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The Biafran War and Igbo Women Writers: Deconstructing the Male Discourse of Nationalism

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While nationalist discourse in all colonies has been a critical factor in the fight for independence, the consequences of the 'scramble for Africa' in which African states were divided among the European nations in the Berlin conference of 1884-5, have meant that the idea of the independent nation was often undermined by the differences between tribes and language groups who constituted the nation. This was the case in Nigeria, where the independent post-colonial state was riven with varieties of ethno-nationalisms that bred feelings of injustice and enmity leading directly to the 1967-70 Biafran War. In most colonies nationalism was seen to be a discourse that brought different groups together by a common cause but, as Fanon warned, nationalism threatens to reproduce the hegemony of the colonial state and in situations of great ethnic diversity can lead directly to violence.

Early literary works from the Nigerian civil war have been male-dominated, with little critical reception paid to the body of Biafran war literature written by Nigerian female writers, because, as Chatterjee says, "the discourse of anti-colonial nationalism – was in its core a male discourse" (136). It has been a tradition in which "women [are] usually 'hidden' in the various theorizations of the nationalist phenomena" (Yuval-Davis 23). Early Nigerian literature has therefore, "either ignored or underestimated the literary efforts of female writers" (Porter 313). Likewise, despite the increased interest in examining the works of female writers in recent years by both male and female critics around the world, this scholarship still remains insufficient and limited.

This article will analyse the works of three generations of Igbo women writers, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, drawing attention to the ways in which they deconstruct the male discourse of nationalism so prevalent in writings on the Biafran war. The fascinating thing about this is that the genocidal violence and famine meted out to the Igbo people – men, women and children – during this war meant that Igbo people had every reason to draw together in a proto-nationalist sense of ethnic destiny. The fact that Igbo women writers looked with a critical eye at all forms of masculinist nation building, whether Igbo or Yoruba or Hausa, suggests that they operated from a position of detachment from the discourse of nationalism itself. This may be why their writings on the war have been overlooked. The war haunts the Nigerian consciousness even today and there appears little room for a detached sense of the futility (and neo-colonial character) of African nationalism.

Like other federations created by the British, Nigeria was a country arbitrarily formed and divided. The British placed together people who were greatly dissimilar in culture, religion and tribal affiliation, failing to take into account that this haphazard union as a political entity only heightened their long-held animosity. The creation of Nigeria as an attempt by the British to bring together the various Nigerian tribes was bound to fail because these tribes functioned as micro-nations, and to make them put aside their various ethnic differences to become a nation, was an almost impossible task. Nigeria was rather a patchwork of autonomous micro-nations, who viewed each other with considerable fear and suspicion. Thus, despite its independence in 1960, Nigeria can only be regarded as a nation in a territorial and geographical sense. In the wake of its independence Nigeria, under Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, was a "boiling pot of unbridled corruption, irrational tribalism, vaunting ambition, pent-up resentment, suspicion, fear of ethnic domination, misguided ancestral glories, political intolerance, religious bigotry and administrative irresponsibility" (Nwanko 2).

The birth of Nigerian and Igbo nationalism respectively during the Nigerian-Biafran war was decidedly a demarcation of 'us' and 'them'. The rage emanating from such nationalisms meant that opposing sides did not view their counterparts with humanity but rather through the lens of "*ressentiment*" (Greenfeld and Chirot 88). While understanding the dynamics of various forms and representations of nationalism, war being a key element, the focus of tribal resentments in the Nigerian-Biafran war was exacerbated by a masculinism in which the respective leaders of Nigeria and Biafra "[demonised]" the enemy population" (87). Approximately two million Igbos had died in the war when it ended on January 12, 1970. The Biafran war was a genocidal war, where males above the age of ten were killed, women were subjected to appalling mutilations, and children were found dead "scattered like dolls in the long grass" (Forsyth 261). It was a war "born in massacre and bred in starvation" (Perham 234).

In *Never Again* (1975), *Destination Biafra* (1982) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) Nwapa, Emecheta, and Adichie unmask the ways in which the discourse of nationalism marginalises women, while at the same time condemning the selfish motivations of Nigeria's former coloniser and the Nigerian elite. Their attack on nationalism takes these major forms: a critique of the representation of the masculinist political leadership and an exposure of the ways in which the feminine voice is virtually silenced during war as women and children become its chief victims.

Before discussing these writers' representation of the war and of the nationalism that it unleashed, it is first vital to understand the exclusion or limited representation of women within national literature and in this context their omission within the Biafran war narratives. The

representation of female characters in male war writings is not particularly favourable, some depictions tending to focus on "women's moral laxity" (Ezeigbo 483). Correspondingly, women's sacrifices in war, their struggle for family survival and caring for their children have not been paid adequate attention in male writings. In fact, the first half of Achebe' short story *Girls at War* (1972), Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973), Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), Charles Ndubueze Akuneme's *I Saw Biafra* (2004), Uzondinma Iweala's *Beast of No Nation* (2005) and Uwem Akpan's *Luxurious Hearses* (2008) portray women as sexual objects, being morally loose, less patriotic in comparison to their male counterparts, frivolous beings more interested in their material possessions than the real sufferings of war.

Two examples of such representations can be seen in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), when a grieving wife's anguish at her son's death "you hear what a husband is saying? ... An assignment to H.E is more important than his dead son!" is juxtaposed with her husband's patriotism when he states "in spite of my grief I have to carry out an assignment for His Excellency tonight" (29). This passage demonstrates the clichéd way in which male writers often treated patriotism, but it also reveals the ways in which women were often closer to the wider circle of human suffering generated by the war. An example of the more egregious stereotyping can be found in Charles Ndubueze's *I Saw Biafra* (2004) when he comments that during the war "women too, had a field day, insofar as they stayed closer to soldiers and note-worthy officials at the Directorate" (51). Nigerian female characters in male writings are often portrayed as weak and subordinate, inhabiting a space outside the affairs of the nation. This skewed perspective upon Nigerian women's position, placement and participation in war necessitates a discussion of Igbo female writers' works, which reveal their view of Nigerian nationalism.

The question arising in this discussion is: "Where are women to be placed in the male discourse of nationalism?" There seem to be many arguments about this. Yuval-Davis argues that women should be placed within the public-realm of national discourse instead of relegation to the domestic realm. She asks, "why, then, are women usually 'hidden' in the various theorizations of the nationalist phenomena? Her answer is that classical theories of the social contract divide the sphere of civil society into the public and private domains. "Women (and the family) are located in the private domain, which is not seen as politically relevant... as nationalism and nations have usually been discussed as part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from that arena has affected their exclusion from that discourse as well" (Yuval-Davis 23-4).

Elleke Boehmer echoes Yuval-Davis's argument that in order to redress the imbalance, women "through claiming a text − or a narrative territory − women sign into and at the same time

subvert nationalist narrative that excluded them as negative, as corporeal and unclean" (10). Enticing and liberating as this idea may be, the idea of women 'signing into' the nationalist narrative is questionable. This is because as Partha Chatterjee reveals in his discussion of Indian nationalism, "the discourse of anti-colonial nationalism − was in its core a male discourse," and points out the capacity of this discourse to appropriate discordant, marginal and critical voices (136). He goes on to shed light on the nature of this inclusion of marginal voices, which within national theory proceeds to marginalise women into inhabiting 'private sphere's' within the 'public sphere'.

Chatterjee explains that while Indian nationalism encourages Indian women to have an education to be better than the common woman, the ideology also urges them to uphold their traditional roles and values, which supposedly places them in better standing than the modern Western woman. He reveals that women's participation in nationalist discourse conspires to relegate women to the private domain. Hence "nationalism's success in situating the "woman question" in an inner domain, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state. In this arrangement, the woman is forced to accept that "masculine identity is normative, and where the female is addressed in the main as the idealised bearer of nationalist sons, woman as such, in herself, has no valuable place" (Boehmer 80). Thus, Boehmer's concept of 'signing into' nationalism, in attempting to place women within the discourse of nationalism, is to ignore the critical perspective women bring to the discourse. In short: why should women want to sign into the heavily male-oriented discourse of nationalism? This reticence characterises the work of Igbo women writers as they bring a very critical eye to bear upon all forms of nationalism.

Yet, Boehmer makes an interesting point in suggesting that women's attempt to write may be an avenue to redress the exclusion of their point of view within the national discourse. She believes that "writing holds out fruitful possibilities of redress. If African literature in the past has constituted a nationalist and patriarchal preserve, then, simply by writing, women may begin directly to challenge the male prerogative. In writing, women express their own reality and so question received notions of national character and experience" (9). The question this article attempts to answer is: "How do Nigerian Igbo women's Biafran war novels fit within this male-discourse of nationalism?" Acknowledging the discourse's capacity for marginalisation, it does not however necessarily have to exclude the participation of women in the national dialogue. Thus, with the case of Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie's writings, their works are a compilation of three generations of women's attempt to deconstruct this longstanding, prevalent male discourse of nationalism in Nigerian literature with the hope of "fruitful possibilities of redress" where "[Igbo] women express their own reality" and unveil the hidden masculine agenda that has led to genocide, tribalism and pan-Igbo ideology perpetuated during the Biafran war (Boehmer 9).

The representation of 'masculinist' political leadership

Often, war is regarded as synonymous with masculinity, in its expression of violence and in the ability to wield power. While Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie address the political economy of the Nigerian-Biafran war, that is to say the complex underlining structures involving patriarchal politics and economic gain, they also provide a glimpse into some of the inherent Nigerian social and cultural values that predispose the desire for masculine authority. One contention is that "war is invariably fought on two fronts: one against the enemy soldiers, the other against all women [and children] subjected to the combat" (Farrar 60). The victims of war are women and children. They unwittingly become the target of mutilation and rape, the object of aggression through "explicit sexual references and representations which permeate combat training" (60).

In *Never Again* (1975) and *Destination Biafra* (1982), Nwapa and Emecheta reveal the weaknesses of the Nigerian-Biafran political leaders as they unmask the savagery unleashed by their failed leadership, no longer embodying "the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity" (Fanon 133). In *Never Again* (1975), Kal grows increasingly distant from Kate and her husband, Chudi. Although he was once their close friend, he seems to be becoming an "aider and abettor of the young bourgeoisie which is plunging into the mire of corruption and pleasure," (Fanon 133-34) as he becomes an active participant in the Biafran war. The excerpt below gives us an idea of Nwapa's critical perception of nationalism, the masculine intimidation Kal uses against Kate and Chudi after he joins the army. To her sarcasm he responds:

> Kate! People like you should go into detention and remain there until the end of the war, and the State of Biafra fully established. You are too dangerous.' He meant what he said. I was afraid, genuinely afraid. He believed in Biafra. I had believed too. But that was too long ago...The good news. Our gallant mercenary who was supposed dead was alive. We had just received sophisticated weapons from Europe. The name of the donor was top secret. 'But that was not news,' I thought, but I controlled myself. I had my children to look after so I didn't want to be detained. Kal meant every word he said. (Nwapa 2-3)

The woman in the novel takes the position of sceptic because she is no longer caught up in the patriotism that generated the war. This allows her a degree of perceptiveness that Kal could never have but she holds her tongue because she has children to protect. The idea that Kal would have his friends thrown in jail emphasizes the dehumanizing power of war and of the nationalism that instigates it. The fear Kate and Chudi have of their former friend shows the depressing consequences of nationalist

fervour. Although he was one of Chudi's best friends, "we began to be afraid of him and to see less of him." (Nwapa 20) because "When you eventually cornered him, he became very angry and threatened to hand you over to the Army or detain you" (Nwapa 21). The relationship deteriorates, as the prospect of victory gets dimmer. But the poorer the prospects, the more fanatical Kal becomes. He will brook no thought of defeat and will not help to evacuate women and children. (31-2). Finally Kal becomes a major, but when was Kal trained? "His shoulders showed he was a major. Wonders would never cease. Kal, a major. A lot could happen in one short week. Anything was possible in Biafra..." (80) The promotion of a civilian to major shows just how badly the war was going. Fanaticism was all that was required to be in Ojukwu's inner circle.

In the depiction of Kal, Nwapa critiques the cronyism that existed during Ojukwu's rule and the Nigerian-Biafran war in general. Although Ojukwu's regime had claimed to provide refuge for the Igbo people through the declaration of Biafra, the reality was far from the promised free nation. Ojukwu's regime stooped to the same level of corruption, favouritism, greed and desire for power as the Nigerians. The portrayal of Kal's comfort and power in his newly acquired title as major in Ojukwu's army is juxtaposed with Kate's cynical appraisal of collective misfortune, such as the senseless deaths of Biafran men who were called to fight without arms. One of the main factors in the failure of both the Nigerian and Biafran governments was the greed of their political leaders. *Never Again* thus depicts the folly of General Ojukwu's and General Gowon's war, through the depiction of one soldier's deterioration under the influence of power and authority.

Buchi Emecheta in *Destination Biafra* (1982) echoes Nwapa's contempt for Nigeria's political leadership. The political leaders are given different names – General Gowon is referred to as Saka Momoh and General Ojukwu is renamed Chijioke Abosi, and she suggests that the military government's takeover to cleanse Nigeria of its corrupt civilian leaders fell into the same trap from which it claimed to free Nigeria. Emecheta deftly describes the rationalization by which the generals, faced with civil disturbance, see that calm can only be restored by a coup, and how quickly this rationalization can lead to murder

> The only sure solution must be for all politicians, the ministers including Dr Ozimba himself and Nguru Kano, to be killed ─ instantly and without pain if possible, but it had to be done. All that remained was to organise the details... It was agreed that the Yoruba soldiers were to take care of the corrupt Eastern Ibo politicians, while the Ibo soldiers would see to the Yoruba West. That way, there was no danger of any of the politicians being spared or escaping. (Emecheta 61)

Although not a single top Igbo politician was killed in the actual coup, by creating the suspicion that it was an Igbo plot to take over Nigeria's governance, Emecheta invents a scenario in which Abosi and Momoh, who were fighting on the same side to create a just and peaceful Nigeria, end up on opposite sides because each believes that he is the better candidate to rule Nigeria. The noble and commendable desire for a One Nigeria ends disastrously in Momoh and Abosi's power struggle.

For Emecheta the civil war is a competition of manhood, the struggle for the nation reduced to a virtual fist-fight between two men struggling for dominance, the dream of a new, unified Nigeria abandoned. Momoh states "that stupid man [Abosi] probably thinks I am a coward, that I am too frightened to fight" (153). He proceeds "to starve [Biafra] into surrendering" (184). Emecheta notes that although Momoh knew that "its not a nice thought, fighting people through their bellies" he rationalizes that the goal was to "make their leader give up the struggle" (155). Emecheta portrays Abosi[1] with equal contempt as she depicts his need to fight the Biafran war despite the starvation he was inflicting on his people. His stand was "if [they] ever [gave] in at all…[they] must do so with weapons in [their] hands, honourably — not begging to be spared. [They] [had] pride, [they] [had] dignity" (244). Abosi "would rather the enemy took Biafra in ashes [than] in slavery" (183). The Nigerian-Biafran war was the reflection of a feud between two men who could not find a peaceful solution but instead chose to demarcate geographical boundaries in a masculine desire for domination: "this so-called civil war was costing the country dear money and manpower, yet the two warring leaders seemed to be blind to see" (155).

Through the death of Abosi's baby, Emecheta symbolizes the premature conception and end of the Biafran nation. The baby's death also foreshadows the death of innocent children during the war, as a result of Abosi's arrogance and insistence of fighting. The experience of Abosi and his wife watching their unborn baby's life slip away without being able to do anything mirrors the eventual defeat Biafra faces. It is uncertain if General Ojukwu experienced a loss of a child during the Biafran

[1] [1] Colonel Chuwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu's *The Ahiara Declaration: The Principles of the Biafran Revolution* (1969) is a good example of the failure of the Nigerian-Biafran elite leaders. In this manifesto, Ojukwu justifies his reasons for secession that "in 1966, some 50,000 of us [Igbo] were slaughtered like cattle in Nigeria. In the course of this war, well over one million of us have been killed. Last year, some bloodthirsty Nigerian troops for sport murdered the entire male population of a village," living in disillusionment that Baifra was a success, "today, as I look back over our two years as a sovereign and independent nation, I am overwhelmed with the feeling of pride and satisfaction in our performance and achievement as a people. Our indomitable will, our courage, our endurance of the severest privations, our resourcefulness and inventiveness in the face of tremendous odds and dangers" (Ojukwu, 2). If the pogroms described by Ojukwu were bad, it was nothing in comparison to the fatalities of the Nigerian-Biafran war, the death and starvation of millions due to Ojukwu's relentless pride (which incidentally he mentions in the opening lines of the manifesto) and pursuit of power skilfully caricatured by Emecheta through the representation of Abosi.

war, but Emecheta uses miscarriage as a symbol of Ojukwu's distorted desires for Biafra – prematurely taking the life of his 'fictional' child just as the lives of innocent children were taken away.

Emecheta is no less damning of Saka Momoh. Although Momoh's wife Elizabeth has the best facilities to deliver her baby, "[their] child did not survive" (203). Momoh is "shown the monstrosity that had been inhabiting his wife's body. It resembled a giant frog more than any human he had ever seen, he thought. It must be a curse. He could not have been responsible for this thing. The deformed piece of humanity was wrapped with its afterbirth and quietly destroyed"(203). There is an obvious parallel between Momoh's refusal to accept responsibility for his deformed child and his inability to recognise the devastation he has created in Biafra. Momoh's dead baby is also an embodiment of the many lives sacrificed in the Biafran war, a massacre that remains a grim mockery of Momoh's initial enthusiastic "A new Nigeria, where there would be no corruption, no fighting in the streets" (60).

Women and War

The military regimes of the Nigerian-Biafran war were an extension of their political leaders General Gowon and General Ojukwu. Gowon and Ojukwu's militarism had led to Nigeria's bloodbath and Nigeria's women and children were its principal victims, innocently murdered to feed their disillusioned leaders' desire for power. Consequently, Nwapa's Kate and Emecheta's Debbie interrogate the fallacy of the tribal patriotism flourishing during the civil war. Kate questions the war with a fiercely determined view of the future:

> Why we are all brothers, we were all colleagues, all friends, all contemporaries, then, without warning, they began to shoot, without warning, they began to plunder and to loot and to rape and to desecrate and more, to lie, to lie against one another. What a secret was proclaimed on the house tops. What holy was desecrated and abused. NEVER AGAIN. (Nwapa 73)

Kate rejects Kal's propaganda about the war and the myth of Biafra's success in the battlefield. She prepares her family to evacuate, disregarding any implications that she and her family are saboteurs. It is in experiencing the brutality and wickedness surrounding the war that she declares that 'never again' – the point and title of the novel – should such a travesty occur. Kate's questioning of this collapse shows the emerging womanist no longer misled by the dream of Biafra, but struggling to conceptualise a scenario where "Africana men and Africana women are and should be allies,

struggling as they have since the days of slavery for equal social, economic, and political rights as fellow human beings in the world," free of division (Hudson-Weems in Phillips 43).

While Kate challenges the patriarchal, bureaucratic structure of the military's leadership in her rebuttal of Kal's enthusiasm, Emecheta challenges this masculine discourse in a slightly different way. *Destination Biafra* (1982) has been viewed as "an intervention in the masculine tradition of records of the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) [...] [Emecheta's] intervention concentrates on recording the women's war, rescuing such experience from oblivion" (Wisker 150). She places Debbie Ogedemgbe as the central character of her narrative, a woman who joins the army to contribute constructively to her nation's growth, only to later rebuff its regime and political leadership when she realises its corruption. Unlike other educated been-to[2] women that are often placed within the domestic sphere of the national discourse, Debbie refuses to be subjected to such a situation:

> If her parents thought they could advertise her like a fatted cow, they had another thing coming. She would never agree to a marriage like theirs, in which two were never equal... Yes, she would join the army. If intelligent people and graduates were beginning to join the ranks of the Nigerian Own Queen's Regiment, she intended to be one of them. It would be more difficult for a woman, she knew, and the daughter of a minister at that, but she was going to fight. She was going to help the Nigerian army ─ not as a cook or a nurse, but as a true officer! (Emecheta 1982: 45)

Emecheta uses this paradoxical idea of Debbie joining the military as a rebellion against the traditional expectation of her duty as daughter and wife. Her strength is emphasized when she is raped – she leaves the army and refuses to bear the stigma of the attack.

The repercussions of rape for the woman are shame, humiliation and condemnation. Yet, Emecheta reformulates the concepts of womanhood /motherhood through Debbie's refusal to be labelled as tainted because it was "through no fault of her own [that] she was a tarnished woman" (159). She refuses to marry for protection and wait in vain hope that people will forget that she "the Ogedemgbe girl was raped" but chooses to go "to Abosi, to warn him not to let himself be carried away by personal ambition to such a degree that he forgets his original aim...before he allows outside influences to get the better of him" (159). Debbie rejects her mother's plans "to build a new image … and wait for the right man" (159). Here, the woman not only reclaims autonomy for herself but also

[2]'Been-to' is a colloquial expression used to call Nigerians who have had the opportunity to study and live abroad.

rejects being bound to the home front since the home was "the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched" (Chatterjee 147).

In fact, it is through this horrendous experience of rape that Debbie decides to reveal the fallacy of Abosi and Momoh's rule. In her attempt to bring peace talks to both Nigerian and Biafran leaders, Debbie "was no longer wearing her uniform, it hadn't done her much good so far anyway" (Emecheta 161). Removing her uniform is Debbie's rejection of the male regime and the beginning of her attempts to take matters into her own hands. It signifies the stripping away of hegemonic strategies that construct and rule women's lives during war, the dissented female perspectives movement towards emancipation, an emancipation that encompasses the well-being of an entire society. Emecheta is particularly interested in the women's capacity to overcome the traumatic event of rape to take control of their lives. Debbie in *Destination Biafra,* Gwendolen in *The Family* and Nko in *Double Yoke* all demonstrate truly remarkable resilience in overcoming the experience of rape to develop strong virilised and self-affirming lives. The prevalence of rape in war makes Debbie's experience particularly resonant – she demonstrates the potential for a raped country to rise up and confirm its ability to overcome the adversity of war. This is an interesting perspective on the myth of the fatherland – the country that is raped by war is more woman than father, and like a woman demonstrates a unique capacity to re-orient and recuperate her dignity and strength.

Just as Kate chooses to reject's Kal's fanaticism, Debbie's emancipation is evident in her actions to thwart Abosi from smuggling arms into Biafra and his eventual escape. Rage is a common emotion exhibited by the female characters in Igbo women's writings when they observe the colossal damage of the civil war. As Kate raged in *Never Again* (1975) about the atrocities and destruction that enveloped the lives of the people of Ugwuta, Debbie's similar rage is seen in her attempt to stop Abosi as

> she saw the white Mercedes being hurried into the plane, followed by the other Abosi cars and several hurriedly tied packages and bundles.
> A hot uncontrollable anger enveloped her, making her sweat and shiver at the same time. To do so betrayed, by the very symbol of Biafra! She remembered the image of the young mother raped and then pounded to a pulp by those inhumane soldiers; she recalled the death of Ngbechi and his little brother Ogo, who wanted plantain and chicken stew and could take no more... Abosi must not escape! He must not be allowed to escape and leave all the believers of his dream... Like a good captain, Abosi should die honourably defending his ship. Her mind was made up. No man, not even Abosi, was going to make a

> fool of her, a fool of all those unfortunate mothers who had lost their sons, the hopes of their families. (Emecheta 257)

Emecheta likens Abosi's escape to Ojukwu's, to comment on the appalling abandonment by Biafra's leader. In many ways, Debbie's attempt to stop Abosi indicates the assertion of female independence and power, the refusal to accept the man's disregard for the sufferings of the people. Her assertiveness shifts power towards the female as the weakness of leadership is revealed. The 'female' emancipation of characters like Debbie Ogedemgbe is "part and parcel of true decolonization, and as a prerequisite for the growth and success of the nation" (Adams 294).

In line with this idea, Igbo women writers challenge the male discourse of nationalism in their representation of female characters as patriots. Kate (*Never Again*), Debbie (*Destination Biafra*), Olanna (*Half of a Yellow Sun*) and Kainene (*Half of a Yellow Sun*) are represented as patriots who form their individual 'ideologies' of life and survival during the war. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1989) reflects the fervour, pride and commitment the patriots of old had for their people, land and culture. These patriots were resistance fighters who defended their land against the colonialist, individuals who fought battles for freedom, not enticed the 'rewards' meted by their oppressors. Kate, Debbie, Olanna and Kainene are female patriots who fight for justice and survival. Their patriotism reflects a commitment to an "affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation" which seems to be advocated by the masculine political leadership (Phillips 18). These female characters fight to keep their families and communities together, battling various forms of danger during the civil war to ensure survival.

In *Destination Biafra*, despite rape and her observation of death and starvation, Debbie takes on a mission to save Nigeria from the hands of its two leaders bent on tearing the nation to pieces. Emecheta states in her conversation with Oladipo Joseph Ogundele that, "if there is a character that I like in my books, it is Debbie Ogedemgbe in *Destination Biafra*. I think that she is still my best character and the one that I would like to identify with...In *Destination Biafra*, she is a woman who could handle guns and she protected all those women and trekked on the long journey from Agbor to Ibuza in the Asaba area...I admire women like Debbie" (Ogundele 448). In fact, Debbie resembles Ngugi's Matigari, her patriotic nature evident in her refusal to leave with her colonial lover Alan Grey, choosing instead to "stay and mourn with [Nigeria] in shame" (258). The desire to put the needs of her country and people first is also seen in her decision to care for the children orphaned by the war, to "help bring up with my share of Father's money. And there is my manuscript to publish" (258). It is pertinent that Debbie's choice to use her father's money to raise the orphans, is an act of atonement for

Samuel Ogedemgbe's embezzlement, thus suggesting the role to be played by women in the necessary restructuring of Nigeria.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie uses the metaphor of twins to explore female heroism in the war. Woven into the fabric of the Nigerian-Biafran war story, Olanna and Kainene are enigmatic female characters who show great strength and courage in the war-wracked nation. While very different physically and temperamentally, their biological attachment and loyalty to each other despite betrayal and mistrust is contrasted with post-colonial Nigeria's fractious attempts at unity. For Olanna, although she is initially captivated by her partner Odenigbo's charisma and revolutionary zeal, her first hand experience of the ethnic tension and violence of the war changes her attitude, yet makes her resilient. She quickly adapts to the poverty in Biafra, queuing up in relief centres to get food, practicing runs to the underground bunkers in the event of an air-raid, learning how to make soap out of ash and even teaching children in school. Unlike her mother, who chooses to leave Nigeria at the first sign of trouble, Olanna refuses the ticket to London her mother offers but chooses to stay with Odenigbo and Baby. Unlike their parents' marriage based on wealth and prestige, Olanna and Kainene rejects the notion of being "meat … so that suitable bachelors will make the kill" (Adichie 59). The twins refusal to leave Nigeria during the war with money and gold, unlike their parents, signifies a deep attachment to land and heritage. It reveals the female hero as a person striving for ways to keep ones dignity and humanity intact.

On the other hand, Adichie's Kainene resembles Emecheta's Debbie in regard to her fighting spirit. Her foresight is seen in her wisdom to set up a refugee camp for the people:

> A van delivered bags of *garri* to the house, and Kainene asked Harrison not to touch them because they were for the refugee camp. She was the new food supplier.
> 'I'll distribute the food to the refugees myself and I'm going to ask the Agricultural Research Centre for some shit,' she told Richard.
> 'Shit?'
> 'Manure. We can start a farm at the camp. We'll grow our own protein, soya beans, and *akidi*.'
> 'Oh.'
> 'There's a man from Enugu who has fantastic talent for making baskets and lamps. I'll have him teach others. We can create income here. We can make a difference! And I'll ask the Red Cross to send us a doctor every week. (Adichie 318)

Kainene shifts her focus from making business deals for her own gain to looking for ways to develop economic sustenance for the people in her refugee camp. The development of her character in the novel does not merely focus on her enterprise but also emphasises her patriotic spirit when she boldly decides to trade with the people across the border. Despite being aware of the dangers surrounding her mission, Kainene makes a conscious choice to put the needs of the people in her refugee camp first, a great contrast to the deficiency of political leaders like Ojukwu and Gowon. To drive home this point, Kainene does not return from trading, but disappears, leaving an impasse at the end of the novel. This 'impasse' frames the questions Adichie seems to be formulating throughout her narrative. One reading of Kainene's disappearance is the confirmation that loss was a common thing during war. Yet it also reminds the reader of the predicament of Nigeria's unmapped future. Olanna's manic pursuit of Kainene is perhaps Adichie's way of representing present day Nigerians as still scrambling to find a footing after Biafra.

The Igbo female character is inextricably linked to the nation. Yet it is clear through the representation of characters like Kate, Debbie, Olanna and Kainene that while they refuse to be placed in the private, domestic realm, they have no desire to be appropriated by the discourse of nationalism. What then, is the position taken by Igbo women writers? A comment made by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in her article *Women in Nigerian Literature* may perhaps help sum up the female position in nationalistic discourse. She states that "Nigeria is male, a fact that is daily thrust in myriad ways on the Nigerian woman. An example of this cultural aspect is the national anthem with its incredibly divisive call on compatriots to serve their fatherland in the tradition of past heroes. The belligerent tone with its macho-masculinity excludes more than half the population of the country─ women and all the children, the country's future. Is it a wonder then that the country is a shambles when "he" has failed to solicit the help of its "better half" and his offspring for pacific pursuits, for the betterment of the country?...what allegiance does father ─ Nigeria expect from his daughters?"(60)

Evidently, this "macho-masculinity' has culminated in Nigeria's continuing chaos. Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie are in accord with Ogunyemi in questioning this masculinist picture of the fatherland. The contempt with which this is expressed leaves us with the impression that Igbo women question the role thrust unto them to pick up the shattered pieces of their nation. Igbo women writers reject the definition of Nigeria as fatherland on one hand and their place on the pedestal of 'Mother Africa' on the other moving towards the concept of a pan-African identity.

Conclusion

Igbo women writers have an important but little recognised role in commenting on the masculinist nature of nationalism and the historic failure of pan-Igbo tribalism. They expose the ways in which male desire for power and autonomy has resulted in the dereliction of humanity and the civil war. By refusing to be swallowed up by nationalism they display a different kind of heroism, one that is essentially not limited to critiquing the oppression of women but rather sees the role of women in restoring the nation for the benefit of all. The representation of the weaknesses of the male characters and the violence meted out on women and children can be seen to emerge from, and consolidate a vision of pan-Africanism, however utopian, a sense that African futures lie beyond the fixation on colonial borders and a cooperation between men and women in building a viable nation.

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