]. Falola, T., & Fwatshak, S.U. (2011). *Beyond Tradition: African Women and Cultural Spaces.* New Jersey, NJ: Africa World Press.
[16]. Harley, J. (2011). Biafra as heritage and symbol: Adichie, Mbachu and Iweala, *Research in African Literatures, 39*(2), 15-26.
[17]. Ike, C. (1976). *Sunset at Dawn*. London: Collins and Harvill.
[18]. Kolawale, M.E. (1997). *Womanism and African Consciousness*. New Jersey, NJ: Africa World Press.
[19]. LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing History, Writing Trauma.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP.
[20]. Moji, P. B. (2014). Gender-based genre conventions and the critical reception of Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (Nigeria). *Literator: Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies*, *35*(1), 1-7.
[21]. McLuckie, C. (1987). A preliminary checklist of primary and secondary sources on Nigerian civil war/Biafran war literature. *Research in African Literature*, *18*(4), 510-527.
[22]. Nwapa, F. (1975). *Never Again*. London: Heinemann.
[23]. Nwahunanya, C. (2003). *Tragedyin the Anglophone West African Novel*. Owerri: Springfield.
[24]. Nwachukwu-Agbada J.O.J. (1996). Buchi Emecheta: Politics, War, and Feminism in *Destination Biafra.Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* Ed. Marie Umeh. New Jersey, NJ: Africa WorldPress, 387-394
[25]. Nwahunanya, C. (1997). *A Harvest from Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War.* Owerri: Springfield.
[26]. Obiora C. A., Onwuyi U. M. (2018). Contending and conceptual issues in politics of gender.In *Contemporary Gender Issues* Emeka Obi et al (eds), Onitsha: Abbot Com Ltd. 2018.
[27]. Osaghae, E., Onwudiwe, E.., & Suberu, R. (2002). *The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath*. Ibadan: John Archers Publishers.
[28]. Okereke, G. (1994). The Nigerian civil war and the female imagination: Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. *Feminism in African Literatures: Essays on Criticism.* Ed. Helen Chukwuma. Enugu: New Generation Books.
[29]. Okafor, C. (2008). Sacrifice & the Contestation of Identity in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset atDawn.War in African Literature Today26*, 33-48.
[30]. Offiong, E.E., Eyo, E. I., & Offiong, A. E. (2021). Patriarchy, culture and the social development of women in Nigeria. *Journal of art, humanity, and social studies, 1*(4), 79-86.
[31]. Porter, A. (1996). They were there too: Women and the civil war(s) in *Destination Biafra. Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta.* Ed. Marie Umeh (Ed), New Jersey, NJ: Africa World Press.
[32]. Zeleza, P.T. (2010). Gender biases in African historiography. *African Women: A Reader*. Chima, J. Korieh (Ed), California: Cognella.