

**Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*: A Discourse on the Roles of  
Women in the Nigeria Civil War Literature and Contemporary  
Implications**

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**Abstract**

*The Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) has remained a ripe subject for literary discourses and has been represented in various literary productions—drama, prose, poetry, essays, and other genres. Despite the plethora of articles that have been written on the civil war subject, the roles played by women in that war are yet to receive due critical attention. Against the male-dominated narratives of the Nigeria civil war, this paper uses Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* to demonstrate the roles played by women in that war. Through her heroine, Debbie, Emecheta asserts the invaluable contributions of women during Nigeria's most trying period, the Nigeria-Biafra war.*

**Keywords: Nigeria civil way; Biafra; Narrative; Discrimination; Gender expectations; Patriarchy; Protest; cultural inhibitions; subservient status; Tradition; male-dominance; self-assertion.**

## Introduction

The Nigeria civil war lasted from July 1967 to January 1970. Seven years after Nigeria's independence from Britain, the Nigeria civil war, otherwise known as the Nigeria-Biafra war, was occasioned by the failure of the elite ruling class and the disillusionment that characterized the Nigerian government and the Nigerian state following independence on October 1, 1960. Because of differing political ideologies and the killings of the Igbo people (Southeasterners) residing in the Northern parts of Nigeria, and following several failed attempts to maintain peace, fairness, and justice, it became almost impossible for the country to co-exist as one. Consequently, with increased economic, ethnic, cultural, social, and religious conflicts escalating all over the country, the Igbos decided to break away from and opted to declare the new republic of Biafra, which led to the war with the Nigerian military government.

Since then, the Nigerian civil war has remained a fit subject of discussion for literary scholarship, given the more significant implications of that war on Nigeria's religious, ethnic, economic, social, and political psyche. The plethora of literary works that have emerged due to the Nigerian civil war justify the hypothesis that literary creativity does not exist in a vacuum; there is always social conditioning that actualizes and humanizes creativity, be they pleasant or unpleasant. In *The Eloquence of the Scribes*, AyiKweiArmah—the celebrated Ghanaian writer, reminds us that "the best professional works especially in the arts, grow out of the nurturing base of a tradition" (12). Nigeria's civil war experience represents 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.

Further, the civil war narrative could be viewed as a tradition that has been nurtured to engage literary creativity and critical reaction as the country's elite continues to negotiate the various ramifications of that war through literary productions in the form of poetry, drama, prose, and film, among other genres and outlets. To foreground the text's nuances and its contribution to scholarship, the remaining sections of this paper will explore a textual discourse of *Destination Biafra*—the heroine's role in the text; contemporary implications of the heroine's roles; and the conclusion.

## The Text, *Destination Biafra*-A fictional Representation

*Destination Biafra* (1982, republished 1994) is Buchi Emecheta's fictional representation of the Nigerian civil war. In the novel, Emecheta examines the failed political situation in the country occasioned by power rivalry between the leaders and various zones of the country. The book portrays three major ethnic groups in Nigeria: the Hausas from the North, the Igbos from the East, and the Yorubas from the West. Each ethnic group has its dominant political party at the time, but with a Hausa man as the nation's Head of State. Several factors militated against the

unity of Nigeria as a country, given its multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-religious setup. Of the various conflicts that arose, the incessant killings of the Easterners—the Igbos residing in the Northern part of the country were the last straw that triggered a secession. In protesting the killing of the Igbo people and the inequitable distribution of the nation's wealth, the Igbos broke away from Nigeria after many failed attempts to settle the irreconcilable differences.

In *The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath*, Osaghae, Onwudiwe, and Suberu, attributed the war to "the so-called mistake of 1914 and its attendant malcontents—as well as the unrestrained conflicts over control of state power" (3), but state further that "however, it was the proclamation of the independence of the Eastern region of Nigeria, christened the Independent Republic of Biafra by the military governor of the region . . . that proved the final trigger for the war" (3). Their observation provides some historical context for the war, especially in their reference to the 1914 Almagamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria by Lord Lugard, which invariably brought people with diverse cultures, languages, religious beliefs, and lifestyles together.

Osaghae et al. presentation of the war account seems limited in scope and perhaps, biased about the factors that served as causes of the war. Arguably, they did not state the actual problems— marginalization of the Igbo people, nor did they point out the incessant killings of the Igbos by the Hausas, which became a final trigger for the war. Arguably, they suggested that the mere proclamation of the Independent Republic of Biafra was the cause of the war; however, that conclusion should be questioned as there have been several cases of mal-treatments of the Igbo people without any end in sight. All attempts to resolve the conflict proved abortive (Feuser, 1978).

For example, leaders of the federal government of Nigeria and the secessionist Biafran leader converged in Aburi, Ghana, on January 4 and 5, 1967, "to agree on what is now known as Aburi Accord. The meeting at Aburi was supposed to be the last opportunity to avoid any conflict or civil war. Unfortunately, it was not to be" (Akinbode, 2021, n.d.), as the Yakubu Gowon-led federal government did not comply with the agreed-upon Aburi agreement. At this point, the civil war was both imminent and inevitable, hence, the Biafran leader, Odumegwu Ojukwu, declared the republic of Biafra. Buchi Emecheta wrote the account of that war via the lens of her female protagonist, Debbie. The following section explores the roles of Debbie in that war as a female protagonist and woman-soldier.

### **The Heroine's Role in the Text as Representative of the Roles of Women in the War**

In the foreword to *Destination Biafra*, Emecheta states, "this book is simply one that had to be written"(vii), arguably, because accounting for the roles of women in the historic Nigeria civil war was long overdue. The story needed to serve as an outlet used to showcase the

contributions of women during the war. This narrative is significant because, for the most part, stories of the war were told by male folks. In this fictional representation of the Nigerian civil war, Emecheta, through her heroine, Debbie Ogedemgbe, an Oxford graduate, and the daughter of a fictional Nigerian wealthy finance minister, portrays the invaluable roles women played in the war as agents of change and unity in a wantonly divided country.

Debbie's character represents women's courage to join the military to save the lives of innocent civilians despite opposition from family and society. Note that the Nigerian community at the time was principally male-dominated, and women did not take part in severe national issues such as war. However, Emecheta opposed that status quo by showing how robust, courageous, forthright, and invaluable women could be in matters of national significance. Debbie embodied those values and virtues Emecheta artistically created an unconventional female character who, by extension, could be viewed as representative of the women who participated in that war.

Given the patriarchal nature of Nigeria, her creation of a female-military-ready-protagonist-Debbie could be viewed as a threat to and a deviation from Nigeria's cultural norms, which attracted serious literary and cultural criticism. Nwachukwu-Agbada suggests that Emecheta's portrayal of Debbie is quixotic, and her actions are hardly tenable in the real world (393); notwithstanding, her actions in the war are quite laudable as she confronted a system that did not value the roles and contributions of women in political or national affairs. Using the protagonist, Debbie, as a focal point, Emecheta criticizes Nigeria's patriarchal system, post-independence disillusionment, and the failure of the country's military leadership in addressing national concerns and strengthening the unity of the nation.

Buchi Emecheta also uses the novel to draw attention to the chaotic nature of the country under military leadership and implies that leaders could not handle national matters appropriately. Also, the Hausa leaders' privileging of ethnic sentiments over national unity further triggered the war. The novel further exposes the ideological differences that exist among social classes and genders in Nigeria. Because, as the text suggests, the Nigerian society was patriarchal in nature; all the actors in the war, including Saka Momoh, Chijioke Abosi, Lawal, Macdonald, and all the soldiers are men. Ironically, Nwachukwu-Agbada misses this gender bias, arguing that "it is merely a coincidence that the internal politicians and their international collaborators are males" (392). Thus, in this male-dominated war theater, Emecheta's female protagonist challenges the *status quo* as she attempts to restore national peace through her efforts.

For example, Debbie's interrogation of Chijioke Abosi (the Biafran leader that led the secession), when he rejects her advice to stop the war and save the poor masses from starvation and death, exposes patriarchal bias. Debbie asks, "Tell me, if I were a man, a man born almost thirty years ago, a graduate of politics, sociology and philosophy from Oxford, England, would you have dismissed my mission?" (Emecheta 277). The novel, therefore, takes the form of a

protest against discrimination and male domination so that through this medium, we appreciate women's role in that war. Through this protest, the author posits a new dimension of leadership, questions patriarchy, and redefines gender roles.

Another significant contribution of the author to this war literature is the portrayal of independent women who resist subjugations occasioned by colonialism, neocolonialism, and patriarchy. Emecheta's portrayal of Debbie is a feminist endeavor to give agency to women even at the height of patriarchal opposition. Debbie and her actions in the war profusely conform to Leelah Gandhi's assertion that "Feminist and postcolonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, and they have each progressively welcomed the poststructuralist invitation to refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/colonial authority constructs itself" (83). Emecheta's novel inverts patriarchal hierarchies to advocate for a society that is devoid of gender restrictions and cultural biases against women. Through the character Debbie, Emecheta draws attention to gender bias in the representation of women in civil war literature, and in her criticism of the portrayal of male heroism in the civil war discourse, Jane Bryce observes that:

Texts by male writers, whether they endorse the notion of Biafra, like Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, or question it, nonetheless promotes a form of heroism that draws directly on the involvement of a male protagonist in the events of the war. There is an intrinsic and inevitable distancing of women. (32)

Contrary to the traditional-patriarchal notion that heroism is exclusively a male trait, Emecheta's Debbie embodies heroism and rises beyond the limits of gender, cultural inhibitions, and male dominance to confront a national cause. Debbie's actions indicate a writer's attempt to bring to focus the challenges, experiences, and traumas that women face; it also points to the fact that being a woman does not in any way prevent one from taking up responsibilities and making sacrifices that are necessary for societal cohesion.

Further, the author artistically embarks on a redefinition and a renegotiation of gender roles in a postcolonial Nigerian society. In this regard, Obioma Nnaemeka observes that, "It is not a paradox to exercise freedom within limits as these independent women, who are reformers and catalysts for change, are doing within the context of their cultural boundaries. Their feminism is what I call feminism of negotiations-negofeminism" (107). The notion of negofeminism is achieved by Emecheta's heroine as she confronts the prevailing patriarchal, engages in the war efforts, challenges oppressive systems, redefines women's roles, and negotiates with society's most pressing needs at the time of war and national upheaval.

In this negotiation, Debbie returns from England to encounter the turbulent political situation in her country. As a female scholar from a prestigious university, the patriarchal society in which she produces expects Debbie to be least concerned about the workings of politics and its instability, given that politics is a masculine engagement. But she returns to



identify with a political crisis that would invariably lead to war. Therefore, it is not out of place to ask what Debbie is doing in the war situation and why she must be directly involved, abandoning her degree and the protection of her father's wealth to pursue a military life with its attendant insecurity.

In answering the question of "Why Debbie"? it is essential to underscore that the Nigerian society in which the novel is set is one that just became independent after a long period of colonization. The colonial legacies bequeathed to the country were built on the ideals of patriarchy, which accounts for why women could not participate in governance at the time. In keeping with this ideology, society did not welcome Debbie's plans to join the military, and even when she eventually joined, one of the male soldiers reminded her, "whatever you do, however much you are armed and in command now, you are still a woman" (75). Is it not surprising to hear a soldier say such words to a fellow armed soldier? This idea of "you are still a woman" further reveals the level of discrimination experienced by women during the war and in society at large. This colonial ideology and sexual stereotype are well captured in the words of Ashis Nandy: "Colonialism, too, was congruent with the existing Western sexual stereotypes and the philosophy of life which they represented. It produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity" (4). Therefore, 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.

Debbie's involvement in the war and her military orientation spread all over the country and that was quite troubling to her mother, Stella Ogedemgbe. Mrs. Ogedemgbe represented an older generation engrossed with the ideals of patriarchy and the acceptance and internalization of the subservient status of women in society. Speaking from the stance of the dominant influence of colonialism/patriarchy, Mrs. Ogedemgbe laments her disapproval of the military life of her daughter, Debbie: "I don't know what has come over you girls. We all want freedom for women, but I doubt if we are ready for this type of freedom where young women smoke and carry guns instead of looking after husbands and nursing babies" (104). The emphasis on marriage and motherhood had been at the core of society's expectations of women; that is all Stella Ogedemgbe wanted from her Oxford university-trained daughter. However, in her quest to ensure the unity of her country in a time of war, Debbie chooses not to marry; instead, she opts to defend helpless victims of the war. If sacrificing one's personal security in service to others in society is one of the attributes of a patriot or nationalist, certainly, Debbie represents that figure.

Debbie's enlistment in the army represents a new woman; specifically, and most importantly, she is an empowered woman, committed to the ideals of feminism, fairness, and justice. She used her skills, knowledge, and ability to challenge the cultural *status quo* and its perception of women, thereby lending voice and agency as sources of encouragement to many. As Chimalum Nwankwo observed, "Feminism challenges, with justification, the secondary status of women in all societies" (151). Nwankwo's assertion is significant because he

recognizes the crucial roles feminist movements and agitations could play in helping to situate the rightful position of women in society while questioning the basis for the discrimination meted against women by mainstream society. By implication, the feminist movement and ideology are justified and must be supported by well-meaning organizations, including Nigeria.

Rising above the subservient status society places on women is crucial to feminist and womanist movements. Thus, a critical discussion of *Destination Biafra* is important in any contemporary discourses on women's roles in Nigeria's society and literary studies. In fact, Emecheta's narrative conforms to Ama Ata Aidoo's assertion that female writers should concern themselves with the acts of: "exposing the sexist tragedy of women history, protesting the ongoing degradation of women, celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities, and above all, unfolding a revolutionary vision of their roles (qtd. in Temitope Balogun, 164). Aidoo is uncompromising in her attempt to empower women writers to use their literary media to question the various degradations and oppressions faced by women in societies. She suggests that women should rise to confront the restrictions societies place on them and take their rightful position while using their physical and intellectual abilities to the fullest, in so far as these values benefit them and their societies. Further, Aidoo wants women to move beyond and expose "the sexist tragedy" that has shaped women's history and inscribe their roles as revolutionaries and agents of positive social change.

In keeping with Aidoo's assertion, Debbie's role in the narrative implicates her as a person that cannot be limited by the dictates of society; she therefore is determined to "protest the ongoing degradation of women" and to "unfold a revolutionary vision of her roles" (164). Thus, she achieves great success in the war and symbolizes an enduring contribution of women in the physical and intellectual reality of the Nigerian-Biafran war. Because of this, Emecheta's narrative and her heroine's actions represent what Temitope Balogun describes as an attempt "to break the African women's silences and marginalization. The trend is to locate the African woman at a vantage point and celebrate many of her achievements which tradition, religion, attitudes, and colonialism have glossed over" (164). Debbie's commitment to and actions during the war could be better understood from Ada Azodo's perspective, "the 'new' Nigerian woman in search of her identity in the contemporary society, which is very different from the society of the past" (242). Thus, the "new" woman is faced with a new role and a new identity that inspires a sense of national service, hence, her decision to get fully involved in the war when it was not feasible. Debbie was raped during the war; however, that trauma did not prevent her from fighting for the unity of her beloved country—a perspective was always glossed over by the male actors and narrators.

Furthermore, Debbie's remark to Alan Grey, who advises her to mediate between the warring leaders, reveals her awareness of her new role. She tells Alan Grey, "you men make all this mess and then call on us women to clear it up" (Emecheta 110). Arguably, Debbie implies that the male folks understand the crucial roles women can play, but they do not seem to appreciate those roles. Apart from her mission to reach Abosi, Debbie also takes the

responsibility of caring for poor children that are abandoned to die from hunger. Without a husband, as her mother and society expected, Debbie comfortably performs multiple roles in the war ranging from a soldier to a patriot and finally to a mother figure. In commenting on Debbie's newly assumed role as mother, Anne Adams notes:

Through this central character, Emecheta manipulates the trope of Mother Africa, not as an unproblematic symbol to mirror the state of the nation or continent, but as a positive alternative to the neo-colonial ploys of the British and the separatist drives of Nigerian males who have torn apart the country in their quest to control the fatherland (288).

Here, Adams sees Debbie in the war as representing an alternative to male leaders who have lost focus on the discharge of their primary duties of keeping the nation united and are now living in a culture of self-enrichment to the detriment of helpless citizens.

### Contemporary Implications of Debbie's Roles

As evident from a plethora of narratives on the civil war, women's role in the war has not received due critical attention. It is imperative to interrogate the history and the socially constructed ideology of perceiving women as subservient characters in matters of national importance. To that end, *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. In *women and political marginalization in Nigeria*, Modupe, Bamidele, Olakunle, Olubukoye, and Ake asserted:

Sixteen years of democracy in Africa's most populous nation, yet women are still secondary in Nigeria's male-dominated political sphere. Over the years, gradual gains have been made in women's political sphere, but female political participation needs to go beyond numbers (24).

Modupe et al. (2019) underscored the "secondary" status of women "in Nigeria's male-dominated political sphere" (24). Still, the situation is even more troubling when that domination is more evident in the civil war narrative. To that end, Debbie, though a fictional character, represents the ideal woman who must rise to the challenge of overthrowing patriarchy, raising the standards, challenging cultural inhibitions, and sustaining the social structure of equal humanity, justice, and fair play for all citizens.

The crux of this paper has been an examination of the roles of Debbie, the heroine of Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. Set during the Nigeria civil war, the text is a protest against the male dominance that characterizes the civil war narrative. Through the character Debbie,



albeit a fictional representation, the roles that women played in the war are highlighted and given critical a voice. There are several implications to this story; however, it is a call to action for women to begin to tell their stories against the backdrop of a domineering male narrativization of the war and other significant events. While the Nigeria of the civil war era is quite different from today's Nigeria, there are invaluable lessons that must be learned by everyone who has read the narrative. By implication, women must tell their stories because "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (Adichie, 2009).

### Conclusion

Against the background of patriarchy, our focus in this paper has been on the roles of women in the Nigerian civil war using Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. Emecheta's heroine, Debbie, exhibited roles that any other characters could not match in the novel. By sacrificing her interests, security, intellect, love, and marriage, she demonstrates a high level of patriotism and commitment to the civil war. This commitment is uncommon in a patriarchal society like hers. Through her various experiences and sacrifices, we understand women's memorable roles in the Nigerian-Biafran war. Really, despite the practical challenges faced by women, they were determined to survive the war. In *Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War*, Egodi Uchendu reminds us, "what is obvious is that a strong determination existed in women in all categories to survive" (136). This strong determination, courage, willingness, and sacrifice to survive the war are evident in Emecheta's Debbie.

More so, the author's presentation of the causes of the war and the destructions caused by the war helped in appreciating the reality of the Nigerian civil war, as Emecheta draws the reader into a journey across the trauma of the Nigerian-Biafran war and points out the various inhuman treatments the Igbos passed through. In his reaction to the trauma experienced during the war, Wole Soyinka notes in *The Man Died*, "It will be a long time, possibly generations, before passions die out over the Nigerian civil war" (qt. in Chimamanda Adichie 9). I think Soyinka is right because it has been over five decades after the war and new perspectives are still coming from it.

Emecheta not only lamented the devastation of the war on people, especially women, but she also emphasized the sacrifice made by women. For example, Debbie abandons personal security and safety to defend her country and the helpless citizens and finally declares, "I am a woman and a woman of Africa . . . I am not ready yet to become the wife of an exploiter of my nation" (Emecheta 245). She renounces personal security, Alan Grey's marriage proposal, and the lure of England to assist poor and helpless children in her postwar society. Debbie has proved to be the ideal citizen-leader-patriot. Although Nigerian society is yet to appreciate these roles in its civil war literature and narrative, they remain enduring contributions of women. These stories must serve as a springboard for other women to take charge and lead the way.

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