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**Beyond Victimhood: Female Agency in Nigerian Civil War Novels**

Enajite E. Ojaruega

*Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria*

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**Enajite E. Ojaruega,**

**"Beyond Victimhood: Female Agency in Nigerian Civil War Novels"**

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**Abstract:** Enajite E. Ojaruega discusses in her "Beyond Victimhood: Female Agency in Nigerian Civil War Novels" the agential roles women played during the Nigeria-Biafra war as reflected in selected fictional narratives. Female characters are generally impacted negatively by their individual and collective war-time experiences. However, there is another important aspect of women's war-time experiences that has largely been underplayed in most historical or literary accounts on war. Female agency recognizes this gender's participatory roles during the conflict as they reconstruct their subjectivity in more beneficial ways in the unfolding circumstances of war. Women are depicted as being able to explore their womanhood and other available resources within diverse social, political and economic spheres to make a difference during the extremely traumatic period.

## **Enajite E. OJARUEGA**

### **Beyond Victimhood: Female Agency in Nigerian Civil War Novels**

#### **Introduction**

The Nigerian Civil War (also called the Nigeria-Biafra War) which lasted from 1967 to 1970 has inspired many writers to interrogate the nature of violent civil conflicts. This war pitched the Federal Government of Nigeria against the breakaway Eastern region, renamed Biafra. Many Nigerian novelists have set their narratives during the civil war period, and presented from their respective perspectives the tragic nature of war. Both Abioseh Porter and Ann Marie Adams have observed that many writers and critics of Nigeria-Biafra war novels have focused on the effects of this war from the perspectives of men. By this, they gloss over the implications of this violent conflict on women writers and characters. Even when the effects of war on women are treated, it is the negative aspects, where women are projected in positions of victimhood, that are often highlighted (Ezeigbo 2005, Palmers 2008, Ogbonna-Nwaogu 2008, Ojaruega 2014, Uwakweh 2017). Critics and writers often disregard the fact that some women under such dire circumstances reconstruct their subjugation through more active and beneficial ways. Indeed, the actual truth reveals that women play crucial roles for themselves and their communities to ensure survival and active participation in the war, even though they remain "the unsung heroes of the war" (Thueze, 2). Therefore, this paper sets out to examine female characters in Nigerian Civil War narratives, who in the course of the war, choose to explore opportunities to act and exercise their agency positively.

The following war novels will be used to discuss the often neglected nature of female agency during the Nigeria-Biafra War: Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975), Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976), Elechi Amadi's *Estrangement* (1986) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). These novels have been selected because they deeply engage various perspectives of the historical armed conflict and they also present female characters, who in spite of their existential circumstances, strive to rise above and beyond their statuses as victims. They also are literary testaments that contradict the often touted misperceptions that in African oral and literary representations women are not seen as active and resourceful characters.

#### **Female Agency**

From a close examination of the selected war texts, many women tend to navigate through war settings in more active ways, rather than just being passive and allowing debilitating conditions to defeat them. Theorizing female agency, Lee and Logan believe "leads inevitably to a consideration of the specific ways in which women have organised themselves and have participated as activists to challenge, resist, overthrow or gain entrance to social structures and institutions that had tended to ignore, exclude, disadvantage or penalise them" (831). Our female characters physically and mentally deploy their resources to cope with war, and refuse to be inactive victims of harrowing conditions. Through their activities, we realise that women's situations during conflict periods are not one-dimensional, but complex. Female characters who look beyond their victimhood to embrace survival strategies rupture gender stereotypes that ascribe agency to men only. In other words, social typecasts and the actual behaviours of women during a civil war are more dependent on prevalent context(s) than the assigned gender roles women find themselves in. Jane Bryce (2016) underscores this fact when she avers that the Nigeria-Biafra war forced women to confront contradictions in their traditional gender roles. Therefore, women's agency here involves female characters' active or participatory roles in the Nigeria-Biafra war, which can be achieved through ethical or non-ethical methods.

War cannot be successfully prosecuted by just those fighting at the war fronts. The home front, although a civilian settlement, is an extended battle ground during war. The efforts of the fighters at the war front are usually reinforced and complemented by those maintaining the home front. Undoubtedly, the home front is kept strong by the women left behind by the men. They provide essential services that directly and indirectly boost the efforts of the men fighting the war, part of what Maik Nwosu describes as "the importance of women in the prosecution of war" (284). Women also help to maintain some form of normalcy or stability in the wake of the chaos triggered by war-time emergencies. In such situations, women are depicted as taking control of their new identities and destinies by not just giving up as helpless victims under the war circumstances. Awogu-Maduagwu and Umunnakwe are therefore, unequivocal when they aver that "women have always been involved in wars, actively in many different roles" (4). Female characters in the selected Nigerian Civil War narratives exercise their agency in various ways that will be discussed in the following sections.

### **Women's Social Agency**

Susan Comfort proposes that periods of violence enforce "gendered divisions of labor on women that redefine and restructure their political and familial identities, as well as their social status and sexuality" (23). Traditional gender roles are sorely tested and affected by some of the exigencies of war. In the generally patriarchal society of Nigeria, men usually head families and the home. Also in the community and society, men play a major role in not just sustaining their families but also in facilitating social order. In most societies, men are very active in farming and trading. These areas that bring income to the household are disrupted by war, thus leaving the families without adequate means of taking care of themselves. It is not surprising that this disruption of farming and the blockade of the borders of the Eastern States (the setting of most of the narratives under discussion) which stopped trading would cause massive starvation during the Nigerian Civil War, thereby further complicating survival strategies for the women left behind at the home front.

The implications of the above are many. One is the void created in the family, home, and community when a greater percentage of the male populace, who normally are heads of households, either volunteer or are conscripted to participate in the on-going war far away from their places of abode. The women automatically step into positions of headships as they now become responsible for ensuring the day-to-day survival of those left behind. At such moments, civilian settlements and social institutions come under severe attack from fighting armies thereby upturning familiar patterns and further compounding the task of the women. Yet, according to Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto, "women's placement in the rear [home front] does not deter them from engaging meaningfully in humanitarian and economic activities during the war with the accompanying risks to their lives" (22).

Children are among the groups that suffer the most in war situations. Children who, before the onset of war, are used to a particular pattern and order, stand the risk of being affected negatively by the upheavals caused by war. The onerous challenge of shielding these children and other dependents from the harsh realities of war falls upon the woman. Her primary role here is to maintain an appearance of normalcy instead of allowing complete dysfunction. Even if it means compromising some moral issues, the woman or mother ensures she protects the children from the destructive consequences of the raging war.

In the novel *The Last Duty*, author Okpewho dwells largely on "how people have used the war as a cover in order to execute their own selfish wars" (Udumukwu, 108). As a result, the fictional couple Oshevire and Aku become tragic victims of a war they did not initiate but were inexorably caught up in. Oshevire is incarcerated on trumped up charges of collaborating with the enemy. This puts the responsibility of fending for and protecting their child, Oghenovo, squarely on Aku. This new development connotes a reversal of traditional gender roles. As a mother, Aku plays a pivotal role during this period of conflict as she tries to protect her son from public ridicule and physical danger as a result of his father's imprisonment and absence. She does her best in preventing the child from suffering the stigma and other forms of trauma associated with having a convict as a father. Hence she tells Oghenovo that his "father is away on a journey to Iddu" (13) and from there sends them clothes and food items. The mother teaches her son to confront antagonists by advising him to return any form of insult to his father. She consistently reassures the child of his father's integrity knowing how important it is that the child retains a positive image of him, even in his absence. In addition to this role of making a bad situation seem normal, and giving emotional and psychological balance to her son, Aku also physically protects her son during air raids, ensuring that he is never far from her sight and is quick to respond to the practice of "taking cover" under the bed during such onslaughts.

The length at which a mother is prepared to go in order to protect her child from dying from the effects of war is further underscored in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. As the war rages on and those in the eastern enclave are forced to retreat further into the hinterlands, Olanna, the daughter of the wealthy Chief Ozobia, refuses to travel overseas with her parents to escape the harsh conditions of the war. Rather, she remains with her boyfriend, Odenigbo, a university lecturer, and assumes responsibility for the child borne to him by another woman. At every point when there is a hint of imminent danger to their lives, the child's safety is uppermost for her. Even though Baby is physically ill, it is Olanna that feels the psychological strain as revealed below:

Olanna spent most of the cash in the envelope and bought biscuits and toffees in shiny wrappers from a woman who traded behind enemy lines, but Baby only nibbled at them. She placed Baby on her lap and forced bits of mashed yam into her mouth, and when Baby choked and started to cry, Olanna, too, fought tears. Her greatest fear was that Baby would die. It was there, the festering fear, underlying everything she thought and did. (266)

Similarly, staying safe becomes an imperative and it behoves the women to teach the children how to keep out of harm's way. To that effect, Olanna grills Baby on emergency safety measures:

She made Baby practise running to the bunker. She also asked Ugwu to practise picking Baby up and running. She taught Baby how to take cover if there was no time for the bunker—to lie flat on her belly, hands wrapped around her head. Still, she worried that she had not done enough and that the dream portended some negligence of hers that would harm Baby. (262-263)

The actual act of training her to run to the bunker or taking cover when necessary shows Olanna actively doing something to save the life of her adopted daughter. Olanna does all she can to ensure that no matter what, Baby gets the best of the meals that they can afford during a period of acute food scarcity. Olanna overcomes her initial sense of inhibition and her privileged background. Alongside other women, some of whom even sleep overnight on mats outside the gates of the relief centre, Olanna queues and struggles for whatever food provisions she can secure for her family, especially Baby. She thus exercises to the best of her abilities her female agency as a mother, albeit a surrogate mother. Through this depiction of Olanna's dedication, Adichie accentuates the theme of motherhood transcending mere biological ties, especially if we remember that Baby's natal mother refuses to have anything to do with the child right from birth.

Flora Nwapa's novel *Never Again* also paints a similar picture of a dedicated female parent. The female protagonist, Kate is the active first person narrator and by this technique one can surmise that she expresses the author's viewpoints on pertinent issues about the war. Kate and her husband, like most of the civilian population, are caught unawares by the fast-encroaching war on civilian settlements. When evacuation becomes imminent: "He [her husband] was the first to go in an empty car for fear that he would not be allowed through the numerous check points. I [Kate] took my five children and a few belongings in the big car" (3). Nwapa appropriates the precarious condition of war as a valid context which makes the woman an agent for safeguarding and ensuring that children are securely evacuated at the home front. This in turn demystifies "social role theory" which usually ascribes agency only to men. Sometimes, even with the presence of male partners at home, the women in Nwapa's novel find themselves restive and more anxious about the security of the family, especially innocent children. Describing one such moment, Kate tells us:

One night, there was shelling. I was unable to sleep. I woke Chudi several times. He heard the shelling, hissed and went back to sleep. I envied him as he slept. I went over to the next room where our children were sleeping...They were lucky children who didn't seem to know the danger we were in...They had not started to suffer as grownups were suffering...I was determined not to see my children suffer. I would sell all I had to feed them if I had to. (25)

The maternal instinct, like the image of the proverbial protective mother hen, accounts for women's efforts in war-times to shield defenceless children from harm. The author's projection here is that an innate disposition in normal times becomes an even more conscious exercise in a war situation. In this example, Kate is prepared to go to great lengths to ensure that her children do not suffer the harsh realities of an encroaching war. This includes giving up whatever personal and prized possessions she owns to secure the survival of her children.

This dogged determination to ensure the safety of their children at all cost is also reflected in the stories of two female characters in Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*. The novelist casts Halima and Fatima as symbolic characters. Both are Hausa women married to Igbo men, who live happily together with their respective spouses before the outbreak of war. The initial mistrust amongst two ethnic groups - Hausa and Igbo - is, in the novel, further exacerbated by the war which narrows down to a fight between two brothers. This also has tragic consequences for these women's marriages. Halima is forced to flee Zaria with her two sons after the gruesome murder of her husband by blood-thirsty Northern soldiers and civilians who also wanted to take the lives of her sons because "if the boys were allowed to live they would grow up as nyamilis" (94). Even her own sister, whom she seeks temporary refuge with, recommends that she hands the children over in order to save her life. But she leaves the house in anger at such a suggestion and goes on to locate the hometown of her late husband in the East in spite of the many dangers involved. Halima's courage in risking her life on the secessionist side to protect her "nyamili" children is depicted as the ultimate testimony of a mother's sacrifice.

On her part, Fatima willingly gives up the comforts of life in the city as she relocates to the village in the East where her husband comes from. She does this primarily to provide security for her remaining son since the elder child is a casualty of an air raid in the city. Halima puts her son's safety before the discomfort and hostility she is bound to experience living among people who consider her own people

as enemies and responsible for their on-going travails. Describing her type of heroism and its reward, Palmer concludes that:

It is significant that the novel itself does not end with the defeat of Biafra. That is consigned to a postscript. The novel ends with the rehabilitation of Fatima and her return to Libreville to continue her humanitarian work....This underscores the fact that Ike's interest really lies with people and the impact of the war on their lives. (39-40)

Another domain where women's contribution towards the win-the-war efforts has made them affirm their social agency has to do with their provision of support services. One of the ways through which women declare their support for the cause being fought for is by forming voluntary associations through which they offer different types of essential services that go a long way in ameliorating the difficulties thrown up by the war. Within such groups, they put into practise their basic skills in handcraft, health care, education and food supplies. In the same vein, women form other types of relationships in the heat of the war to help assist the army whose resources are constantly depleting. The women's non-lethal supplies also equip the men to fight harder for the cause. For instance, in spite of their privileged backgrounds, female protagonists like Olanna in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Kate in Nwapa's *Never Again* join other village women to sew uniforms, singlets, and towels for the soldiers. Simple as these provisions may appear, they are essential to the soldiers' prosecution of the war. Lack of these essential clothing items could lower the morale of the soldiers, which these women's efforts help to raise. That these women exercise their agency via these win-the-war efforts do not necessarily translate to their support of war as a good thing. Rather, as a result of the dire conditions of a war which they have been ineluctably drawn into, many of the female characters in these Nigerian war novels channel their resources, skills, energies, and human experiences towards ameliorating the negative effects of the war on themselves, their families, and some sectors of their society.

Coping with the exigencies of the war demands that the women learn new skills in handcraft. They are thus involved in weaving baskets, mats, making brooms, local soap and even baking using non-modern appliances. All of these are done with the aim of providing war-time assistance to encourage their fighting men as well as adjusting to the challenges brought about by the scarcity of essential products and services during war. The women also contribute to education, especially of the young ones. During the war, school-time activities are disrupted. Since both urban and rural settlements feel the crippling effects of the war, almost all educational institutions, from primary to tertiary are either closed down, commandeered for military operations or converted to refugee or food camps. As a result, a lacuna is created. This vacuum, if not filled in one way or the other, could lead to a deficiency in human development and portends dire consequences for future generations.

In Adichie's novel, Olanna, assisted by Ugwu and Mrs Muokelu organize home lessons for children in order to forestall the total disruption of the children's academic learning because of the outbreak of the war. Her primary objective of setting up the school in spite of the chaos of war is because, "we have to make sure that when the war is over, they will fit back easily into regular school" (291). It is thus with a sense of pride at their accomplishments in this field of war-time agency that Odenigbo announces to his friends, "My wife and Ugwu are changing the face of the next generation of Biafrans with their Socratic pedagogy!" (293).

Also, women take it upon themselves to offer services in health care by joining such voluntary organizations as The Red Cross where they learn how to administer first aid services to those injured or in need. They often fall back on their natural skills as care-givers to help look after the sick and wounded. By this, they assume the roles of casual nurses even though they do not possess the formal skills or training for this particular profession. Summing up the importance of the various aspects of women's social agency during the war, Nwapa's authorial voice emphasizes the fact that: "The women especially were very active, more active than the men in fact. They made uniforms for the soldiers, they cooked for the soldiers, and gave expensive presents to the officers. And they organised the women who prayed every Wednesday for Biafra" (7).

The war novelists under study identify the unusual circumstances of war as an opportunity for women to explore and develop entrepreneurial skills hitherto dormant because of the monopoly of this enterprise by men. In this capacity, women become food suppliers or contractors because of the prevalent atmosphere of the war which has changed traditional roles. Before the war, Alekiri, Amadi's female protagonist in *Estrangement* is a housewife training to become a teacher who occasionally assists her husband, Ibekwe in selling his wares at the market. But when the war separates them, Alekiri is able to fend for herself and take care of her other responsibilities during the war through being an assistant to a food contractor. Mr Adedoyin, the food contractor to the army with whom she works, readily attests to her industry when he confesses to her on one occasion, "You have been so helpful,

dashing up and down under rain and sun to buy fish, vegetables and whatnot. But for you, the army boys might have shot me by now" (45).

Kainene, Olanna's twin sister in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, is also depicted as an astute business woman. She has been in charge with running her father's vast business empire before and during the war. Her father, Chief Ozobia, sings her praises to anyone who cares to listen, emphasizing the fact that "she has always had an excellent eye for business" (31). He boasts with pride that "Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two!" (31). This is quite an important testimony worthy of note. Coming from a man like Chief Ozobia who operates within a patriarchal culture where male off-springs, just by virtue of their gender are regarded as superior to females, this is indeed an unequivocal validation of the capabilities of a woman in this field of human endeavour.

As the war intensifies, Kainene diversifies her business interests to other areas. She registers as a food contractor with the army and supplies them imported stock fish, a business deal which she prides herself in carrying out diligently; after all, "many contractors were paid and didn't deliver. At least I did" (343). She makes cash donations in support of the Biafran cause and takes charge of running a refugee camp where she caters to the physical and health needs of those dispossessed or injured during the war. She starts a farm at the camp where, with the aid of the workers, she grows food crops meant to bolster the treatment and diet administered to refugees in order to speed up their recovery. Her search for food supplies and more sources of income to fend for the displaced people in the camp takes her across enemy lines or territories for trade. Crossing over to the other side of the divide in search of some of the essential provisions that are scarce in the Biafran enclave is popularly referred to as "Ahia Attack" or "attack trade." This is quite a dangerous venture as one stands the risk of being imprisoned or even killed if caught by the federal army. Kainene is very much aware of this condition, yet she insists on embarking on such a risky expedition if the end result will get her badly needed commodities for her people. Unfortunately, she does not return from this first time incursion into enemy grounds and nothing more is heard of her despite concerted efforts by family and friends to find her. However, one must applaud her industry and courage during the war.

In a related development, the imperative to survive during war challenges women to discover and develop latent potentials. In order to cope with the acute shortage and sometimes total disappearance of essential commodities like soap, body cream, and cooking fuel, women come up with alternatives which involve the use of their motor and cognitive skills. They form groups or associations to learn how to weave mats, baskets, cook and bake. Olanna is taught how to make soap from ash by Mrs Muokelu. Although there are incidents of intra-gender conflicts among women, during the processes enumerated above, the women usually establish stronger and closer female relationships at personal as well as communal levels.

A typical example of female solidarity is evident in Adichie's novel. Olanna and Kainene are twin sisters who are estranged. Kainene witnesses the gruesome death of her steward by shelling and comes to realize how precarious human life is during war such that it is not a time to be separated from one's only sister. She therefore, reaches out to Olanna after which they enjoy the closeness which was sadly missing from their previous relationship. The same thing applies to the siblings, Alekiri and Christie in *Amadi's Estrangement* where both sisters become closer than they were before the war as a result of having survived harrowing experiences individually and collectively.

Similarly, in Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, in spite of their disparate social status, Fatima's and Halima's shared experiences provide a common platform for their bonding during the war. Both are women from the same ethnic background, married to Easterners, lost their children to the brutalities of the raging war and compelled to live in their spouses' village amidst hostilities. Fatima's close association with Halima makes her a changed person and more receptive to her husband's people. Thus, in her private musings, Fatima admits:

Now she saw everything differently. Mrs Halima Uche 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. Halima had sacrificed personal comfort and risked her very life in her determination to identify herself with her husband... She had broken through a major cultural barrier, for which she had won her husband's family. Even after her tragic separation from her husband's family, her overriding concern remained the protection of her one remaining visible tie with her husband. Fatima wondered whether the unseen powers had sent Halima to teach her one or two lessons on marital devotion. (99-100)

Through Fatima's musings in the above excerpt, the author depicts her as a dynamic character given the profound insights about the subtleties of marital relationships she learns from the war and Halima.

Ike skilfully weaves this association with Halima as a subtext of the womanist precept which places premium value on the survival of the family as a whole unit.

Women also come together to discuss and implement ways of helping out in the face of the on-going crisis. At the news of the outbreak of war in the university community of Nsukka, Adichie tells of the university women's association's efforts at organizing food donations for refugees from the North (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, 158). This is a gender-based association and their enterprise is to relieve fellow "sisters" who are suffering dislocation from their "homes" in the North. The women are involved in a life-saving exercise when they make sacrifices to help feed female refugees and their families. At the height of the war, when there was scarcity of food and other provisions, these women are the very first group effort to reach out to their men at the battle front. At a time of want and scarcity, when other women are busy saving whatever provisions they have for their family only, Olanna freely gives out to fellow women like Mama Adanna and Alice from the little she has. Apart from this, she also provides a listening ear to those women whose war experiences have affected their sense of self-worth and therefore are badly in need of psychological comfort. A case in point is Edna's (her neighbour in Nsukka) state of distraught at the bombings in her hometown that had left close family members dead. The narrator recounts that in such a condition, and as part of efforts towards helping a friend through such a traumatic experience

Olanna made tea and sat next to Edna, their shoulders touching, while Edna cried in loud gasps that sounded like choking.... Olanna reached out often to squeeze her arm. The rawness of Edna's grief made her helpless, brought the urge to stretch her hand into the past and reverse history. Finally, Edna fell asleep. Olanna gently placed a pillow beneath her head and sat thinking about how a single act could reverberate over time and space and leave stains that could never be washed off. (245)

The communal type of female bonding we see in Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* is worth commending here. Brought together as a result of their precarious war-time situation, the women in Emecheta's novel share certain experiences, interests and suffering which generate a level of solidarity and further mobilise them as active or positive agents. Her heroine, Debbie, is gang-raped by a group of Nigerian soldiers on her way to the East to broker peace between the two warring generals. Ordinarily, this experience should be reason enough for her to give up her mission, but her irrepressible spirit gives her the courage to attempt the journey again. On her second trip, she is compelled to keep the company of some refugee women and children whose men have been brutally killed by the Federal army. During this period, women from different social backgrounds are brought together. While all the men are killed, the women are subjected to the humiliation of being stripped naked and man-handled by the soldiers.

However, what one notices in this dehumanizing situation is an admirable sense of sorority among the refugee women. In admonishing them to be brave and strong, Uzoma, one of the women, tells the others: "Our men were useful, yes, very useful; but they have now been killed by other men. We have children to look after. Just like our grandmothers. They looked after our parents who had us. So I don't know why Dorothy should want to die, when her days are not up yet" (203).

As a member of this group, Debbie observes the women's level of co-operation and "marvelled at the resources of women" (203). The women's bonding at such moments of grave danger goes a long way to act as a sort of psychological prop for one another. An image that clearly comes to mind from the foregoing discussion is the laudable activities of women as social actors with a will to influence and change things despite the commotion caused by war. This view is resonated by Nwapa's female protagonist in another of her war fiction, *Wives at War*, when she voices out the fact that: "Without women, the Nigerian vandals would overrun Biafra: without the women, our gallant Biafran soldiers would have died of hunger in the warfronts. Without the women, the Biafran Red Cross would have collapsed" (18). Clearly, the exigencies of war-time crises account for women's discovery and utilization of their social agency. Female characters here are able to activate latent potentials as well as assume responsibilities outside of the traditional demands of their gender towards individual and communal survival.

### **Women's Political Agency**

Beginning from the grassroots level, women from all walks of life have been active participants in rallying support for their fighting soldiers. Here, one of the roles of women as political agents is seen in the emergence of women's organisations for mass political mobilization. Often, enlightened women are at the forefront of such movements offering survival strategies for coping with the war and drumming up support for their soldiers. To harmonise the relationship between the war front and the home front, such mobilization to ensure mass support is very necessary in the prosecution of the war.

The contributions of such women to the win-the-war-effort is largely realised through their ability to promote a nationalistic consciousness as well as drum up support for the men who are fighting. Even

though civilians are sometimes far removed from the actual combat, the need to help them sustain their faith and belief in the possibility of their soldiers winning the war and by extension safeguarding their lives still arises. Often, the tension, fear and uncertainty associated with the battlefield spread to civilian habitations. This can lead not only to panic but also could lower the morale of the fighting forces. At this point, the task of maintaining calm and strengthening patriotic ties largely depend on the efforts of women.

Female characters are quite involved in conflict resolution processes. Such women are sometimes brought into the scheme of war-time affairs for a non-violent negotiation. An example of the former mode of political agency is apparent in *Never Again*. Nwapa presents a war-time condition which necessitates the input of some women who are regarded as respected members of their communities. The narrator particularly identifies a character who is simply described as a "lady politician" (12) that is "so powerful then that people were very careful not to offend her" (7). Her dedication to the Biafran cause informs her impassioned speech during a town hall meeting where she laments thus in the face of the people's wavering confidence in the abilities of their fighting forces:

What is all this? I don't like the way this meeting is going. We have come to discuss serious matters and people here are trying to sabotage every effort to arrive at any decision. I am a woman. I am not afraid of shelling. I am not afraid of any Vandal. I am going to fight with my mortar pistol." She turned to the direction of the women. "Isn't that what you said I should say?" "Yes, yes," filled the air. That's exactly what we said you should say." Another woman got up and said, "We are behind you." (12)

Such statements, though made out of a sense of bravado, go a long way in uplifting the morale of the Biafran soldiers and civilian populace. It is pertinent to point out here that the use of propaganda as a political strategy is made possible through the efforts of women. Although the Information Bureau or Directorate is the formal office devoted to this type of activity during the war, women are at the heart of the informal sector of this war-time activity. As a vital part of the propaganda and network machine, the women become a means of disseminating news widely and faster. The female character, Mrs Muokelu, is a champion of this in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Due to her staunch belief in the Biafran cause, she does not pass off any opportunity to provide her audience with the latest news and tidbits about the war or from the war front even though people like Olanna know she tends to exaggerate details. On one occasion, she regales Olanna with the following incredulous information:

Did you hear that we shot down their bomber around Ikot-Ekpene? And this was done by a common civilian with his hunting gun! You know, it is as if the Nigerians are so stupid that whoever works for them becomes stupid too. They are too stupid to fly the planes that Russia and Britain gave to them, so they brought in white people and even those white people can't hit any target. Ha! Half their bombs don't even explode. (278)

Without waiting for any input from her listener, she continues the propaganda:

I hear that our *ogbunigwe* is putting the fear of God into them. In Afikpo, it killed only a few hundred men, but the entire Nigerian battalion withdrew from fear. They have never seen a weapon like that. They don't know what we still have for them. Gowon sent them to bomb Awgu Market in the middle of the afternoon while women were buying and selling. He has refused to let the Red Cross bring us food, refused *kpam-kpam*, so that we will starve to death. But he will not succeed. If we had people pouring guns and planes into our hands as they pour into Nigeria, this thing would have ended a long time ago and everybody would be in his own house now. But we will conquer them. Is God sleeping? No! (279)

This is essentially a political strategy to boost the ego of stakeholders as such persons try to feed and sustain their relentless faith in the cause their men are fighting for. News of success or defeat is usually quickly and effectively spread by word of mouth through women. This helps shape public opinion and positive reception of the activities during the war. This form of political agency which the women engage in serves the advantage of bringing war-time reportage to the grassroots level as it provides civilians the opportunity to learn the latest goings-on at the battle fronts and if possible know the next line of action to take in safe-guarding their lives and properties.

More evidence of women exploring their political agency in this capacity is also found in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. With the rumour of an impending war, the University (of Nigeria at Nsukka) women's association organizes an "In Case of War" seminar orientation where women sensitize the people on how to cope with war-time emergencies. Validating rumours of war or not, this meeting prepares the populace for war. Even if they may not know the brutal realities of war, the people gradually prepare their minds and persons towards the disruption and drastic changes the war will bring into their

lives. Their participation in the "In Case of War" orientation programme is also a good example of how women prepare themselves to serve as political agents.

Similarly, women are conscripted as ambassadors of peace in a bid to help douse the tension and reduce casualties during war. In their capacity as peace educators, the primary function of women is to bring together the warring parties. At the height of the political impasse between the two generals heading the different forces engaged in the civil war, Debbie in *Destination Biafra* is approached to undertake a peace mission. She is selected because of her respected position in the nation's armed forces, her non-partisanship and by virtue of not being a member of any of the two major ethnic groups at the centre of the armed conflict. In addition, her sense of patriotism and commitment to national unity is another reason why she is chosen to undertake such an arduous task which it is hoped will result in a cease-fire and put an end to all the senseless killings and ravages of the war. Her challenging assignment is to convince Chijioke Abosi, the leader of the Biafran army, to reconsider his stance and rescind his decision to lead his people to break away and form a republic of their own because of perceived injustices.

Quite aware of her commitment to the unity of the nation, Alan, her British boyfriend, first makes this proposition to her that she can "try and save the situation" (110). Saka Momoh, the head of the Nigerian state expresses the confidence that Debbie "would be the right person to reach him [Abosi]" (118). For the love of keeping her beloved country united, Debbie accepts to undertake this dangerous task in the course of which she suffers unimaginable hardships to her person—physically and psychologically. Yet, she ensures that she completes her assignment. By this form of characterization, Emecheta succeeds in underscoring the important roles of women in peace negotiations during the war.

In *Estrangement*, Amadi's protagonist, Alekiri is one of the Commando Girls, a group of female soldiers who also had a role to play in helping their side win the war. The position of some women's militias could best be appreciated through their dogged determination and loyalty to ensure victory in a war which they had been involuntarily drawn into, thereby validating their indispensable roles in promoting justice and conflict resolution. Debbie sums this up rather succinctly when she underscores the inevitable truth that "You men make all this mess and then call on us women to clear it up" (110). By the nature of their charming gender and the general perception by men that they are weak and harmless, women ironically can go on to do great things.

### **Women's Economic Agency**

It is quite important to point out that there are intersections in the different roles women play during the war. In other words, the activities of women as economic agents may invariably be intertwined with some of their laudable efforts in the social and political spheres already discussed. It is therefore quite possible that in carrying out their supportive roles during the war, women were involved in different forms of agency almost simultaneously. Or, to put it differently, women's agency in the civil war period was multifaceted. Speaking in line with this observation, Ifi Amadiume who has extensively studied women in Igbo society, points out that:

Women fed and sustained the economy of Biafra through "attack" trade, which involved market trips through enemy front lines. Women mobilised Biafrans for all public occasions. Women formed a strong core of the militia, task forces, etc., while mothers cooked for and fed the whole Biafran nation. Women became the cohesive force in a shifting, diminishing people who were slowly losing what they saw as a war of survival. (183)

However, the primary focus here will largely be on women's efforts at sustaining and promoting economic reconstruction during war and post-war recovery processes.

In this capacity, women are often responsible for the well-being of their households and communities. This is an aspect of their war-time existence which connotes an increase in responsibility as they take charge of the family's economy. A case in point is that of Aku in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. Before Oshevire, her husband's incarceration, Aku was just a housewife whose major responsibility was to take care of her husband, son and their home. Her husband's thriving rubber business was enough to sustain the family. One can therefore imagine the drastic adjustments Aku had to make in the absence of her husband, the family's sole provider. She comes to realise that from that point of separation, it befalls her to take charge of her family's upkeep, especially their little son, Oghenovo. In spite of the assistance she gets from Chief Toje, she takes up a form of petty trading, selling her wares in the market. This small scale economic venture enables her fend for herself and her son without wholly depending on Chief Toje.

In a related vein, the Mrs Stella Ogedemgbe readers encounter at the onset of Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* and before the outbreak of the war is different from the one we see towards the end of the novel. As the wife of the minister of finance, she lives a life of affluence and great comfort. She does not engage in any form of business transactions, yet, "the proverbial ten per cent from all contracts signed by the federal government going into the Ogedemgbe's private purse, [gets] paid into the Swiss account her husband had opened for her" (47). But her circumstances change with the death of her husband during the first military coup in Nigeria. The current state of affairs demands that she looks for alternative means of taking care of her needs since the family's wealth was gone with the death of the head of the family. She seeks for economic self-empowerment by going into a business partnership with other women. In collaboration with Mrs Ozimba and Mrs Eze, she becomes a part of the network of women who trade in goods across enemy's lines. What is surprising and perhaps, impressive about these women's actions is that before now all of them were used to a life of luxury bankrolled by their respective spouses.

Specifically, a woman like Mrs Ogedemgbe is quick to adjust herself to the situation of the war by deciding to empower herself economically. She chooses to invest in a business which has a lot of security risks, but which also fetches her much-needed economic power to survive during war. No doubt, many of the war narratives have it on record that women virtually possess a monopoly over barter trade during the war. These women risk their lives crossing national borders and enemy territories. Their activism in the sphere of economic endeavour helps to bring in food supplies, medicines and other essential provisions for soldiers, refugees, hospitals, and others. Even Olanna (*Half of a Yellow Sun*) who takes up organising private lessons for children whose education was disrupted as a result of war is also seeking for alternative ways to augment the family's income. Also in the same novel, Kainene's business acumen has already been discussed in a previous section. Clearly, from a position of inactivity, these women have risen above their present war-time challenges and setbacks to find alternative means of taking care of their financial needs or lending their support to the win-the-war efforts.

### **Male and Female Authors' Representation of Female Characters' Agency**

Whether written by male or female writers, all the war novels treated in this essay project different women characters as they engage different modes of survival during the war. However, this does not also mean that by doing this, all the writers give equal depth or measure of portrayal to their respective female protagonists. For instance, one observes that the female war novelists, Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie are more interested in directly addressing this subaltern gender's experiences of war through their narratives. They thus have more detailed depiction of women's personal and collective experiences than Ike, Amadi, and Okpewho, their male counterparts. Shalini Nadaswaran interprets this feminist perspective as being a consequence of the women writers' reservations about the polemics of "all forms of masculinist nation building" prevalent in male authored war narratives and as a result they [women writers] chose to operate "from a position of detachment from the discourse of nationalism itself" (48) in their own works.

The female novelists examined in this article, concentrate in showing how women navigate existential chaos such as poverty, food scarcity, illnesses, sexual and gender based violence, lack of basic provisions, and internal and external aggressions. Thus, it is in their works that readers encounter more graphic and vivid images of the sufferings as well as triumphs of women during war. The actions of their plots dwell more on the mechanics and finer details of existential circumstances that women contend with under the exigencies of war. They depict female characters caught up in the intrigues of war, even from the private or domestic sphere rather than in public or national discourse. Their portrayals reveal that the women who are saddled with the responsibility of keeping the home front intact are also the same active participants in many other survive-the-war efforts. This is against the male writers' predominant preoccupation with the politics and physical combat of war.

Again, the war novels by female writers tend to have relatively fewer male characters. Their male characters occupy marginal positions compared with their female characters. Perhaps this is done to redress what Bryce (1991) queries as the relative silence of women writers in the genre of war narratives in the face of the harrowing experiences most women suffered during this historical period. In many cases, the narrative perspective of these female authored war texts is that of a female character in the unfolding circumstances of war. This particular mode of representation has helped to inscribe women's involvement as equally vital in giving a balanced account of the experience of war.

Another observation on the modes of representation by male and female writers in these war narratives is that female novelists appear more empathetic in their portrayal of the harrowing effects of war on women than their male colleagues. For example, in presenting incidents or experiences of rape, dispossession, and other war-time types of trauma, women writers use words or expressions that are

emotive and identify more with the sufferings of female victims. They often spend some amount of time in assessing the precarious situation of women at this particular time and never fail to apportion blame to those party responsible for their plight.

Similarly, these women authors in their representation of female characters are also quick to cash in on activities that portray female characters in positive roles during war. In their narratives, readers encounter more symbolic or emblematic characters. This type of delineation is in keeping with the actual realities of what obtains during war as history is replete with accounts of women's behind-the-scene contributions as part of enduring war. Therefore, in addition to promoting social and literary awareness of women's contributions to war and post-war reconstruction efforts that are ordinarily glossed over, this mode of female representation provides readers with insights into female and male writers' feminist stance or otherwise.

While some writers—Okpewho in *The Last Duty*, Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*—employ multiple or shifting narrators in recounting their stories, others, like Nwapa's *Never Again*, use a single narrator. Still, other writers use the first person authorial perspective (see Okpewho's *The Last Duty* and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*), while a few others use the third person witness perspective (see Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, Amadi's *Estrangement* and Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*). The ultimate goal is the representation of the reality of war through a depiction of the challenges and triumphs of women during the crisis. Sometimes too, in their attempt to create verisimilitude, the author's emotional involvement or ideology is decipherable. As members of the same sex, female novelists intuitively assume a feminist stance in their projection and support of their female protagonists in war narratives. Therefore, it is probable that these sets of writers deliberately highlight the heroic contributions or salutary efforts of women during this war than do their male counterparts.

### Conclusion

The depiction of women's agency in war-time narratives leads to explorations of female activism and heroism. The analysis of female agency has been carried out here with a view to helping reframe the way women in war and post-war periods are portrayed and perceived, especially as according to Obioma Nnaemeka, women are involved in a "multiplicity and simultaneity" (236) of battles during war-time crises. It also connotes the idea of women rising above the incapacitating effects of victimization. Rather than the situation of victimhood, women here are actors, activists, and survivors.

It is thus clear from the discussion of the female characters in Nigerian Civil War narratives that women were not just victims but exercised their agency in diverse social, political, and economic spheres to make a difference during an extremely traumatic period. Women appear very capable of adjusting to harsh conditions by using their creative resources to ameliorate hardship and bring a certain level of normalcy to a chaotic period. In these Nigerian Civil War narratives, the female characters rise above the patriarchal gender perception of weakness, vulnerability, passivity, and victimhood to do things that make a significant impact not only on their lives, or of their men and children, but also on the entire society, culture, and nation during the war and post-war reconstruction periods.

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**Author's profile:** Enajite E. Ojaruega teaches Literature-in-English at the Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. Ojaruega's interests in scholarship include: African literature, Gender Studies/Theories, and Cultural Studies. Ojaruega's publications include: "The Place of Urhobo folklore in Tanure Ojaide's Poetry" (Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde 52(2), 2015), "From the Niger Delta's Viewpoint: The Nigerian Civil War Literature" (The Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta, 2021), Co-Editor, The Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta, Routledge, 2021). email: <[ojaruega@delsu.edu.ng](mailto:ojaruega@delsu.edu.ng)>