

GENDER AND POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN NIGERIAN WAR NOVELS

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Abstract

Female critics of earlier Nigerian literature written by Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark have accused them of stereotyping women and giving them marginal and inferior roles in their works. They also claim that women in works like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1960) Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964) and Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1961) pander to satisfying the needs of men in a condescending manner. According to Nwapa (2007:528) "the focus has been on the physical, prurient, negative nature of woman." Ogunyemi (1988:60) claims that the (Nigerian) literature is phallic, dominated as it is by male writers and critics, who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns." Similarly, the novels of the Nigerian civil war written by men have not been spared of such criticisms by these critics who believe that male authors of the civil war novels privilege the activities of men and gloss over women's invaluable roles in the war. Arising from the foregoing and considering that literature is a veritable tool for the representation of human experiences, this study critically examines the conception and representation of women in some Nigerian war novels written by male and female authors. It reveals, among others, that the author's gender has a great influence in their representation of women in their works which in turn affects their objectivity.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Representation, Politics and Nigerian war novels

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Introduction

One issue that has dominated Nigerian and indeed African literature since inception is perhaps the politics of gender and representation. The early Nigerian writers, especially Chinua Achebe, write in response to the bad image of Africans seen in works by colonialist writers such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1975) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1973). Achebe's classic, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is critically acclaimed as one of the best responses to the misrepresentation of Africans by European writers. Achebe (2009:118) in reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* observes that "...stories are not always innocent; that they can be used to put you in the wrong crowd, in the party of the man who has come to dispossess you." In another related essay, Achebe (2000:73) notes that "Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter." In most of his literary works and essays, Achebe writes to correct the wrong impressions of European writers about Africans. It is also not in contention that pioneer Nigerian female writers such as Flora Nwapa and her literary daughters write to correct the distorted image of women by early Nigerian writers such as Achebe, Ekwensi, Soyinka and Clark. Nwapa's first novel, *Efuru* (1966), is a counter-narrative to the depiction of women characters in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

In the same vein, the female writers of the Nigerian civil war novels have written to arguably correct the distorted image of women as portrayed in the works of some male writers on the war in order to avoid what Chimamanda Adichie (2000 TED Conferences) regards as "the danger of a single story." Since every piece of writing is politically implicated (fiction and non-fiction), the politics of representation cannot be divorced from any form of writing, by male or female authors. Without doubt, the Nigerian civil war has provoked lots of literary works in all genres of literature, especially novels, written by male and female authors (Amuta 1988:85, Obioha 2018:28). Therefore, it can be safely argued that some of these works must have been influenced by gender and politics of representation. Nwapa (2007:527) posits that

“recent changes in Nigeria – the 1967-70 civil war, economic changes, and an emphasis on the education of women – have affected men’s views about women. Women have started to redefine themselves; they have started to project themselves as they feel they should be presented.” The war is considered the most significant event in Nigerian history that has impacted the growth and development of Nigerian literature and most of the novels of the war have received critical acclaim and subjected to diverse evaluations by literary scholars and critics.

Some female critics have claimed that these works privilege those things that men do such as combat duties, diplomacy and neglect the pivotal roles of women in the war. This study, explores the male and female authors’ construction of the female characters as depicted in Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty* (1976), Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). This study seeks to comparatively reveal the authors’ sexual politics, biases, and what gave rise to them and the strategies deployed in such representation. It will equally find out if issues that concern female characters matter in such depictions by male and female authors and whether there are points of congruencies and divergences in such portrayals. This research relies generally on Feminism Theory, especially the African womanist variant, and some of its principles to examine how the female characters are portrayed in these works. The study draws strength from Lengermann and Niebrugge (1996:436) position that “Feminist theory is a generalized, wide-ranging system of ideas about social life and human experience from a women-centred perspective.... Its major object is the situation (or the situations) and experiences of women in the society.” Based on this, the study privileges the place and situation of women in the selected works.

It also recognizes that there are different types of feminisms such as Liberal, radical and Marxist/socialist, motherism, womanism, lesbianism and others. Despite their differences, they all aspire a world where men and women will be

equally treated. They also want to end female oppression in all its ramifications and ensure fair and equal treatment of men and women in the patriarchal society (Ezeigbo 1998:121). The African version of feminism, womanism, advocates the welfare of men, women and children in the society (Ogunyemi 1996:117, Kolawole (1997:203). Therefore, the study explores the characterization of female characters, from the perspectives of womanism, in the selected works of the civil war written by male and female authors, paying attention to the female characters and how they are represented in the war fiction.

Images of women in *Sunset at Dawn* and *The Last Duty*

Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* is a recreation of the Biafran war story from the point of view of an active participant in the war. Ike actually worked with the Biafran government during the war. At a glance, Ike's story would appear like a rehash of diary of events in the 30-month civil war but on a closer look, it is more than that. Although a historical novel, there is a mediation of historical facts and fiction with the author's skilful use of plot, flashback and irony in his narrative of events of the war.

In this war novel, the author skillfully weaves the story from the formation of Biafra on May 30, 1967, following the breakdown of talks between the seceding Eastern Region (Biafra) and Nigeria, and the great enthusiasm with which the people welcomed the new republic. He records the initial setbacks, the economic blockade, bitter fighting, the mammoth refugee problem, acute food shortage, starvation, the Biafran ingenuity in inventing armaments, and initial military successes as well as Biafra's surrender on January 14, 1970. In his portraiture of the war, Ike retains the actual name of the towns involved in battle but uses fictional names for all the characters portrayed.

Ike buttresses this fact in the author's note: "The Nigeria-Biafra War provides the setting for this novel, and reference is made to some actual battles and a few other historical events, including some peace conferences and diplomatic recognitions of Biafra" (*Sunset at Dawn* 6). Similarly, Chidi Amuta (1988:89) has

observed that the novel is weaved around the familiar facts of war, which includes known events, dates and even specific battles. According to Amuta (1988:89), the author deploys his artistic maturity to establish an aesthetic distance between the historical facts and the fictional universe of his characters. Ike's narrative revolves around soldiers, some self-important people and young people exposed to the horrors of war.

A close reading of the novel shows that the characters in the novel include men and women, but there are more prominent male characters than females in Ike's war story. Of all the 25 principal characters in the novel, only five (Fatima, Love, Nma, Rose, Halima Uche) are females; while the rest are males. While Fatima is the wife of Dr Amilo Kanu, Director for Mobilization for Biafra; Love is Dr Kanu's mistress. Nma is the wife of Duke Bassey (Indigenous) owner of a chain of super-markets; Rose is the wife of Ndubuisi Akwaelumo (Akwa) a civil servant; and Halima Uche; wife of an Igbo man killed in Kano during the 1966 pogrom and a Hausa refugee with one surviving child (*Sunset at Dawn* 7).

Ike uses multiple characters as a narrative technique to capture the various departments of the war and the war's effect on the ordinary people, the civilian population. While narrating the men's prosecution of the war, Ike weaves the women's story as well. Among the females in Ike's war fiction, only Fatima is educated up to university level and a professional radiographer. In Ike's characterization of the female, a woman is either a wife or a mistress. While four of the female characters are wives, only one is a mistress. Inside the novel, such minor female characters without names like the civil defence girls, the "Cradlers" and others who are willing to go to bed with any man are reduced to sex objects for the satisfaction of the males. In war situation, sexual immorality is always high.

Perhaps Ike uses the Cradlers as a narrative strategy to reveal and critique the moral lapses of women and their male accomplices during the war. Most of the characters that are involved in warfare, policy formulation are invariably male. Judging from the preponderance of male characters over the female

ones in the novel, it would be safe to conclude that Ike narrates the account of the civil war from the male point of view. The novel apparently valorizes the activities of Biafran soldiers in war fronts; the ingenuity of Biafran scientists that work in the Research and Production Unit; as well as the diplomatic aspects of the war, and the vital relief operations by international humanitarian agencies. But on the other hand, a womanist reading of *Sunset at Dawn* also reveals that Ike has keen interest in women concerns as well. Such close reading of the text shows that Ike has interest too in things that women say and do unlike the early Nigerian sexist male novelists already mentioned in this article that are male-centred in their writings and portrayal of female characters.

Ike's war novel is therefore a marked departure from male-oriented and dominated Nigerian literature. Just as Ike devotes some spaces for male characters, he also gives women some space to ventilate their views, experiences and actions. In other words, there is dialogue and negotiation between Ike's male and female characters as they navigate the wartime exigencies. Such is evident in the interaction between the male protagonist, Dr. Kanu and his wife, Fatima, can be regarded as the heroine of the novel. Fatima's fellow Hausa woman married to an Igbo man, Halima, is also realistically portrayed. The characters of Fatima and Halima represent lived experience in wartime Biafra. The friendship and bonding between Fatima and Halima transforms Fatima to believe in the Biafran cause and becomes a committed Biafran to the acknowledgement of the Biafran leader, Ojukwu.

Apart from being highly educated and a radiographer by profession, Fatima is nobody's appendage. Fatima has voice. She is in control of her life. She knows what she wants in a relationship and what she abhors. Fatima could not contemplate a life in the village at the heat of the Biafran war while her husband lives in the city. Her reaction to her husband's insistence that she stays in the village with his parents is full of anger and resentment: "You stay there at Umuahia, having the best of everything—clean, pipe-borne water, electricity, civilized society, shops, everything desirable—while I am tucked away in this jungle and told to thank God for

little mercies?"(89). There is no doubt that this kind of expression could only emanate from a self-conscious and educated woman character that is not subservient to the husband. Fatima wants to live with her husband. She abhors living apart while the war is on and she has a compelling reason for making that choice. According to the narrator:

She had previously dismissed the idea of settling down at Obodo, no matter how much her husband lured her by building heaven on earth there for her. She was not the kind of wife a man could tuck away at will in his village; she married her husband with the intention of living with him, and no mansion, however modern, would blind her to the hazards ahead of any foreign wife who lives her young, handsome, magnetic husband to the mercy of sophisticated girls from his own ethnic group. (*Sunset at Dawn* 98)

By insisting on living with her husband in the city, Fatima wants to protect her marriage and shield her husband from the luring eyes of young girls milling around men of big means in the city. Perhaps, she had the Cradlers in mind and does not want any of those beautiful undergraduates to snatch her husband from her. Initially, she is hesitant to be involved in the Biafran struggle but after hearing the story of her fellow Hausa compatriot, Halima Uche, another positive female character in the novel, Fatima becomes a transformed Biafran. Fatima's meeting with Halima, according to the narrator, "had taken away the blinkers which had narrowed her horizon. Halima's account of her wretched experience highlighted some of the noblest ideals of marital life which Fatima suddenly recognized were woefully deficient in her own" (*Sunset at Dawn* 99). Even before Fatima's meeting with Halima, her father-in-law, Mazi Kanu, could notice the change in her character and admits that "One thing I must admit is that I have noticed an improvement in my daughter-in-law's attitude to me and my wife. She has ordered new clothes for us, and she no longer calls the little boy away when he comes over to us" (*Sunset at Dawn* 87). The

confession by Mazi Kanu demonstrates the womanist tendencies in Fatima to care for men, women and children in the society. Fatima's strong character is depicted in her setting up the goat scheme for women and the feeding centre that takes care of the sick and hunger-stricken Biafran children. Not even the death of her first son, Amilo Junior, in mortar attack in Enugu could distract from her latter resolve to support Biafra. Amilo Junior was one of the victims of the first Nigerian mortars lobbed into Enugu at the beginning of the hostility (*Sunset at Dawn* 27). Her undying love for Biafran children's welfare is shown when she travels to Gabon in the heat of the war. Ike's portrayal of Fatima as an educated, enlightened and patriotic Biafran is very realistic. Fatima is indeed a fully realized female character in the novel that represents women's lived experience in Biafra. Fatima is human and not perfect. She exhibits emotions of love and anger. On one hand, she exhibits anger when she almost catches her husband and his mistress, Love, red-handed in a love affair in their apartment in Umuahia. On the other hand, she also sends packets of condoms and other gifts to her husband from Gabon so that he could not contract venereal disease in Biafra in view of his sexual escapades. In her letter to her husband, Fatima advises him:

I would rather you keep yourself for me, as I am keeping myself for you. But remembering what I saw the day I arrived at Umudike without prior notice, I am enclosing two packets of Durex so that if the devil proves too overpowering for you, you do not contract Bonny disease or whatever they call V.D. in Biafra (*Sunset at Dawn* 218).

The compassion Fatima has for her husband, other people and Biafra makes her a well-rounded character. Perhaps it is this realistic portrayal of Fatima that made Ugbabe (2001:129) to regard her as "the sophisticated Hausa wife of Dr Amilo Kanu, an easterner in the employment of Biafran government." Akwalemo describes Fatima as an "amazing woman" probably on account of her courage, independence and masculinity—a masculinity which does not in any way detract from her feminine charm and grace

(*Sunset at Dawn* 241-242). Palmer (2008:29) observes that “although Amilo Kanu can be regarded as the hero of this novel, there is little doubt that the most fascinating character is his wife, Fatima. Indeed, there are those who might consider her the central character.” Ohaeto (2001:142) also contends that “the noteworthy aspect of the historical role of Fatima is her gradual transformation from an uninterested observer of the war tragedy into a committed participator.” This type of transformation can only come from a well-conceived and thinking female character. The Nigerian society today more than ever before is in dire need of such compassion as exhibited by Fatima to overcome some of its myriad problems. There is the urgent need to invoke the power of women as demonstrated by Fatima and her likes in Ike’s war novel in order to rectify some of the societal problems. There is the need for more women to take commanding heights in the nation’s politics and economy for a more rounded development. As far as the female principle is neglected, so long shall Nigeria remain undeveloped.

Ike’s portrayal of Halima Uche is no less dramatic. The fact that her story could transform Fatima is an indication that her portrayal is also realistic and objective. However, Ike’s depiction of the Cradlers, the young girls of easy virtue in Biafra that hunt for men is prurient and satirical. The Cradlers are portrayed in a way to suggest their moral lapses even though the author satirically regards their service as “an invaluable contribution to the war effort” (*Sunset at Dawn* 184). The illicit love affair between Dr. Kanu and Love is used to portray and mock the moral failing of the female in war time. Perhaps it is also Ike’s narrative strategy of lampooning Biafran men who leave important matters (the prosecution of the war) in pursuit of vanity. The depiction of the sex boom in Biafra, though realistic, is tilted against women. It is my contention that such portrayal has some element of gender bias against the females in favour of the males.

Apart from these prurient depictions of female sexuality, his depiction of women generally can be said to be balanced. The gender influence in his portrayal of women is somehow minimal. A critical reading of Ike’s war novel shows that he depicts women as

human beings that are capable of independent thought and action. His women are assertive and do not fear authority. Fatima is a good representation of the fearless and assertive women in the novel under discussion. This is probably why Fatima is rated by some critics as one of the most important characters in the novel. In Ike's war novel, the reader visualizes the events through the voices of both his male and female characters. He portrays the strengths and weaknesses of both genders. Ike's women in *Sunset at Dawn* are strong and assertive and they negotiate the Biafran landscape with their men on equal pedestal. Even though Ike gives prominence to the male voice in the novel, the female voice is not muted either. His is therefore a balanced narrative of the war.

Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* is regarded as one of the best novels of the Nigerian civil war because of the author's detachment from the narrated events. Despite the critical acclaim of *The Last Duty*, his portrayal of Aku is open to many interpretations. While some readers would have sympathy for Aku, others may blame her for not staying faithful for the three years of her husband's absence. No doubt, Okpewho depicts Aku as a victim of circumstance which may likely be a reflection of reality in war situation. But some critics may regard Okpewho's rendering of Aku's character as phallic and preying on the moral failings of women. In the first place, the image the reader gets of Aku is that she is the faithful wife of Oshevire, the victim of Toje's jealousy and conspiracy. Aku is revealed to have come from Simba, the fictional Biafra fighting with Zonda (Nigeria) and she has a son, Oghenevo. Okpewho does not say much about her education if any or her profession. Perhaps those details do not matter to the author.

The depiction of Aku as an unfortunate victim of Toje's amorous relationship seems realistic and exploitative but making her relieve her sexual passion with Odibo, another victim of Toje's tyranny is patriarchal. It makes Aku to look like a whore that some characters like Okumagba takes her to be. That is the dilemma of Aku's characterization. Palmer (2008:47) alludes to this fact: "Generally speaking, we are provided with quite a sympathetic view of Aku's plight and of her general character and conduct. But

we are also given the opportunity of seeing how her behavior might appear to the towns people, particularly the males, who have not been granted the privilege of the information that we have.” In *The Last Duty*, Okumagba describes Aku condescendingly:

She comes back much later, very close to the curfew time: empty handed sometimes, and at other times with some bundle trussed under her arm, yet at all times wearing signs that the missions she had been on could scarcely be described as honest. She enters the house, and a few moments later the cripple comes out and slinks his way home...A rebel is bad enough. But a whoring rebel! Hm (*The Last Duty*132-133).

Okumagba is so infuriated with Aku’s behavior that he vows to handle his wife differently if he is travelling without his family:

For when I saw a woman fall down and begin to weep so passionately, my bowels were turned far less by anger at her shameless bad faith than by the realization that the man had been so long a victim of a fate he never deserved...If I ever get married, and I have to go anywhere without my family, I will plug my wife’s cunt with a hand grenade (*The Last Duty* 232-233).

Okumagba’s veiled threat is excessive and sounds patriarchal but he has registered his disapproval of the sexual encounter between Odibo and Aku, which he also regards as adultery. Perhaps this is Okpewho’s narrative strategy of satirizing such sexual abuse in war-time. Perhaps he wants the reader to interpret it the way he deems fit. Palmer (2008:48) also dismissed Okumagba’s masculine angst on the episode and argues that:

The basic ingredients of both episodes had been narrated for us by Odibo, Aku, and Ali, but we have the point of view not just of the ordinary, maybe biased, inhabitant of Urukpe, but also of the

brusque soldier putting across a male point of view in a male-oriented society where sympathy goes to the cuckolded husband.

Obafemi (1992:65) appears sympathetic to the plight of Aku and states that “not condemnation, but an understanding of Aku’s psychological turmoil and physical depravity owing to the war is necessary.” However, it is my contention that a womanist construction of Aku would have been better than the way Okpewho portrays her. The author would have invested Aku with strong character traits to overcome the pent-up passion or invented other narrative strategy to rescue her from the likes of Okumagba. Since Okpewho uses Aku to depict the sexual exploitation of some females during the war, he succeeds to that extent. The resolve by Aku to survive through the entire ordeal even to the point of being a sex slave to Toje and later satisfying her passion with Odibo can be excused. Aku’s vow and her faith on her man is worth quoting: “for I think too that I must stay on to prove that I have faith in my man, that if they are truly going to do anything drastic to him in the end, his wife has a duty to love and cherish it all...I am constantly reminded of my duty to love and cherish the memory of a man to whom that attention is due” (65).

But Aku’s moral resolve crumbles when she realizes that Odibo can actually consummate the sexual act that Toje could not perform after arousing her. Aku reveals that: “Frustration had driven me to the point where I would rather live the fact than the fiction of sin. Loyalty and devotion had been strained beyond all possible endurance, and neither the mind nor the body could any longer fight the overwhelming presence of temptation” (*The Last Duty* 184). Material hardship may also have forced Aku to abandon her faithfulness in exchange of sex for scarce essential commodities. Stories of women doing so are common in Nigerian written by men. For while women are portrayed as lacking in moral resolution, there is always a male character who, like Achebe’s maimed soldier or Okpewho’s Mukoro Oshevire, maintains his integrity” (123). Patriarchy may have been responsible for Okpewho’s portrayal of Aku as obedient and faithful wife, whose

moral fibre collapsed under excruciating war exigencies. While many readers of Okpewho's war novel would have sympathy for Aku, some will critique her great moral fall.

Images of women in *Destination Biafra* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*

In *Destination Biafra*, which is generally regarded as one of the best accounts of the war from a female writer, Buchi Emecheta, deals with the theme of war and underscores the vital roles of her female characters in the war as well as how the war affects them. She portrays the causes of the war and locates the historical factors that led to the unfortunate gory war in the formation of the country by colonists and the failure of local politicians to rise to the challenge of nation building. She narrates the war from the Mid-Western angle, recording, especially what women experienced in hands of Nigerian and Biafran soldiers. Emecheta uses the war novel to lay open the rape discourse in African literature, a hitherto taboo subject. Like her literary foremother, Nwapa, Emecheta in the novel is much preoccupied with women-centered issues. Ezeigbo (1996:5) asserts that "the most significant achievement of Emecheta's novels is the broad perspective they have given to the African novel by presenting the feminine point of view in a way that challenges the false representation of women and women's experience in male authored literature."

Debbie and other women Emecheta portrays in the novel can be said to be strong female characters. Also, in contrast to the male writers' conception of the war of a male affair, Emecheta's war heroine is a combatant female soldier, Debbie. To ensure that her heroine is very strong and not subservient, Emecheta gives her a male role as a combatant soldier and not a cook or a nurse, areas reserved for females in the Nigerian Army then. As a combatant soldier, Debbie can order men around; she can shoot with her gun just like the men too. It is good to also point out that in recent times, females are enlisted also as combatants and they go to war alongside the men. As a very educated woman, Debbie wears trousers, smokes cigarettes, and has a white boyfriend. These are

things that she is traditionally not expected to do as a woman. Under the traditional system, Debbie should have been married and raise children for her husband. But Emecheta's new woman character is not ready to accept those patriarchal assigned roles to women. Taiwo (1998:200) has argued that "in devoting so much space to the psychologically development of her heroine and endowing her with so much education and ability to perform so well at crucial times, the novelist directly raises the status of African womanhood." In this novel, Emecheta burrows into the prosecution of the war, the Mid-West massacres, especially the one in Asaba, when the Nigerian soldiers recaptured the region from Biafran soldiers who had occupied it. She ventures into the diplomatic aspects of the war and makes her heroine the ambassador of peace between the Nigerian side and Biafra. Debbie's journey to Biafra at the instance of the fictional Nigerian leader, Saka Momoh, (Gowon) to persuade the fictional Biafran leader, Abosi, (Ojukwu) to drop his secessionist ambition and embrace the concept of one Nigeria, although seemingly non-plausible, is Emecheta's manner of representing the war through the diplomatic angle and vision. Her heroine's stance in the diplomatic shuttle to Biafra is anti-war and womanist. Debbie's vision to persuade Abosi to stop the war is to ensure the survival of humanity. It also shows the nurturing roles of women in the society. Emecheta gives women voice in her novels. In an interview with Oladipo Joseph Ogundele (1998:452), Emecheta explains:

I use the voices of women to talk about corruption and the inadequacies of so many things because women have been silenced for so long. I make most of them the protagonists in my books. It is only in a few of my books like *Double Yoke*, *The Rape of Shavi* and parts of *Destination Biafra* that I used male voices.

Stratton (1998:122) argues that although Emecheta like other authors of the civil war novels...is concerned with the effects of war on social morality, she is of the view that Emecheta approaches

the theme from a different perspective, correcting a bias by telling stories that have been suppressed in the dominant tradition.” There is no doubt that Emecheta uses her novel to highlight incidents of sexual abuse of women, especially rape during the war. On Emecheta’s portrayal of female characters in her war novel, Porter (1998:320) claims that “her major female characters in this work—Debbie Ogedemgbe, Dorothy and Mrs Uzoma Maduako—are presented as people (most of them ordinary folks) who are forced by personal experience, idealism, or the suffering of others to become active participants in the struggle for genuine freedom.” Emecheta also makes women the centre-piece of her war novel. Her protagonist is a soldier and a peace negotiator. Her women are active and lively. They are in charge of their lives. Most of them work for the good and wellbeing of all in the society. Ezeigbo (1991:99) contends that Emecheta presents a feminist view of the war fiction by suppressing her male characters and magnifying her female characters.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) has been hailed as one of the most comprehensive novels of the Nigerian civil war. Although Adichie writes about women issues, especially their roles and effects of the war on them in her war novel, she also narrates about warfare, diplomacy and experiences of troops in the war fronts. Beyond her population of her war novels with diverse and interesting female characters, she has also some realistic male characters as well in her highly regarded detached and balanced account of the war from the Biafra side. In his study of Adichie’s war novel *Ugochukwu* (2011:241) argues that “the novel, although centred around two twin sisters from the upper-middle class and their lovers, presents a great number of other women: aged mothers keeping to the village, wealthy traders, hawkers, female lecturers, quiet housewives, chatty neighbours.” It is through these numerous characters that Adichie weaves her war narratives offering the readers with diverse or multiple points of view of both her female and male characters. Adichie tells her war story through ordinary people with particular attention to women. At the same time, she does not neglect men. One of her interesting

and fascinating character, Ugwu, is a male. Plaiaş (2012/2013:76) holds that “*Half of a Yellow Sun* is undoubtedly the endeavour of a committed female African writer and the women Adichie writes about are mostly resilient and fight their daily battles playing multiple roles, which show the arbitrariness of such gender roles, and by extension the women’s capability to perform them.” Her being born seven years after the war perhaps provided her the distance to interrogate the events of the war objectively. Moreover, Adichie has the privilege of reading and consulting many books on the war and oral sources before writing the novel. Adichie’s reading list on the war is stated at the end of the novel. In her narrative, she deals with the big issue of the contradictions of the formation of Nigeria by colonial masters with less regard to the feelings of the diverse people with different religions, cultures and histories.

These contradictions, corruption of the political space and the military, she narrates, are responsible for the factors that led to the coups, the pogrom against the Igbos in the North and then the civil war. While major female characters like the twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene are prominently projected in Adichie’s war novel, male characters like Ugwu, the *bildungsroman* character, Odenigbo, Richard, Okeoma and Professor Ezeka are realistically constructed. Olanna and Kainene are the best of Adichie’s womanist ideology. Both are highly educated with master’s degrees from universities in Britain. They are the only children of the highly rich Chief Ozobia, a businessman and government contractor, who could not see anything wrong in encouraging his beautiful daughter, Olanna, to romance with politicians in lieu of contract business he will get. By making Olanna and Kainene females and twins, Adichie is interrogating the preference for male children and the killing of twins in Igbo land of old. Adichie is indirectly saying that female children are also good as the males and that having twins is not bad, although that practice has long been abolished in Igbo land. Adichie is careful in naming her major female characters. Olanna is “God’s Gold” while Kainene is “Let’s watch and see what next God will bring” (*Half* 60). Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010: 205) acknowledge that

“Kainene’s strength radiates through the story, underlying her reputation as a vibrant, emotionally strong, courageous and enterprising young women.” The twin sisters do not subscribe to the traditional way of marriage. While Olanna chooses to marry Odenigbo, a university lecturer with little means, Kainene chooses Richard, the white man that speaks Igbo as her lover. Olanna’s preference for a university lecturer as a husband contrasts with her father’s preference for marrying from a rich family with a secured future. To their surprise, Olanna refuses to marry Chief Okonji and the children of the rich that her father prefers. These include Igwe Okagbue’s son and Chief Okaro’s son. Through Olanna and Kainene, Adichie is endorsing the notion that a woman can choose who to marry or not and can either marry, remain single or have a boyfriend.

Her womanism empowers women to take control of their lives and feel free to do what they like. The resolve of Olanna and Kainene to stay in Biafra and help the new nation in the crisis instead of going away to London with their parents is in tandem with the womanist praxis of caring for all in the society. The two characters are used by Adichie to voice some of her concerns about the war, women issues and the concept of nation building. Adichie’s Kainene achieves a martyr status when she disappears from the attack trade where she has gone to get some food for the inmates of her refugee centre. Adichie’s women are industrious, vibrant and are in charge of their families’ welfare. Therefore, Adichie’s fictional universe is a world in which women are in charge of their affairs. Though Adichie narrates her war story through multiple voices and characters including men and women, she gives more attention to her female characters than the males. Olanna and Kainene are prominent in this regard.

Conclusion

The study has examined gender and politics of representation in the selected four Nigerian civil war novels. It reveals that all the authors, to a large extent, manifest gender bias in their portrayal of women characters in their works under discussion and such bias

affects their objectivity in the narratives. While male authors focus on moral failings and caricature of most of their female characters, the female writers, whose mission is to correct the bad image of women in male-authored Nigerian war novels, portray their major female characters from womanist ethos. The female authors' heroines are strong and resourceful in their experiences and activities during the civil war.

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