Chapter 4

Women and War
Why resurrect it all now. From the past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion.

--Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

Traditionally, women and war are regarded as being opposed to each other. The phenomenon of war has always been considered to be a strictly male preserve. In fact a woman writer’s depiction of warfare is considered to be an anomaly as the traditional space of the woman is supposed to be the hearth and the home. She is also seen as the angel of peace. Therefore in most war novels, it is the man who goes into combat while the woman aids from the periphery by taking care of the family. The cross-cultural consistency of gendered war roles, which this chapter will explore, is set against a backdrop of great diversity of cultural forms of both war and gender roles considered separately.

Apart from war and a few biological necessities - gestation and lactation, gender roles show great diversity across cultures and through history. Human beings have created many forms of marriage, sexuality, and division of labor in household work and child care. Marriage patterns differ widely across cultures. Some societies practice monogamy and some polygamy. Of the polygamous cultures, most are predominantly polygynous (one man, several wives) but some are predominantly polyandrous (one woman, several husbands). Regarding ownership of property and lines of descent, a majority of societies are patrilocal; women move to their husbands’ households. A substantial number are matrilocal, however, with husbands moving to their wives’ households. Most societies are patrilineal – tracing descent (and passing property) on the father’s side – but more than a few are matrilineal. Norms regarding sexuality also vary greatly across cultures. Some societies are puritanical while others are open about sex. Some work hard to enforce fidelity – for example, by punishing killings of adulterers – whereas others accept multiple sexual relationships as normal. Attitudes towards homosexuality also differ across time and place, from relative acceptance to intolerance. Today, some countries
officially prohibit discrimination against gay men and lesbians, while other countries officially punish homosexuality with death.

Gender roles also vary across cultures when it comes to household and child care responsibilities. Different societies divide economic work differently by gender. Political leadership, while never dominated by women and often dominated by men, shows a range of possibilities in different cultures, from near-exclusion to near-equality for women. The puzzle, War, then, is a tremendously diverse enterprise, operating in many contexts with many purposes, rules, and meanings. Gender norms outside war show similar diversity. The answer in a nutshell is that killing in war does not come naturally for either gender, yet the potential for war has been universal in human societies. To help overcome the soldiers’ reluctance to fight, cultures develop gender roles that equate “manhood” with toughness under fire. Across cultures and through time, the selection of men as potential combatants (and of women for feminine war support roles) has helped shape the war system. In turn, the pervasiveness of war in history has influenced gender profoundly—especially gender norms in child-rearing.

In war, the fighters are usually all male. Exceptions to this rule are numerous, but these exceptions together amount to far less than one percent of all warriors in history (Goldstein 54). As interesting as that fragment of the picture may be—and it is—the uniformity of gender in war-fighters is still striking. Within this uniformity, some diversity occurs. For one thing, women’s war roles vary considerably from culture to culture, including roles as support troops, psychological war-boosters, peacemakers, and so forth. Although men’s war roles show less cross-cultural diversity, societies do construct norms of masculinity around war in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, these variations occur within a uniform pattern that links men with war-fighting in every society that fights wars. According to Joshua A. Goldstein,

In the present interstate system, the gendering of war is stark. About 23 million soldiers serve in today’s uniformed standing armies; of who about 97 percent are male (somewhat over 500,000 are women). In only six of the world’s nearly 200 states do women make up more than 5 percent of the armed forces. And most of
these women in military forces worldwide occupy traditional women’s roles such as typists and nurses (see pp. 83–87; 102–5). Designated combat forces in the world’s state armies today include several million soldiers (the exact number depending on definitions of combat), of whom 99.9 percent are male. In 1993, 168 women belonged to the ground combat units of Canada, Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway combined, with none in Russia, Britain, Germany, France, and Israel. Change since 1993, although not trivial, has been incremental. In UN peacekeeping forces, women (mostly nurses) made up less than 0.1 percent in 1957–89 and still less than 2 percent when UN peacekeeping peaked in the early 1990s. (54)

Goldstein’s data reflects a time period in which women had reached their highest social and political power to date, and in which the world’s predominant military force (the United States) was carrying out the largest-scale military gender integration in history. Despite these momentous changes, combat forces today almost totally exclude women, and the entire global military system has so few women and such limited roles for them as to make many of its most important settings all-male.

Did these rigid gender divisions in today’s state military forces occur in other times and places, or are they by-products of specific contexts and processes embodied in today’s states? Gender division existed in some form or the other in most pre-colonial societies. Yet there are examples of societies where women had near parallel roles with men. And myths abound in the creation of Amazonian figures. Goldstein studies the mythical Amazons as de-sexed entities who symbolically sacrifice one of their breasts in order to shoot arrows.

**Myths of Amazon matriarchies**

The strongest evidence against universalizing today’s gender divisions in war would be to show counter-examples from other times and places, especially female armies – the Amazons. The Amazons of Greek myth not only participated in fighting and controlled politics, but exclusively made up both the population and the fighting force. They
supposedly lived in the area north of the Black Sea about 700 years before the fifth century BC when the historian Herodotus reports hearing stories about them. According to the myth, the Amazons were an all–female society of fierce warriors who got pregnant by neighboring societies’ men and then practiced male infanticide or sent the male babies away. Supposedly they cut off one breast to make shooting a bow and arrow easier, although most artistic renditions do not show this. Amazons are an important theme in Greek art, and – in various forms – in subsequent cultural currents throughout history. Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman art incorporated battles with Amazons on a regular basis.

Roles in pre–industrial societies are to a large extent defined by sex status. Social rules for the division of labor by sex are common. Even where division of labor by sex exists, it is not an invariable rule that women’s tasks are domestic and men’s are related to the public sphere only. The economic and social structures of traditional societies permit no clear distinction between labor which is publicly productive and labor which is confined to domestic sphere. Two societies in Africa with very different varieties of labor between the sexes provide examples between non productive household labor and publicly produced labor in traditional societies.

The Mbuti pygmies living in north-east Congo are the largest single group of pygmy hunters and gatherers in Africa. They have no rules for the division of labor by sex. The women’s work consists of gathering vegetable foods, building huts, preparing food and making baskets and nets for hunting. Men make other hunting equipments, bark cloth and gather honey. Women and men go hunting together. Men gather vegetable foods when they have the opportunity. There is no stigma attached to the men’s performance of the women’s task and vice versa. With a minimal division of labor by sex, the Mbuti have the least differentiation between the roles of the sexes. The role of the father and mother are not sharply delineated. Women are not supposed to be the ones solely responsible for child care. Even in the language, there is no difference between ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ or ‘mother’ or ‘father’.

Like the Mbuti, the Leles of Africa, too, make an interesting study. The differentiation of sex roles among the Lele is not based on an opposition between home, domestic work
and family on the one hand, and the are of on – family work outside the home. The Lele’s major economic activity is the cultivation of the Raffia palm. This is an exclusively masculine task. The basic division in social life between the sexes is the forest, which is the masculine sphere, and the grasslands on the edges of the forest, which belongs to the women. Women are even prevented from entering the forest on every third day and on other religious days. The only crop which thrives on the grasslands is the woman’s which is the groundnut. It is exclusively cultivated by the women. In spite of the division of labour, the women’s role is not scoffed at or denigrated. On the contrary, it is seen as complementary to the men’s work and integral to the economical development of the tribe.

The gendering of war is similar across war–prone and more peaceful societies, as well as across very sexist and relatively gender–equal societies. Joshua Goldstein gives the examples of two different kinds of societies – one gender insensitive and the other professing gender equality. The two societies occupy extreme positions regarding both war and gender equality and yet warfare seems to be considered as the man’s prerogative even in the most gender equal societies. The two societies are the Sambia of New Guinea and the inhabitants of Vanatinai Island in the South Pacific.

The Sambia are among the most warlike cultures ever studied, and also among the most sexist. Women are not only disenfranchised and subject to abuse, but villages are laid out with different paths for men and women. Male Sambia warriors are taken from their mothers at 7 to 10 years old to be trained and raised in a rigid all–male environment. Younger boys sexually “service” older ones, eventually reversing roles as they grow into warriors. This homosexual phase is supposed to build masculinity in the warrior. After marrying, these young men adopt heterosexuality but treat their wives very harshly. Sambia society is marked by extreme male dominance and the suppression of the feminine in the male’s world. Not surprisingly, warfare among the Sambia is strictly a male occupation. Nor are the Sambia exceptional in this regard. Of the most warlike societies known, none requires women to participate in combat, and in all of them cultural concepts of masculinity motivate men to fight.
Vanatinai Island, by contrast, is one of the most gender-egalitarian societies ever studied. In this culture, men and women are virtually equal in power and move fluidly across gendered roles. One exception to this gender equality (mentioned late in a newspaper article that declared the “sexes equal” on Vanatinai) was that “in earlier times, warfare was the one important activity reserved exclusively for men.” (Goldstein 33) Although long pacified by colonial rule, the culture still retains this asymmetry: when a 6-year-old girl joined some boys in throwing mock spears, her mother “came out of the house...and said, irritably, ‘Are you a man that you throw spears?’ The girl burst into tears and ran into the house.” (Quoted in Goldstein 34) So although gender relations on Vanatinai are radically different from those among the Sambia, one commonality is war-fighting is seen as a male occupation. The pattern of Vanatinai repeats in five other relatively peaceful and gender-equal societies – the Semai of Malaya, the Siriono of Bolivia, the Mbuti of central Africa, the Kung of southern Africa, and the Copper Eskimo of Canada. All are gatherer-hunters and the first two also engage in some slash-and-burn agriculture. All have in common open and basically egalitarian decision making and social control processes. Long-term material inequality between individuals cannot exist because these societies produce little or no surplus. In these five societies, relative gender egalitarianism prevails in most areas of life (compared with agricultural and industrial societies). Both genders (and sometimes children) participate in food gathering in four of the five societies. Food gathering is mainly a female occupation. Both genders likewise participate in fishing (the Semai), and in horticulture (in both slash-and-burn societies). Among the Semai, women engage in basket weaving, carrying water, and harvesting rice, but both genders cook. Among the Mbuti, both genders help with camp tasks from the age of six and with net hunting from the age of nine. The gender division in child-rearing is unclear, except among the Siriono, where women are the primary caretakers but both parents spend a lot of time playing with their children. This appears to be true of the Kung as well, among whom gender participation in child-rearing is relatively egalitarian. This gender equality largely disappears, however, in war. (Goldstein 34)
The Genesis of war and Nationalism

Marxist scholarship has portrayed both sexism and war as products of a certain stage in human history – that of private property and the state system following the invention of agriculture over ten thousand years ago. Originally, it is claimed that humans lived in matriarchal societies where women held political power which did not have war. Evidence comes from the supposedly peaceful and gender-equal character of modern-day gathering and hunting societies. Thus, both patriarchy and war are products of economic class relations which changed with the rise of the state.

Friedrich Engels links the beginning of war to the rise of the state – and thus the end of war to the anticipated post-state era of communism. Engels argues that societies before the invention of agriculture were matriarchies and that when, with agriculture, private property came into being, gender relations were transformed, and men seized power. The rise of the state and the beginning of war were products of that same transformation. Gender and war are here linked, but only indirectly, both being effects of the transformation of economic class relations after property came into being. The solution to war, therefore, is to move beyond private property to a classless society, by means of a revolution against the current phase of private property, namely capitalism. (Hobsbawm 56)

Nations and nationalisms enjoy a great deal of currency in contemporary theoretical debates. Most notably, post colonial theories and post modern ideologies have rigorously addressed, investigated and problematised the roles of “nations” and “nationalisms” in this increasingly globalized world. Critics may not agree with the usefulness of the terms, nor on their continued validity, but they do seem to suggest that the phenomena are prerogative of the male subjects or of male theorists. Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and Homi Bhabha have all presented their particular “readings” of nationalism, it remains clear that these critical readings are gendered (Hobsbawm 2). One of the only prominent theorist talking about the “woman question” and the woman’s role is Partha Chatterjee. Despite the ascendancy of feminist theory in the academy and all its discourses, national allegories are still seen as the domain of the male authors.
Revolutions are fought and nations are constructed by men and are also written about by
men.

Women, though have been involved in revolutions and in national constructions, they
have been theorized and have been written about. The assumption that women around the
globe would and could remain passively at home while soldiers fought for “god and
country” is itself a bourgeois ideology predicated on Anglo – American and ‘modernist’
notions of femininity. Women have been active players in the war. Their invisibility is
not due to their lack of participation but because they have not been adequately
acknowledged in the colonial and post colonial narratives. This study attempts to address
and redress the literary representation of women as national subjects within their
respective geo- political locales. Individual female authors represent female characters
within their country’s national allegories.

In writing about national borders and boundaries in the era of independence, many post
colonial intellectuals have described what seem to be sites of confusion and
contradiction. Indeed, the very idea of a clearly defined national border in the context of
decolonization seems contradictory, given the deep ethnic and religious divisions within
many decolonized nations. This is mainly because, during the colonial era, the actual
territorial borders of many colonized nations were either drawn completely at random or
to enclose a particular administrative zone. (Hobsbawm 137) Frequently large colonized
nations were created out of existing areas of colonial administration without any
knowledge of cultures within them and without the consent of their people. (Hobsbawn
171) In the post – colonial era, many nations became hybrids, taking linguistic, popular
and official versions of nationalism from previous models of Europe and elsewhere.
(Anderson 113)

In this context, novelists and literary critics have suggested that post colonial nations are,
by nature, artificial, pointing out that they are false and unnatural, with imaginary claims
to unity, frequently corresponding to no real geographic space. As Timothy Brennan
suggests, “Nations are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an
apparatus of cultural functions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role.”
Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* (1982) describes the post colonial Nigerian society and politics in the middle of a bloody civil war caused and fuelled by Western economic imperialism and resulting in genocide and economic disaster. Although Emecheta focuses at length on the unprecedented horror that the war brings, she points out that constant obsession with drawing and redrawing boundaries is, in many ways, part of the horror. However, Emecheta’s main task seems to be to give the woman her due in the wartime situation. Besides that, she also seems to suggest that the position of Nigerian women within these fluctuating borders is very ambivalent. Sometimes they seem victims of violence and sometimes, symbolic of the nation’s move towards modernity. A distinct similarity is seen in the novels on civil war written by women authors across the globe. In some form or the other they critically evaluate the growth of the new nations. Julia O’Faolin’s *No Country For Young Men*, Bapsi Siddhwa’s *Cracking India*, Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* and Hanan Al- Shaykh’s *Story of Zahra* attempt to locate women in the newly budding nation-states. None of these women may “speak” for their country or their country women at large, but collectively they are able to dislodge gendered notions of “decolonization” as well as refigure the narrative contours of the nation.

Although almost all theorists can agree that the “nation” and “nationalism” are relatively recent ideologies generated in the West, very few can delineate or define these nebulous concepts. Ernest Renan, one of the finest theorists of this phenomenon, claims that the nation was a group of people, with common heritage, who agreed to live together. (56) Building upon Renan, Benedict Anderson postulated that the nation was and is “an imagined political community” whose cohering ideology – nationalism- was fuelled by print capital. (78) Max Weber tends to focus on the cultural aspect of the nation when he claims that the intellectuals are responsible for its creation. He alludes to more concrete manifestation of the state – thus helping to coin the neo logism – nation-state. (89) Clifford Geertz even goes as far to say that “national unity” is only maintained with reference to a civil state. “Primordial” (often ethnic) categories may often make claims to and complicate national status, but they do not have the necessary grounding to create a “nation”. (90)
As can be seen by this brief survey, there has been and continues to be a proliferation of definitions of “nations” and their attendant “nationalisms” but despite the terms’ common usage, the multifaceted phenomena are not so easily codified. Stalin may have laid out a definite criterion, claiming that all aspects needed to be met in order for a nation to form: “a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make up manifested in a common culture.”(20) Nations and nationalisms do not always have a common language base nor rely solely on particular geographical locations or states. India, most certainly is an example of multiethnicism, multi language structures and the coexistence of multiple racial identities. Various forms of Black nationalisms have united parts of the African diaspora around the globe with or without the construction of Africa as “homeland”. The Palestinians continue to assert a national identity even though they have been dispossessed of all their homes and denied a civil state by Israeli occupation.

Yet the debates surrounding the abstract terms are also compounded by a negation or celebratory dismissal of the concepts in question. In many schemas, nationalism is seen only as a phase that endangers independence as something which must make way for something “better” and more “lasting”. According to Edward Said in *Culture And Imperialism*, “Nationalism was only one of the aspects of resistance and not the most interesting or enduring one.” (266). Like Fanon, Said believes that struggles for independence, once the independence has been gained, must strive towards “national liberation” or the “very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs” (204). The needs while suiting those of the new nation, were necessarily “transnational” and “transcultural” for they would embody a new “humanism”, one that is not undergird by imperial constructions of voluntaristic subject. Other theorists may not be so comfortable ascribing to a utopic theory predicated on “humanism”, but may have also seen “transnationalism” as the necessary “end” of liberation movements “of the new order”. In fact nations and nationalisms are often perceived to be “outmoded” in the era of globalization. As Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes note in their introduction to *Migration and Identity*, “massive migration is a permanent feature of the world system, constantly undermining tendencies towards ethnic homogenization in a given country,
and condemning the nation – state, as an ideal and a reality, to varying degrees of perpetual and endemic crisis.” (6) Homi Bhabha seems to agree with Benmayor’s and Skotnes’ assertion, and even fashions this global movement as the new, structural ordering of the world. In *The Location Of Culture*, he proposes that “where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that the transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or the political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature.” (12)

Nations and nationalisms, when they manifest themselves in a concrete, geographically defined nation state, are clearly still prerequisites for an “identity” even in the new world order. As Benedict Anderson puts it, “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.” (3) Timothy Brennan makes the connection between “nation” and written literature when he notes, “literary myth too has been complicit in the creation of nations – above all, through the genre that accompanied the rise of the European vernaculars (the novel)... and the separation of literature into various “national literatures” “... Nations, then are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role”. (49)

Theories of the ways in which the “nation” has been “narrated”, necessarily filters through a Western paradigm. As Anderson’s and Brennan’s work shows, they can be fruitfully applied to Third World texts and contexts as well. Often, an awareness of the ways in which colonization and decolonization figure in postcolonial literatures has necessarily led to an analysis of “nationalism” and “national identity” in those works. Flora Nwapa locates the “national identity” in a “humble” crop like cassava. In her poem “Rice Song” and “Cassava song”, she eulogizes the cassava as the national food. Rice eating, she terms, as fashionable and Western, whereas homegrown cassava, which has fallen out of favour since colonization, is, according to her, the mother of food.

The threat posed by imported rice to cassava is ideological. At a macro – level, nationalism, – indeed decolonization is signified by the call for a ban on imported rice in
Songs. According to Obododimma Oha, “the reason proferred for the call is not only the foreignness of rice (as a symbol of coloniality) but the economic and psycho-social implications in the preference for the imported rice. Rice, for the post colonial Nigerian society, has come to signify class superiority.” (Umeh 1998 423) Nwapa writes,

...the white man came

Bringing their food to us

But rice was not their food

Neither was it ours.

Yet, in no time, rice was elevated

Rice became the food for the rich

For in my home, there is a saying:

“A poor man does not eat rice.”

So, rice became a rich man’s food

Which he and his family

Ate only on Sundays and on

Festive occasions especially weddings. (Nwapa 1986 53)

The class consciousness underlying the preference for imported rice is perceived as disruptive of social and political order, and particularly matrimonial order. The persona, in fact, presents rhetorical proofs which include prevalence of hoarding and suspicions at the social level and dissatisfaction in the home. She cites examples with cases of the wives quarrelling with their husbands over non-purchase of imported rice. The wife says, “Marriage is no marriage without rice”. (Nwapa 1986 55)
To attribute human qualities to cassava is to elevate the latter. Cassava is called “great” and cassava is also addressed as “mother”. By mapping the qualities of “mother” onto cassava, Nwapa stresses the importance of the mother in the Ibo society. Cassava is the poor man’s food. During war, it is the cassava which feeds millions and saves them from starvation. It is significant that the “goodness” of the M/other or the feminine is presupposed in the persona’s Mother - Cassava analogy. The persona (implied author) assumes that the reader appreciates (or shares with her) the knowledge of the values of motherhood. In the Ibo milieu of songs, motherhood is a very important factor in the life of the individual and of the society. According to Catherine Acholonu,

Motherhood and childbearing are central to the life of African people. It is not an overstatement that motherhood is the anchor, the matrix, the foundation on which all else rests in the African society, and especially the family. (31)

The maternal presence or writing of the m/other’s body is to decode the semiotic, which, as Kristeva says, is repressed in the masculine symbolic. (131) The maternal presence also equates cassava with the nation, and rice, as an import and therefore something foreign. Ambai, the noted Tamil writer, comments on Nwapa’s Songs. She writes:

It is strange how we take certain things for granted. Like rice. We call ourselves rice-eaters, not knowing an entire history of agriculture and eating habits in Tamilnadu. Recently I was reading Cho Dharman's Toorvai, a novel where a character who has come away from the village yearns for millet and finds rice tasteless. I was reminded of a Nigerian writer called Flora Nwapa whom I met in 1986. Flora presented me one of her books of poetry called “Cassava Song” and Rice Song. The "Cassava Song" is a tribute to Cassava, a yam-like root, which had been the staple food of Nigerians for a long time. The "Rice Song" is, on the other hand, a condemnation. Rice is an expensive imported food, which drains Nigerian coffers while doing little to nourish the population. (4)

Nwapa is extremely critical of the nairas the Nigerian government spends in importing rice. She pleads for a ban on imported rice and for incentives to rice growers. In 1984, the
papers said that in the 18 months between 1982 and 1984, Nigeria had spent a staggering 600 million naira on rice importation. If one supposes that it is a nation of 600 million people it means that each one has consumed one million naira worth of rice in eighteen months! Flora Nwapa makes her demand:

Naira in cash

For I am one of the population

And I don't care about rice

I am an adult, a wife and

A mother

So, can you give me

My share which is

Approximately one million naira? (Nwapa 1986 135)

African Woman and War

Images and stereotypes of women, particularly African women, abound. Indeed, African women have long been perceived as docile, "bound to home and hearth." submissive to male authority, and even politically inert or passive. This pervasive image of women as culturally conditioned to behave in deference to men seems to be found worldwide. Commenting on Ethiopian women’s seemingly cultural propensity to defer to men in sociopolitical affairs, a nineteenth-century Italian diplomat remarked that, in fact, "all the daughters of Eve are the same in all latitudes." (Goldstein 30) But recent literature on women abundantly attests to the fact that in many African societies women actually wielded considerable influence and political authority independent of men. Thus, as Audrey Wipper points out, "formal systems, ideologies and codes of etiquette" that present women as always subordinate to male authority or as aloof in sociopolitical
affairs are not necessarily "realities." (6) Rather, one can argue that under certain circumstances women have forcefully challenged not only male but also colonial authority, sometimes successfully. It is no wonder, therefore, that modern African women have proudly asserted their pre-colonial power on the one hand and, on the other, have mourned their marginalization in modern political affairs. The major objective of this chapter is to present African women as not simply onlookers in African sociopolitical affairs but as the avant-garde of progress. Stated more explicitly, women are perceived as catalysts in the sense that their actions, whether peaceful or otherwise, have resulted in far-reaching social and political change. Thus we are concerned here partly with the deconstruction of stereotypical gender. The examples cited are from Nigeria, Ethiopia and Kenya.

The Ethiopian-Italian War and Empress Taytu

Empress Taytu (Taitou) was the wife of Emperor Menilek (1844-1913) of Ethiopia. Historical accounts acknowledge her pivotal role in influencing the outcome of the 1895-1896 Ethiopian-Italian crisis. An Italian diplomat, somewhat mesmerized by her beauty and power, said of the empress, "Her Majesty... like all Ethiopian women is very brave.... In sum, she is a great lady, who perhaps in another milieu would have been a Christiana of Sweden or a Catherine the Great [of Russia]." (Goldstein 21) Commenting more directly on the empress's role in the Ethiopian-Italian diplomatic squabble, the diplomat noted rather ruefully that had it not been for Empress Taytu's intransigence with regard to the Ethiopian and Italian treaty disputes, there might have been no war. (Goldstein 22)

Empress Taytu distinguished herself as an influential woman during the Ethiopian-Italian conflict, which arose from the European scramble for Africa in the late 1880s. Like the other European powers, Italy had claimed portions of the Ethiopian territory (now in Eritrea) as belonging to it by treaty. The Italians, it should be remembered, had signed several treaties with Ethiopian rulers, chief among them the Treaty of Wichale signed between Italy and Emperor Menilek on 2 May 1889. Interpretations of Article 17 of this treaty of "amity and commerce," however, became the source of conflict between
Ethiopia and Italy. Basically, the Italians claimed in 1891 that Ethiopia was an Italian protectorate. The ensuing diplomatic wrangling led ultimately to the Ethiopian-Italian War of 1895-1896, which resulted in Ethiopian victory at the historic Battle of Adowa in 1896.

Empress Taytu reportedly remained unalterably opposed to the Italian political pretensions over Ethiopia. She reminded her husband of the supreme sacrifices made by his predecessors, noting that they even gave up their lives in defense of Ethiopian national honor and territorial integrity. "How is it," she asked Emperor Menilek, "that Emperor Yohannes [your predecessor] never gave up a handful of our soil, fought the Italians and the Egyptians for it, even died for it, and you, with him as an example, want to sell your country! What will history say of you?" (Marcus 66) Thoroughly disappointed with the emperor's "seemingly compromising attitude towards the Italians," Taytu "raved at Menilek," calling him "weak and stupid." Furthermore, utilizing the symbolic gesture of contempt, the empress "turned her fleshiest part towards Menilek" as she spoke these insulting words. (Marcus 67)

According to anthropologist Audrey Wipper, "the displaying of one's genitals," in this case to the men, symbolized both a curse and a refusal to recognize male authority. Traditionally, Wipper writes, "Quarrelling women might use it when they were furious with each other. It was also used as a group curse by all the women in a community ... That gesture indicated the end of social intercourse with the person or persons thus insulted, or, in the case of a man, the women's refusal any longer to recognize his authority."(9)

To the Italian negotiators who watched Empress Taytu insult the emperor with dismay, it seemed clear that this "stubborn" woman would pose a great obstacle to any peaceful resolution of the dispute. Surely, said the Italian diplomat involved in the negotiations, the "responsibility for any rupture with Italy would fall on the shoulders" of Empress Taytu, an avowed and uncompromising antagonist. (Marcus 68) Determined to preserve Ethiopia's sovereignty and independence, Empress Taytu urged Emperor Menilek to make no territorial concessions to Italy and even insisted that the Treaty of Wichale be
annulled. When the Italian diplomat remarked that annulment of the treaty would invariably result in Italy losing "its national dignity," the empress replied, "We too must retain our dignity," adding, "you want other countries to see Ethiopia as your protege, but that would never be." (Marcus 68) Posing as the most "persistent advocate of force against Italy," the empress advised Emperor Menilek to brace for war with Italy as a consequence of the abrogation of the treaty. But she disclaimed being a warmonger: "I am a woman, and do not love war, but sooner than accept this treaty I prefer war." (Marcus 68) According to Chris Prouty,

The victory, was a tremendous life for the Ethiopians. Fear of the white man's invincibility was laid to rest. The victory ensured the preservation of Ethiopia's honor, sovereignty, and independence. Interestingly, the empress, as well as thousands of Ethiopian women, fought bravely during the war. The logistics of a military campaign were heavily dependent on the thousands of women who carried on their backs what could not be loaded on a mule and who also cooked for the soldiers and retrieved the dead and wounded. (Goldstein 15)

The Harry Thuku Incident and Kikuyu Women

Similarly, in Kenya one witnessed the clash between formal and informal gender roles as illustrated by the Kikuyu women's collective action against the British colonial establishment during the 1922 Harry Thuku incident. Harry Thuku's articulation of African grievances resulted in his arrest and imprisonment at the government police station in Nairobi in 1922. Thuku began his agitation for African rights by traveling from district to district and holding mass meetings. At these rallies he strongly criticized the colonial administration's policies toward Africans. Among other things, he decried the imposition of the pass law (kipande); the colonial forced labor policy, especially the recruitment of women and girls as laborers; the doubling of the colonial hut and poll taxes; and the reduction of workers' wages by white settler farmers. Particularly offensive to Thuku, was the exploitation of women through the colonial forced labor policy.
Indeed, as the ordeal of forced labor and taxation weighed heavily on the Africans, Thuku's speeches became "increasingly anti-chiefs, anti-missionaries, anti-settlers and anti-government." (Goldstein 45) The attempt to rescue Thuku from incarceration was made on 16 March 1922. A mass demonstration, estimated at between seven thousand and eight thousand people - both men and women - were held at the police station. In the traditional scheme, the men were expected to play their leadership role—that is, to take the initiative to free Thuku. Egged on by the women to get their leader free, the men, however, demurred, and having been prevailed upon by the colonial authorities to send a delegation to the colonial secretary for a possible peaceful resolution of the matter. Six male representatives met with the official, who advised them to tell the crowd to go home. But that was a fruitless endeavor.

Feeling betrayed, the women began to curse and taunt the men, branding them as cowards. To the women it even appeared that the men had been bribed by government officials. In growing resentment of the men's cowardly behavior, the Kikuyu women resorted to traditional modes of social protest and repudiation of male authority, such as scratching their buttocks. In addition to verbally insulting the men, colonial officials, and the native police (askaris), the women also began to make "very distinctive" cries, said to have had "an exciting effect on the menfolk." (Goldstein 45) The most prominent woman in the crowd, Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, "leapt to her feet, pulled her dress right up over her shoulders and shouted to the men: 'you take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let's get him out.'" At that point, "The hundreds of women trilled their ngemi (Kikuyu ululation) in approbation." (Goldstein 45) According to Felix Elechi,

Since the women perceived the men to be impotent, they therefore seized the initiative to free Thuku from prison: "Suddenly a section of them made a rush for the prison door," pushing on "until the bayonets of the (police) rifles were pricking at their throats." Then "the firing started," and by the time it was over at least twenty-eight people had been killed and several wounded. No one knows who gave the order to fire, but European settlers "sitting (and) drinking on the verandah of the Norfolk Hotel" across from the scene of action are said to have
joined in the shooting and "were responsible for most of the deaths" that occurred. Mary Nyanjiru was among the victims, and she has become the symbol of anticolonial protest in Kenya. (Quoted in Goldstein45)

The Kikuyu women's militancy did not result in Thuku's liberation. He was deported to Kismayu, where he remained in prison without trial until 1931. Yet it would be grossly misleading to view the women's militant action as an exercise in futility. On the contrary, the mass protest, which alarmed the settlers and the colonial administration, drew attention to the urgent need for colonial reform. According to Andrew Wipper, "Thereafter, "African grievances were given some frank discussion in colonial circles. For example, the labor policy was sharply modified, and the tax hike which had provoked widespread resentment was rescinded. This change of policy signaled the end of attempts to coerce more and more Africans into the labor force by increasing their tax rate. Never again were taxes raised for the sole purpose of filling labor needs." (41)

Mau Mau rebellion of Kenya and the women

The women in the Mau Mau movement played a large role in helping the men hide from the British. Some fought alongside the men while others brought food and weapons to the men. Women fighting alongside men was possible, as the Mau Mau had a strict rule about rape. Rape was punishable by death. The laws of the forest and the laws of humanity were sacred to the Mau Mau warriors. Ngugi Wa Thiongo's The Trial Of Dedan Kimathy shows the strength of the women in the portrayal of The Woman in his play. She, single handedly spearheads the agitation when Kimathy is sentenced to jail. One of the roles of the women is to let the men in the forest know what the British were doing. While they did this they managed to keep their farms going and raise their families.

The British moved some villages into camps where the women were beaten, harassed, raped, and forced into 'communal labor'. The communal labor was really forced labor. Everyone had to work from 7am to 5pm. Curfew was at 6pm. All the cooking and cleaning supplies had to be gathered within that hour. The women worked out a system
where some would gather the wood, some would get the water, and so on. They worked together so that everyone had what they needed to survive. Even so, they managed to keep their families together and help out their men.

At times women would hide the Mau Mau fighters in their homes. This was a dangerous thing to do for if they were caught they were sure to lose their lives and also put their families and even their villages at risk but that did not deter them from aiding their freedom struggle. The women would make extra food for the men and bring it to them at night. The British patrol had a habit of falling asleep after midnight and the women took advantage of this.

While the Mau Mau fighters rested in a home of a sympathizer, they were generally working on a plot to attack the British. Sometimes they plotted to attack the post set up in the very village where they were staying. The women were clever enough to keep up the appearance of normal everyday life even though they may have been hiding Mau Mau fighters or even involved in a plot themselves. These women were also able to save up enough money to send some of their children to other countries for education. They had them smuggled out of Kenya and into Europe with the hopes that their children would come back and help lead a free Kenya. Many of these children did come back.

The women who belonged to the Mau Mau were strong and continued to work for the freedom of Kenya no matter what the odds were against them. These women accomplished a lot for the freedom of Kenya. Commenting on the Mau Mau struggle and the role of the women, Muthouoni Likimani writes:

Mau Mau is more than anybody who was not involved can fully understand. Mau Mau was a top secret movement of people who went to war with nothing - no guns, no spears...nothing but determination to get freedom and their land. What upsets me is that of all the books written about the movement, as much as women were involved, no one has ever written about the extent of their involvement. To me, women were unsung warriors. They were the fighters that no one talks about. They went to the forest with other men. They were seeing that the people in the
forest were fed, that the sick were taken care of. Women raised money, stole guns, stole medicine, transported all kinds of goods into the forest, they were even shooting. I know of one of the women, 'Field Marshall' Muthoni, who was trapping wildlife to cook. She went to fight alongside famous warriors of the forest like Dedan Kimaathi Waciuri. In fact, this woman was one of the last to surrender from the forest upon independence, she was not sure to surrender until she saw the African flag. Women of all ages and all walks of life participated in the Mau Mau war. Grandmothers - old, old women were very involved. No one would suspect a grandmother. Walking sticks in hand, they would take all kinds of things into the forest. These women knew they wanted their land back and their freedom. Many women were involved in finding support for Mau Mau both locally and internationally. One woman who is still alive, Mama Sarah Sarai, was one of the few educated women at the time. She was totally involved in Kenyatta's struggle. The true history must be told, everyone must know the truth about women, the unsung warriors of Mau Mau. (89)

**Nigerian Women as Forces of Change**

The women of Nigeria have a tradition of independent organization and collective action that dates back long before the advent of the Europeans. In the pursuit of their interests, some of these organizations have been on occasions confronted with problems which are religious or political in nature and whose resolution has involved them in short-term political activity. Thus, as forces or agents of social and political change, women often used traditional songs and dances, or the "sitting on" technique, as effective instruments of social criticism and political protest. There were also occasions when women exerted their power and influence in defense of the ancestral religion, as well as of traditional customs and practices. In these instances, as the discussions in this section show, women functioned as the guardians and defenders of the social order.

When the first Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Calabar in 1842 and began to question the long-established local customs and practices, the women—particularly the elderly women—offered the greatest opposition to missionary propaganda and iconoclasm.
Reverend H. M. Waddell recounts his encounter with Calabar women in 1853. This is with reference to the killing of the twins which has been a practice in Nigeria. He writes:

The subject of infanticide came up particularly this year. At all the stations it was determined, if twins were born in the towns, to bring both mothers and children to the mission houses.... At Creek Town some of the principal men could be depended on to aid our design.... To our surprise, the greatest opposition we met came from a quarter from whence it was least expected, the women themselves.... Preaching on Christ the light of the world, I referred to the deeds of darkness... particularly infanticide as beyond most bad customs unnatural, above most crimes heinous and unaccountable... But the elderly ladies of the town, sitting in double row behind us, murmured and contradicted us... and maintained so sharp a dispute that for a time service was disrupted... They repudiated the doctrine of twins as monstrous and abominable, and spat out in disgust at the mention of such a thing. (89)

Significantly, this women's "sharp" protest influenced local response to the missionary campaign against the killing of twins. Waddell says of the attitude of the king and his compatriots, "At the close of the discussion among themselves, King Eyo expressed their opinion, that the old customs of the country could not be changed." (89) In short, the wishes of the women had prevailed, at least temporarily, because the custom of throwing away twin babies was eventually abolished during the colonial period.

Ironically, although women were staunch defenders of traditional religion, in some societies, they nevertheless played a major role in the spread of Christianity. For example, the establishment of the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) at Emekuku, in the present Imo State of Nigeria, is said to have been the result of women's intervention. According to local legend and missionary accounts, Emekuku men, for reasons unknown, seemed decisively opposed to the establishment of the Catholic mission in the town. But women, we are told, were favorably disposed toward the Catholic missionaries, evidently because of their perception that the missionaries were agents of progress. Specifically,
they believed the missionaries would not only make it possible for their children to go to school but would also help the town to "grow up," (Ekechi50) just as the neighboring town of Egbu had "grown up" following the arrival of Protestant missionaries in 1906. (Ekechi51) As a result of the women's pressure, the story goes, the chief and his advisers finally allowed the Catholic missionaries to settle at Emekuku. Thus, the story of the founding of the RCM in Emekuku has tended to revolve around the intervention of women. (Ekechi52) Emekuku women, therefore, must be seen as progressive forces of social change.

Perhaps the most celebrated illustration of a successful protest movement by women, at least in terms of its far-reaching effects, is the 1929 Women's War in eastern Nigeria. This revolt has been studied from a number of perspectives, including recently as a classic illustration of female solidarity and challenge to the colonial political system that had excluded them. Thus, feminist anthropologist Audrey Wipper sees the Women's War as a heroic political challenge to male dominance: "Excluded from the formal political structure, women had to resort to extra-legal channels to voice their grievances." (54) The Women's war was trivialized by the colonizers as the Aba Riots. The Women's war had far reaching effects as it went a long way in de-stabilizing the colonial rule.

The Woman writer and war narratives

The Nigerian Civil War has been analyzed and contextualized from numerous historical perspectives. African as well as Western scholars have attempted to assess the effects of this brutal struggle. Whether it is C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, laying out his plea to the world in Biafra or liberal scholars such as Auberon Waugh and Suzanne Cronjé highlighting the hidden and not so hidden role of Britain in the "internal" conflict, the war has been written and rewritten from sundry ideological perspectives. Yet it is also clear that this phenomenon is not the sole prerogative of political scientists, historians or military warfare experts; numerous authors have creatively reenacted the war, often minutely chronicling the various offenses and battles. As Chidi Amuta, perhaps the foremost critic of Nigerian Civil War literature, notes,
Although the war ended more than a decade ago, one of its most enduring and significant legacies is the numerous literary works it has generated and inspired. Apart from works based directly on the war situation such as Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, Okechukwa Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun*, Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, recent works such as Festus Iyayi's *Violence* and Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* testify to a still lingering "war consciousness." The civil war constitutes the most important theme in Nigerian literature (in English) in the 1970s. (83)

Craig W. McLuckie, in his study, *Nigerian Civil War Literature: Seeking an Imagined Community*, implicitly agrees with Amuta and even goes so far as to claim that this literature can be read as an attempt to construct a truly national community after the partisan conflict of the disastrous war. The Anglophone nature of these works, McLuckie contends, is indicative of their national nature, for to "write in an indigenous language (Igbo, Yoruba, or Hausa, for example) would be to limit one's Nigerian audience, while also implicitly advancing a tribal rather than a nationalist consciousness" (6).

Despite the abundance of criticism on the war and the "national" literature it inspired, very rarely has the role of women, or women authors, been discussed in this critical discourse. As Abioseh M. Porter notes in "They Were There, Too: Women and the Civil War(s) in Destination Biafra," it is ironic "that some of the most celebrated attempts to discuss works dealing with the Nigeria-Biafra civil war--one of the predominant themes of modern African literature--have either ignored or underestimated the literary efforts of female writers" (313). If gender is discussed in a literary context, it tends to be in relationship to the female characters found in Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* or Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace*, seemingly despite the fact that the most celebrated woman writer in Nigeria, Flora Nwapa, has written extensively on the war in *Never Again, One is Enough* and *Women are Different*. Even the popularity of Buchi Emecheta and her impassioned *Destination Biafra*, has not allowed for the growth of a much critical "gendered" discourse. The two noteworthy overviews on the war and gender are Jane Bryce's "Conflict and Contradiction in Women's Writing on the Nigerian Civil War" and Marie Umeh's "The Poetics of Thwarted Sensitivity". Save for these two
overviews on Destination Biafra, Emecheta's work on the war seems to be largely ignored—even by feminist critics. This "oversight" is an unfortunate lacuna because Destination Biafra, perhaps more than any other Anglophone work, attempts to redress the gendered bias of discourse on the war as well as the "gender" of military warfare itself. Much like Salman Rushdie's Shame, Emecheta's Destination Biafra is a thinly fictionalized allegory that closely follows the rise and fall of military regimes.

Traditionally, women's narratives are considered of little value when she talks of war. Both Nwapa and Emecheta portray the horrors of the war from the women's point of view. It is history retold by the woman as she puts forth her powerful narrative analyzing the cause of the war and its aftermath. Most war literature from the African subcontinent chooses to ignore the two seminal war classics written by Emecheta and Nwapa. As Marie Umeh points out:

African women writers have not been treated as major contributors to the general output of war literature. In post war writing in Nigeria, women writers are conspicuous by their absence... One does not get the impression that post war writing comprises any other than the male sex. (Umeh 1996 56)

Jane Bryce points out that both Chinua Achebe and Chidi Amuta agree that the war has been a subject matter for many Nigerian writers. It is the one historical event which has been told and retold in several ways but interestingly it has not been a source of inspiration to women. How come there have been very few war narratives from the women? Bryce tries to answer her rhetorical question saying:

A simple answer is that the same numerical discrepancy is evident across the spectrum of Nigerian literature, and its causes have been well rehearsed elsewhere: disparity in educational opportunity, a double burden of domestic and wage earning labour, motherhood, family responsibilities and women's social roles. But beyond all these, there is still the question raised by Virginia Woolf: 'But the educated man's sister -- what does "patriotism" mean to her? Chukwuemeka Ike's Sunset at Dawn, or question it, nonetheless promote a form
of heroism which draws directly on the involvement of a male protagonist in the
events of the war. There is an intrinsic and inevitable distancing of women, or at
least, bourgeois women, whose roles were neither combative nor concerned with
policy making, but centred on survival. Both Rose Njoku and Flora Nwapa give a
good account of this. (32)

Amuta argues that writers have been schooled for power. Most texts authored by men
talk about the heroism involved in the war. The woman’s perspective is very different.
Nwapa stresses on the autobiographical element – stressing on her own experience of the
war. Like her educated and aware author, Kate, of Never Again she does not see any
bravery in the war. To her mind, it is more important to feed and protect her children
from the dreaded kwashikhor or starvation which killed more people than the actual war
did. In a paper titled “Nigeria – the woman as a writer” which Nwapa presented in Iowa
City in 1984, she began with a brief history of Nigeria. She discusses at length the civil
war and the misrule that characterized Post Independence Nigeria. She ends by saying:
“Now how do women fit into this seemingly chaotic situation?” She answers her query
by making her chief protagonist resisting war propagandas even at the risk of being
labeled a saboteur. The autobiographical links are unmistakable. According to Theodora
Ezigbo, “Nwapa uses the autobiographical mode and imbues it with authenticity and
clarity. There is every indication that Nwapa assumes the identity of the author, narrator
and heroine of the novel. In effect, Kate, the heroine of Never Again is Nwapa herself”.
(Umeh 1998 479).

Nwapa’s daughter Ezine Njerbie’s unpublished article “Remembrances of the war
period” records her and her mother’s experiences during the civil war. One of the
passages reads:

Mama …. Always has her radio on, listening to news on the war especially the
BBC. Looking back now she was always alert as if awaiting something… I
reckon she wasn’t amused by the events of the war because she argued always
with people and people, I believe, thought her to be a saboteur! (Umeh 1998 105)
The version in *Never Again* reads:

We fell to talking about BBC and the news. The view of the others was that I was a fool to take it seriously. The BBC was simply lying. Nigeria was not preparing for an attack on Ugwuta. It was just not possible. “But we heard Nigerians were making arrangements for flat bottomed boats for the attack,” I insisted. “Lies, all lies” many said. (24-25)

Two non fictional autobiographies – Leslie Ofoegbu’s *Blow the Fire* (1986) and Rose Njoku’s *Withstand The storm: War Memoirs of A housewife* (1986) has graphically explored the Nigerian crisis and the civil war. Njoku’s position as the wife of one of the most senior army officers in Nigeria and later at Biafra gave her access to not only the Biafran head of state but to highly placed individuals in the enclave. This unique position, hardly occupied by any woman in secessionist Biafra, enabled Njoku to embrace life from a wider perspective than most women in the area. Jane Bryce compares Njoku’s book with Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*. She writes:

> Withstand the Storm makes an eloquent counterpoint to Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*, in the sense that Rose Njoku actually underwent many of the experiences Emecheta ascribes to fictional Debbie Ogedembge. (39)

However, Ofoegbu’s *Blow the fire* is very different. She describes her family’s involvement with the war. Unlike Njoku, she does not interact with high placed military officers. She writes:

> We did not move in high circles so those looking for names of well known personalities will be disappointed. We were not close to the army so there are no military revelations. (2)

Both accounts are gripping and represent two authentic views of the tragic war from the women’s perspective. Anita Kern in her review of *Never Again* commends Nwapa for giving the reader “a realistic glimpse into the tensions of the war on a basic level” (58) and providing an “enlightening account of plain coping under fear, and a moving and
strong plea that such a terrible clash should indeed happen ever again.”(58) Nwapa’s vision in the war writing is woman – centred and the main actions in the novel and short stories revolve around individual families as their destinies unfold in the events of the cruel war. In her war fiction, Nwapa validates women’s war experience of war as a fit subject for literature and an important addition to the canon of Nigerian war writing.

Emecheta calls her writing “masculine”. She feels she has truly entered the masculine territory where she is writing about a subject which is masculine in nature. She prefaced Destination Biafra with the statement “I am glad this book is published: it is different from my other books; the subject is as they say,”masculine”. Both Njoku’s and Emecheta’s description of the woman in combat is very different from the male narratives. There is no glorification of war. It’s a grim acceptance of reality and an exploration of new possibilities for women. Emecheta writes:

Death was too near for comfort in Biafra. And for us who had known no danger of this kind before it was hell on earth. I meant to live at all costs. I meant to see the end of the war…. So that I could tell my friends on the other side what it meant to be in a war. (5)

Chidi Amuta, exploring the relationship between history and heroism writes:

…critical discourse of modern African literature must delve deeper into the ontological configurations of the very literary works in order to decipher the truth value of the texts as systems of aesthetic signification of meanings that ultimately derive from history. (60)

The elements of this statements “ontological configurations”, “truth value”, “aesthetic signification” and “history” combine to project an assumption of what a war novel should be about. Within the social realist genre it espouses, the protagonist assumes a kind of universal representativeness. The writers had been schooled for power “nurtured in the colonial system as logical successors to the colonialists.” (Amuta 60) The Ibo women, though schooled into playing the role of the passive home maker, left their homes and were in the thick of the battle. They played an essential supportive role. Amuta writes:
During the war, the women’s market network and other women’s organizations maintained a distribution system for what food there was and provided channels for the passage of food and information to the army. (84)

The women joined civil defense militia units and in May 1969, formed a Women’s Front and called on the Biafran leadership to allow them to enlist in the infantry. This is corroborated by Ifi Amadiume who writes:

Women fed and sustained the economy of Biafra through ‘attack trade’ which involved market trips through enemy front lines. Women mobilized 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 shifting, diminishing people who were slowly losing what they saw as a war of survival. (22)

The women did not cause the war but they were the worst victims – suffering rape and torture and seeing their men and children killed and maimed before their eyes. Nwapa writes in Never Again:

… were the old politicians. I did not like them. To my way of thinking they caused the war. And they were now in the forefront again directing war. The women especially were very active – more active than the men in fact. They made the uniforms for the soldiers, they cooked for the soldiers…(10)

Echoing Nwapa’s sentiments in Never Again, Emecheta writes in the introduction to Destination Biafra :” I hope we Nigerians in particular and the Black race in general will never again allow ourselves to be so used.” (VIII)

Some of the most famous war narratives documenting the horrors of the Nigerian civil war come from Eddie Iroh, S.O. Mezu, Cyprian Ekwensi and Elechi Amadi. Most of this writing about the Nigeria - Biafra war often discusses events as they take place either during or immediately after the war. Thus topics such as military reasons (including tactical and strategic maneuvers and battlefield scenarios) for Biafra’s loss of war, the
consequences of the war on the ordinary folks who had made tremendous sacrifices for
the Nation and received nothing in return, the behaviour of the individuals who used the
war as the opportunity to empower themselves form some of the important topics. Both
Nwapa and Emecheta discuss the women’s role in the war. Flora Nwapa’s *Never Again* is
a simple narrative which exposes the hypocrisies of the people who are pro-war. By
exposing the lie of the land, Nwapa emphasizes the plight of the masses that are forced to
be a part of this mindless destruction. She also records the trauma of rape, murder and
plunder that the women are subjected to. Buchi Emecheta’s novel *Destination Biafra*
borders on the fantastic as her central protagonist Debbie joins the army and is sent on a
mission of peace by the federal forces to the Biafrans. While Debbie’s mission seems to
border on the impossible, Emecheta emphasizes her role in trying to unite Nigeria. For
Emecheta, it is a story that needed to be told- the sufferings needed to be recorded. She
raises pertinent issues through her writing. She explores the causes of the war, the role of
the women in war and the position of the women in post war Nigeria. Through Debbie
she also looks at the educated and westernized woman who is seen to be a misfit in the
traditional Ibo set-up. Debbie’s learning process is seen as an integration of the modern
with the traditional as she struggles to keep baby Biafra alive.

In the following pages we analyse in detail Flora Nwapa’s *Never Again* and Buchi
Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*. Prior to that, we focus on the Aba protest by women of
Eastern Nigeria in 1929 and the Nigerian civil war which forms the background for the
two novels.

**The Aba Riots or The Women’s War**

The Aba Riots or the Women’s War is the link with the oral tradition of yore. It took
place in 1929-30. This protest movement achieved what other movements could not. It
heralded the end of the corrupt Warrant Chiefs who had become a nuisance to the society.

As the British established their rule, first in the delta and then in the Ibo land, they
established a series of courts, called the Native courts. They were widely established by
1903. Individuals were given warrants to sit on them and the holders of these warrants
were called Warrant Chiefs. The selection of Warrant Chiefs was extremely arbitrary. Sometimes he was the real chief but very often he was a town fool who was pushed forward as the local people were skeptical about the motive of their colonial masters. But very soon the Warrant Chiefs realized that they were at an advantageous position. They amassed huge amounts of wealth and used corrupt measures to strengthen their position in the society. The British realized from an early date that the Warrant Chiefs were extremely corrupt but they used these men to their own advantage. It is with their help that the British managed to rule the Iboland as they did not speak the local language themselves. The Warrant Chiefs grew rich in many ways. They grew rich through the sale of justice in the courts and indulged in money lending to the poor litigants. They even invented the system of fake summons called Akwukwo Nwannunu. Through this fake summon they could put innocent people in jail while the Warrant Chiefs would rob them off their property. The first set of protests took the form of a religious revivalism. A band of women would take it upon themselves to convey the message. They would appear before the house of a Warrant Chief, symbolically sweep his compound and deliver a message through song and dance. They would then demand money and ask that he should send the message further. Their charter of demands was very interesting - most often it would be pro- women. One of the demands was that of going back to the past and observe the rituals of the old times. The other demands were protests against social abuses, exhortations to keep houses and compounds clean, to limit the bride-price, show honesty in the bride price disputes, to fix market prices and to avoid native courts as the poor were often punished by these courts at the insistence of the rich. They even bargained that the prostitutes should moderate their charges. Their charter of demands might be seen to be somewhat conservative but the interesting thing remains that women were addressing these issues as their own concerns. They advocated the use of cowries to British currency. Women were advised to avoid food which might lead to the birth of twins. Most of their demands were related to women and trading. Men were cautioned against planting cassava as that was seen to be a woman's domain. (Isichei 76)

The British did not take very kindly to this revivalist movement. The women taking part in this were fined severely. Slowly the movement died out just as suddenly as it had
started. But it left in its wake an immense amount of confidence in the women who began to feel as empowered as they were in the pre-colonial times. In a sense this movement paved the way for a greater show of strength by the women in the women’s war of 1929.

**The Reasons for the Women’s War of 1929**

The background to the women’s war lies in the decision which was taken by the British in 1926-7 and implemented in 1928. The form of direct tax was introduced. The rationale was simple- all Nigeria was taxed so there was no reason not to tax the South Eastern provinces. But this met with a very strong opposition. Even the Warrant Chiefs were unhappy but they were forced to implement it. The Ibos felt humiliated. It was as if they were being treated as slaves and being forced to pay for the cultivation on their own land.

In 1928, the taxes were collected. There was immense amount of resentment because of the falling prices of the palm oil and the fear that women too would be taxed. In 1929, this resentment gave vent to large scale protests. The spark that ignited the conflagration was struck in the Oloko, in Bende division. A young British officer wished to check the accuracy of local population returns. He relegated this job to the local Warrant Chief who in turn delegated it to a local schoolmaster. The school master asked a few questions to a woman named Nwanyeruwa, who was processing oil in her compound. For some reason the woman lost her cool and a noisy argument started which led to a scuffle. Nwanyeruwa rushed to a gathering of women who were holding a church meeting. Together they joined in the protest against the schoolmaster which alarmed the young British officer who was unable to fathom why the women were so agitated. To appease the women he imprisoned the Warrant Chief and the school master. The women were beside themselves with joy and this small victory gave them the false assurance that they could win against the British. The women of Oloko sent delegates armed with symbolic palm branches to neighbouring towns. In a number of centres in Calabar province the women responded with great enthusiasm. They protested against the corrupt practices of the Warrant Chiefs. They were also critical of the British for the imposition of courts and the ruining of their personal finances through arbitrary taxation policies.
The revolt had very little planning. It was entirely spontaneous as about 20,000 women took to the streets on one accord. They wore chalk markings and carried palm fronds—interestingly the markings represent both war and peace. Armed only with sticks the women attacked the native courts and the Niger company factories. However, their greatest grievance was against the Warrant Chiefs. They wanted their caps of insignia removed. The women had great faith in their invulnerability. They felt that being women and mothers, they would not be attacked physically. This, however, was proved wrong as the British forgot their tenets of chivalry. Troops fired on the women in 8 different places, killing several and maiming the others. The official casualty showed 55 women to be dead, the real count was however much more. As Elizabeth Isichei points out:

Unplanned, spontaneous, disastrous, the rising gave outward expression to a deep inarticulate desire to turn back the clock of change, not only to remove specific forms of oppression, but to realize again the happier society of the earlier times. Half remembered, half understood, unrecoverable, the world they had lost beckoned them with a compelling attraction. (155)

Interestingly while the economic reason was foremost, the women were concerned about their declining position in society. In the pre-colonial setup they were accorded respect as senior wives and mothers. Even in the otherwise patriarchal set up, they enjoyed certain privileges but in the colonial times their status declined considerably. When the women took to the streets to protest against the arbitrary taxation, the British rulers were flabbergasted. What surprised them even more was that the movement had no ostensible leader. It seemed that all the women were equally involved and equally agitated. One of the recorded versions of the women’s speech has a woman named Enyidia, giving evidence on behalf of the agitated women. She is referred to as the Female African. She says:

What have we, women, done to warrant our state? We women are like trees which bear fruit. You should tell us the reason why women seeds should be counted. Don’t you agree that the world depends on women? It is they who multiply the
population of the world. We suffer at the hands of chiefs. They do things and want to place the responsibility therefore upon women. We are not prepared for it. Out desire is that all the old chiefs should be deposed and their caps taken away from them... (Hatch 45)

The Women’s war was both a failure and a success. In terms of the Rebellion it failed completely as the women were routed instantaneously. But it succeeded in forcing the British to re-examine their governance. In fact the British began to re-examine the nature of the pre colonial structures. The Warrant Chiefs were brought under scrutiny and the corrupt ones were severely punished. A new system of local government was introduced. Its basic characteristic was that it was an attempt to restore the system of pre colonial times. This new system was far from being successful but the colonial regime learnt a few useful lessons from the women’s massive show of strength.

The Women’s War is a precursor to the role women play during the Nigerian civil war. It was a psychologically debilitating war as this time it wasn’t a foreign power they were fighting against. Again, the women hold fort as they lead from the front as active soldiers in the battle. They also echo the conscience of Nigeria which knows this war is fruitless and will benefit none.

The Nigerian Civil War
Post independence Nigeria relived its worst nightmare in the form of the civil war which had the whole of Nigeria up in arms butchering their own brothers and burning their own property. The British granted independence to Nigeria on paper but in order to keep their share in the newfound oil wells, they kept up the politics of creating minority discord. The Nigerians as they were now called, was in reality an ethnic group of multiple clans mainly the Ibos, Yorubas and the Hausas. It was an agglomeration of tribal nations. To ensure one’s constant presence in Nigeria, the British chose to keep the division between North and South Nigeria intact. The reason was to keep the North in total darkness about the developments in South Nigeria which was rich in economic activities and had a major Christian influence. The three major tribes also backed the three major political parties
that were now dominating the Nigerian politics. The first was NCNC (National Council of Nigerian Citizens) which was founded in 1944. This had a major Ibo presence; however it was Pan African in orientation. Its first President was the veteran Lagos Nationalist Herbert Macaulay. The second important party was headed by Chief Awolowo, a Yoruba from Ijebu. Awolowo formed a Yoruba cultural Association, the Egbe Omu Odudwa. The 3rd was led by the Hausa intellectual Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. It was formed by the conservative Fulani Hausa communities.

Oil prospecting in Nigeria started in 1937 with Shell beginning to prospect for oil. In 1956, the 1st production wells were drilled. The head quarters for Shell BP was located in Owerri for sometime and later shifted to Port Harcourt.

The Nigerian independence was in a sense a series of compromises made by the political parties, their leaders and the British. The colonial rulers were eager to leave this land of strife and political unease but they wanted a stake in the country’s economy. After Independence NPC and NCNC formed a coalition government headed by Tafawa Balewa in 1960. Azikiwe, doubtless reluctantly accepted the ‘gilded cage’ of Governor General. In 1964, the Mid- West with NCNC backing became a separate region under Dennis Osdebay. As time past, the optimism wore off and an infighting of a sinister kind held sway. Corruption was rampant. The members were bribed to cross the floor. The most disturbing feature, however, was the growth of Tribalism. This was seen everywhere- in competing for market stalls and gratification in the civil services.

By 1964, there was a strong anti Ibo sentiment in Nigeria as the Ibos were seen to be holding all the top jobs in the government. Commenting on the unfortunate ethnic divide of Nigeria, Chinua Achebe writes:

Modem Nigerian History has been marked by sporadic eruptions of anti Ibo feelings of more or less serious import, but it was not until1966-7 that it swept through Northern Nigeria like “a flood of deadly hate that the Ibo first questioned

255
the concept of Nigeria which they had embraced with much greater fervor than the Yoruba or the Hausa/Fulani. (76)

The first coup or the January Boys’ Coup triggered off the 1st round of the Nigerian civil war. The coup was planned by army officers comprising mostly of Ibos. It was a coup which was planned more to bring down than to build. On the night of January 14th, 1966, the army boys carried out assassinations in Lagos, Ibadan and Kaduna. After a brief political confusion, Major-General Johnson Agui Ironsi took over. The coup in Kaduna was led by Major Chukuma Nzeguri, an Ibo. In his speech after the coup, he enumerated his goals. They were idealistic and hoped to succeed by killing all the corrupt men who were in power. In his speech he says:

Our enemies are political profiteers, swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten percents, those that seek to keep the country permanently divided so that they can remain in the office as ministers and VIPs of waste, the tribalists, the nepotists. (Isichei 243)

The coup was extremely brutal as the Sardauna of Sokoto was shot along with his wife. Emecheta records these horrifying details in Destination Biafra. Interestingly, in this coup no Ibo leader was killed. To the rest of Nigeria it appeared as if the Ibos orchestrated this coup for a complete take over. On 29 July 1966, in a counter coup, Ironsi and a number of other senior leaders were killed. Most of the traders killed this time were Ibos. Among the rest of the Nigerians, a strange fear of an Ibo takeover seemed to gain ground. Amidst immense political confusion Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from a Northern minority group took over. For over a month different forms of governance was applied to the beleaguered and battered territory of the so called new Nation. Though an army man, Ironsi had dreamt of a unified Nigeria devoid of petty tribalism. In one of his radio interviews he said:

...It has become apparent to all Nigerians that rigid adherence to “regionalism” was the bane of the last regime and one of the main factors which led to its
fall...A solution suitable to our national needs must be found. The existing boundaries of government control will need to be readjusted to make for less cumbersome administration. (Biswas 22)

After Ironsi’s brutal killing, Gowon tried very hard to stem the infighting within the army. He realized that tribalism was leading to a sense of separatism that spelt disaster. But by then, the damage was done. The Northerners and Southerners were convinced that each was plotting against the other. Despite Colonel Gowon’s efforts, the army participated in communal massacre. In an effort to avert the disaster, General Ankrah, head of Ghana’s military government persuaded his colleagues to meet at Aburi in 1967. The Aburi meeting was seen to be a huge success as the warring leaders decided to call truce. It made for great international press as the leaders embraced and spoke of a unified Nigeria. In reality it was hogwash, as each leader chose to retain his territorial domain. The military government put forward the proposal that the legislative and executive powers should be vested in a supreme military council, which would be subject to unanimity among all military governors. The tragedy of Nigeria was that there was no unified leadership. It was clear to most that secessionism would start any moment.

On 26 May 1967, the East, under the leadership of Ojukwu decided to secede. It declared its independence and the new state was called Biafra. Officially all ties between Biafra and the federal state of Nigeria was dissolved. This paved the way for one of the worst instances of fratricide recorded by history as brothers killed brothers- people who served in the same army earlier were now thirsty for each other’s blood. In this bloodbath that lasted for over one and a half years, the maximum number of people killed were Ibos. Biafra was a concept kept alive by some dogged believers who felt they would win. The disparity in resources between the Biafrans and the federal soldiers were immense. The Biafrans fought empty handed and on empty stomachs. Their resilience was immense but it was suicidal. Only once did the Biafrans show some signs of winning when they almost occupied Lagos but they were beaten back the very next day. It was evident that the Biafrans had no chance of winning. Ojukwu hoped to hang on and rally for world opinion
on his side. Four African countries recognized Biafra- Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon and the Ivory Coast.

At first the Ibo masses rallied around Ojukwu. They were convinced that theirs was a just war and they would win. Many of them made huge financial sacrifices to keep the war going. The war, however, was going nowhere. The people were dying, children were starving and women were being brutally raped. It’s almost as if all hell had been let lose on the Nigerian soil. More soldiers died of marasmus and kwashiorkor (starvation) than bullets. For the Biafrans, it was a show of strength for sure, but it bordered more on foolhardiness. A British journalist reports:

When half starved, bare footed, ragged soldiers, numb with fear, speaking glowingly of their ‘Biafra’, when poor peasant boys march singing to the frontline with five rounds of ammunition a piece, proudly totting rifles they have never fired before; and when an illiterate peasant woman who has just seen her second child die of starvation declares its spirit to the success of Biafra it is impossible not to accept that the masses- the Ibo masses at least- were behind the war. (Isichei 98)

Finally on 15 January 1970, the Biafrans made an unconditional surrender. Ojukwu fled to the Ivory Coast just before the end. In the next four years, the Ibos tried hard to forget the past trauma and rebuilt their present lives. After 4 years, it was almost as if the war had not happened. However, the deep scars of the unreasonable ethnic warfare had remained- these wounds were too deep to be done away with.

The women’s involvement in the Biafran war is a historical reality. They were involved in wartime administration. Some of them were recruited into the civil militia and also promoted to official cadres. The women provided all kinds of services- as nurses, as providers of food for the soldiers and some even opted for active combat. On the economic front, women sensed an opportunity and seized it. Food was required for the army and the women took contracts from the Biafran soldiers to become food contractors.
Many women who were erstwhile teachers, farmers and typists, took to this profession which provided them with great financial security. With the end of the war came the oil boom where Nigeria’s income from petroleum skyrocketed. Many women, due to their proximity with army officers made a lot of money during this time. They were called the proverbial “cash madams”. Ibo women are resilient. Both Emecheta and Nwapa record the resilience of the women in the face of war.

*Never Again (1975) - Flora Nwapa*

*Never Again,* the title of the book, says it all. Nigeria or any other place for that matter should never be subjected to the horrors of war. The war is debilitating, harsh and harmful for civilization. It does not matter who wins because in a war everybody is a loser. Through this seemingly simple and uncomplex book, Nwapa recounts the horrors of the war through the eyes of Kate, an educated woman who is able to see through the politics of war. She is not fooled by the tall claims of the corrupt politicians but the war renders her helpless. She is forced to flee the land of her birth. The narration is semi-autobiographical. During the civil war, like most Nigerian elites Flora Nwapa was forced to run away to the East. On her return she undertook the almost impossible task of trying to unite the orphans of the Biafran war with their families. It was an immensely difficult job but she met with some degree of success. *Never Again* is set in the times of the Civil War when the Biafran army is rarely to be seen. What has remained of Biafra is merely a dream. The novel is set in the lake town of Ugwuta. The Nigerian Federal Forces are fast approaching but the perpetrators of the Biafran war- the army and some men who support it for their own vested interests, insist that the town is well guarded and nobody should flee. Kate and her family have been on the run for quite sometime. The very first paragraph of the novel sets the tone for the horrific conditions the people of Biafra are forced to endure.

After fleeing from Enugu, Onitsha, Port Harcourt and Elele, I was thoroughly tired of life. Yet how tenaciously one could hold on to life when death was round the corner. Death was too near for comfort in Biafra. And for us who had known no danger of this kind before it was hell on earth. (5)
Throughout the text, there is a feeling that war has been thrust upon the common people. For the common masses, it mattered little who ruled. Kate realized that Biafra had been created merely with words. The Biafran soldiers have no ammunition to defend themselves. But to the common man, the Biafran radio recounts their heroic deeds and the numerous victories they have won. In Biafra, BBC and other foreign news channels have been banned. People are fed on the lies perpetrated by the middle men who want to keep the dream of Biafra alive. It is people like this who use the war to their advantage. One such person is Kal. He is so pro Biafra that people feared him. He seems to know everything about war fronts. He addresses people who flee war fronts as saboteurs. Yet, interestingly, two days before Port Harcourt is shelled, he runs away. After Ugwuta is shelled and then left barren, Kal is seen again. He has now become a major in the army. Kate wonders at Kal’s change of fortune. He has never fired a shot nor taken any army training but by sheer lies and connivance he is wearing an army man’s uniform. He has also enlisted his nephew as a batman. Looking at Kal, kate is unable to conceal her surprise.

He was so full of himself as usual. How come he had enlisted so soon after the fall of Ugwuta? He now had a batman, a nephew of his who was in school at the outburst of hostilities. He too was in uniform. When was he trained? And Kal, when was Kal trained? His shoulders showed that he was a major. Wonders would never cease, Kal, a major. A lot could happen in a short week. Anything was possible in Biafra. (76)

Though Kal had nothing to do with the war, his closeness to Ojukwu ensured that he led a good life inspite of the sufferings around him. While the common Biafran could not drive a car for there was an acute scarcity of petrol, Kal drove an army car. Looking at him, Kate can only marvel at the folly that had resulted in the creation of Biafra.

“Bravo Kal”, I said when I saw him. He came in a commandeered car. Kal had his own car which he had hidden somewhere and used somebody else’s. That was
Biafra. Those who were in and out of State House, who had access to Ojukwu preserved their cars and used those commandeered from transporters and traders and businessmen. Served all of us right. We all were collectively responsible. We all must pay collectively for our folly. (78)

Kate is Nwapa’s spokesperson for exposing the hypocrisies of the pro war argument and the mercenaries who have declared the state of Biafra. Even if initially people believed in the rhetoric of equality, it was clear very soon that while the common masses suffered, the politicians prospered. The dream that was Biafra was hollow. Kate always talks about it in past tense.

That day, long long ago Biafra was declared. We stood and heard our national anthem and the speech. It was six in the morning. The anthem was inspiring. Everything then was inspiring. (7)

Very soon the inspiration turned to acute despair. Biafra was supposed to be an honest and just nation but soon what remained was a travesty of these sentiments. The officials were corrupt, the Biafran soldiers looted for survival and the common man faced death and destruction for no reason at all. It was almost as if God had abandoned Biafra. While some women put their trust in the Goddess of the lake, Kate is unable to put her faith in God. Perhaps she is truly becoming the mad woman that people have started calling her.

To me God did not interfere in the affairs of Nigeria and Biafra. God had nothing at all to do with it. Not long ago in Nigeria we prayed to one God. Now we had two Gods. The God of Nigeria and the God of Biafra. (9)

What has kept the Biafran war alive are a pack of lies. And interestingly these lies are perpetrated by the likes of Kal and his henchmen. The young men who have been forced
to enlist as soldiers have no ammunition and no food. Armed with sticks they brave the bullets of the Nigerians. Kate is appalled at this sheer carnage but anybody who dares protest is dubbed as a saboteur and might be picked up for questioning by the Disciplinary Committee. Endless meetings are being held where the “intellectuals” speak. One even likened the Biafra war to the war between David and Goliath. Just as David had slain Goliath, so would the Biafrans triumph over the Nigerians because their war was just. Unfortunately the soldiers who defend Biafra tell a different story altogether. The two soldiers who report from the war front talk of fatigue and starvation. They talk of lack of ammunition but the committee turns against them and they are called liars. Both men are unceremoniously turned out of the gathering. Kate’s husband Chudi goes to see the preparation for defending Ugwuta. He is appalled at the sight.

Chudi was very sad. He had gone up to the field to see what the youths were doing. They had wooden sticks as guns on their shoulders. A wounded Biafran soldier was in command. He limped as he commanded and it was so painfully ridiculous…How could these people he saw defend Ugwuta? What were the people, the soldiers who were paid to defend us doing? They were not doing anything at all. And yet there was a strong campaign that anybody seen packing would be handed over to the army…(56)

In *Wives At War*, Nwapa echoes a similar sentiment. In “A Certain death”, a woman pays an eighteen year old volunteer to take her brother’s place in the army. Her determination to save her brother does not blind her from the moral dilemma of paying someone to replace him. She thinks:

Suicide it was. To be compelled to go to war. To be compelled to go to war and to be conscripted into the Biafran army was suicide, pure and simple. Only those who possessed the sixth sense survived. Like the youth who was now going to take the place of my brother. I had bought him to “die” in place, not of, but for my brother. (37)
In spite of the shelling moving closer and closer, the people of Ugwuta are not allowed to move out. An artificial petrol scarcity is created. While only a few are able to buy petrol at black market prices, many are forced to walk as their cars are rendered useless without fuel. When they finally evacuate it is like a mass of humanity on the move. Old men and women, children, pregnant women, animals all seem to be moving out. The roads are lined with rotting corpses. It is almost as if nothing in Biafra will remain except for the corpses of its men, women and children.

As they move out of Ugwuta, more and more horrifying sights meet their eye. A pregnant woman dies amidst heavy shelling while her helpless children look on unable to fathom the world around them. The sentiments are echoed in the words of an old woman who has lost a daughter and her only son to this mindless violence.

I have not seen my son. My son has been killed by the Hausas. My daughter who lived in Vom did not return, and now my son. What interest had I in the politics of this country, and now this has befallen me, an insignificant wretch like me. What am I to do...? (30)

Nwapa is equally critical of the women who join the men in the positive propaganda of Biafra. According to her, sometimes these women were more fanatical than the men. However, in this case, one of the women politicians, who had spoken so eloquently about Biafra just a day before, now realizes that she has been duped.

Madam Agfa spoke between sobs. I went to Oweri this morning. They assured me everything was alright. That man, that head of the Navy, I went to him last night. I told him I was afraid. Was it necessary for us to evacuate? He laughed at me. He said I was a coward. He took me to a place where he showed me all the arms and ammunitions. He said it would be suicidal for the Nigerians to make an attempt. I was deceived. I was deceived by my people... (39)

Nwapa also comments on the anti Ibo sentiment that had pervaded Nigeria at that point of time. Ibos were seen to be becoming more and more powerful. When the Ibos demanded
their own land Biafra, the public sympathy was with Ojukwu. But slowly it gave way to despair when they realized that the war was subjecting them to humiliation. Gone was the dream of a just nation, here it had become a day to day fight for survival. Commenting on the anti Ibo sentiment, Kate muses:

The war was madness. We were not prepared for this war. We shouldn’t have seceded. It was a big miscalculation. I had thought Gowon was not going to fight us. I had thought that the rest of Nigeria would have been glad to get rid of the Ibos. The Ibos whom they said grabbed all their jobs, all the wealth of the country. The uncivilized Ibos who only the other day had their first lawyer, and who have just had their first generation of doctors and engineers. How dare they rub their shoulders with the Yorubas of the West, the civilized people whose grandfathers were doctors and lawyers; whose great grandfathers attended Oxford and Cambridge in the last century. (50)

In the face of war, life seemed to have lost all semblance of normalcy. Suddenly people find themselves sitting idle with nothing to do. Nwapa likens this idleness to mental inertia which very often prompts disruption. Kate is petrified of this idleness. She feels that because of this mental idleness, the Biafrans may start attacking each other. The Biafrans were accusing each other for being saboteurs. The army chided the civilians for not contributing as much to the war as they were. Moreover, the starved Biafran soldiers looted and plundered which made Kate wonder at the sanity of the war which has been thrust upon them.

We could have built Biafra where no one would be oppressed. Was anyone sure of this? ... There was already oppression even before the young nation could stand on its feet. Wasn’t it even possible that war could’ve broken out in the young nation if there was no civil war? Perhaps Nigeria did well to attack us. If they hadn’t, we would have, out of frustration began to attack and kill one another. (50)
Looting. It was the order of the day. It was our bane. The bane of Biafra. I used to think that only an invading army looted property, not the home army. (50)

The women play multiple roles during the wartime. Most of them organize kitchens for the soldiers. Nwapa shows her women to have enormous resilience in the face of severe oppression. While men debate over the political imbroglio, it is the women who make decisions with their heads and not with their hearts. Kate and her friend Bee very clear sighted about the war. They see through the lies but know better than to protest. Kate’s primary concern is the welfare of her family and she works towards it keeping her wits together. She wills herself to survive the war and she does it. During the shortage of petrol, it is Bee who is able to procure the petrol which saves several lives.

Another example is that of Mike’s wife, one of the residents of Enugu. She is very critical of the war propaganda right from the outset. Her husband, however, would hear none of it. In order to sustain their twelve year long marriage, she helps him buy a gun and dig a bunker in the house knowing fully well that they would be of no use. However, when Enugu is invaded, neither the gun nor the bunker is of any help. Mike and his wife are forced to flee to safety as the wife had foreseen right from the outset that the only way to avoid bullets was by fleeing the area before the attack.

When Kate and her family move out of the Lake city, it is again left to the women to organize the food and take care of the children. The men are rendered helpless and useless. They have lost their erstwhile jobs. Now, if they are in the army they are kept busy but as civilians, their ego takes a beating every minute. They are mocked at by the army men and not being trained in any kind of domestic work, they are forced to take a back seat as the women keep the family going. Sadly though inspite of the women’s strong resilience, it is they who are the worst casualties of war. When an old man is incapable of contributing to the war, he plays host to the soldiers allowing her daughter to sleep with them. Very often, the father would even allow the army men to take away their daughters. More often than not, the woman had little or no say in the matter. During the raids, it is the women who pay with their bodies. The Biafran and Nigerian soldiers rape
innumerable women. Several women are forced into prostitution. One such example is that of Agnes who had studied in Congo and had come back to her home town just before the war. She was not given a visa to fly back so she and her sister join the mercenaries in the hope that they would help them escape. Kate watches helplessly as the mercenaries take away two Biafran girls.

Agnes jumped out. She collected her suitcase and that of her younger sister. She gave some money to her mother and father and asked her sister to come with her. They drove away. The Mercenary had captured a Biafran girl. No two Biafran girls. (62)

The Federal Forces move on after capturing Ugwuta. Kate and her family cannot believe their good fortune. Kal and his henchmen claim all the credit for the evacuation. According to Kal, the valiant Biafran army had won their land back. There was no truth in it as Owerri falls soon after. However, the refugees cheer as their land has been cleared. A young Biafran soldier claiming all the credit for the evacuation of Ugwuta warns them about the Ugwuta that they would see now.

When you go back to Ugwuta, think not of your property but the blood we spilled to set it free. Build anew, that’s what Biafra means. (69)

Kate is appalled at the destruction she sees. In 48 hours, a vibrant living village has been converted into a vast desolate land. Even a live chicken or a goat cannot be seen. The only thing recognizable is the Lake. The Goddess Uhamiri had been kind to her people. But Kate sees that the sacred lake had been desecrated. Dead bodies are floating in it. A vile stench hangs around it. The novel, however, ends in hope as Kate sees Uhamiri worshippers in white going towards the lake with the sacrificial white ram.

Uhamiri heard the pleadings of her people. She did not turn a deaf ear. She heard them. And she had acted according to the belief of her people. No invader coming by water had ever succeeded in Ugwuta. Uhamiri be praised. (80)
Nwapa’s message reads loud and clear. War spells nothing but disaster and the perpetrators of war are the worst enemies of humanity. Looking at the war ravaged Ugwuta, Kate can not believe that it was milling with people just a few hours ago. War can be so final and so debilitating.

Only a few days before, the place was swarming with people. Now it was empty. It was a battle ground. Where were the Nigerian troops who entered it just three days ago? Where was everybody? What folly? What arrogance, what stupidity led us to this desolation, to this madness, to this wickedness, to this war, to this death? When this cruel war was over, there will be no more war. It will not happen again, never again. NEVER AGAIN, never again. (70)

**Destination Biafra**

*Destination Biafra* is Emecheta’s magnum opus on the civil war of Nigeria. During the war she was among the people protesting against the war at Trafalgar Square in London. However, her family in Nigeria suffered terrible casualties. Her brother walked barefoot on the Benin-Asaba road and witnessed several brutal killings. Her eight year old niece Buchi Emecheta died of starvation and her four year old sister died two days later. It is difficult for Emecheta to be neutral about the war. Her book favours the Ibos and mourns the blatant killing of Ibos that happened during this war. However, consciously Emecheta tries not to take sides. Her central protagonist Debbie is not an Ibo but belongs to a marginal tribe called the Istekeris. In her foreword she mentions her debt to Wole Soyinka’s *The Man Died* which opened her eyes to the sufferings of the non Ibos. Debbie therefore is constructed in the light of a true Nigerian, who does not believe in Tribalism. Destination Biafra is Debbie’s courageous foray into Biafra to bring Momoh’s message to Abosi to request him to surrender and spare the common masses from the mass slaughter that they were being subjected to. However, Debbie’s journey is much more than that. It is this journey which teaches her to be a true Nigerian. Divided by class and education, there is a huge chasm between her and the common masses. The war breaks down the class barriers and Debbie finds herself relearning the lessons of her
foremothers. The sordid journey teaches her to be one with the common masses. Therefore *Destination Biafra* is as much about Debbie’s journey inwards as her fantastic travel to meet Abosi, the secessionist leader of Biafra.

*Destination Biafra* is oft critiqued as a flawed novel. The characters are not well fleshed out and seem almost stereotypical. This is not entirely untrue but to judge the novel merely on this would not be fair on the effort Emecheta makes to understand the mechanisms of war. The first thing she does is to analyze the causes of the war. Debbie becomes her spokesperson on several occasions. Alan Grey represents the quintessential double faced White man who makes love to the daughter of Africa, Debbie, supplies arms for the war and is solely concerned about the oil deals. Debbie’s slapping Grey and asserting herself in the end of the novel might seem dramatic especially as she weaves the “African woman” and the “Englishman” into her discourse, yet the message is clear. A new breed of African woman has been born. An education in Oxford has only strengthened her. She truly believes in a united Nigeria free of tribalism and free of class based exploitation.

*Destination Biafra* recreates the history of the civil war. Through fictitious characters modeled on some real characters, Emecheta fleshes out the reason for this heinous fratricide. She identifies some key reasons for the grim fate of her countrymen. Even as the British are ready to leave the country, their concern for the oil wells makes them want to have a permanent stake in Nigeria’s economy. As far as the British are concerned, the only quality they look for in a Nigerian leader is that he should be a puppet in their hands. Fergus and Alan Grey, the self proclaimed “friends of Africa” voice their main concern on the eve of the Nigerian independence:

> These vast areas are full of oil, which is untouched and still needs thorough prospecting. Now we are to hand it over to these people, who’ve had all these minerals since Adam and had not known what to do with them. Now they are beginning to be aware of their monetary value. And after independence they may sign it all over to the Soviets for all we know. (6)
In *Destination Biafra* Emecheta pieces out the events of the war as they unfold. She points out that the Nigeria which the British left is unable to deal with its borrowed political legacy. Moreover, the British do not wish to let go of the governance entirely. Their desire to keep the oil wells under control leads them to nominate the Hausa leader to power. With their little or no knowledge of the tribes, the British presume that the Hausas are in majority and that they are by far the most peaceful of the three major tribes. As the Governor General Mc Donald debates with Sir Fergus, the former Governor General, they ponder on who should be nominated as the first Nigerian Prime Minister.

‘The first President must be someone popular with all the major tribes...’ Macdonald began. ‘Not necessarily. These people have no real experience of democracy. We shall have to introduce proportional representation. They won’t know it is not practiced in Britain. Three quarters of the people don’t know what voting means, and even after they have voted they still won’t know. It is good for Mallam Nguru to be popular among the Ibos, though I doubt if the Ibos will nominate anybody other than their own Dr. Ozimba. All the same numerically speaking Mallam won’t need the votes, since the Hausas are greater in number than the rest of the country put together, even not even counting their women. (10)

Emecheta does not merely put the blame on the British colonizers, she realizes that the corrupt ministers of Nigeria are as much to blame for the sorry state of the country’s economy. Debbie’s father, the foreign minister signs several contracts with the U.K. distilleries making himself richer with the pay-off deals, the money for which is deposited in his Swiss bank account. In his own country, not only does he boast of his riches, he even makes an obscene show of it by making his wife and daughter wear shoes laced with gold. These leaders amass huge amounts of wealth. They also encourage and abet tribalism to serve their own needs. It was understood that if someone from the tribe won the election, he would be expected to benefit his tribesmen by favouring them over other Nigerians.
As a responsible person in Nigeria, one did not just go into politics to introduce reforms but to get what one could of the national cake and to use part of it to help one's extended family, the village of one's origin and if possible one's own tribe; at least in this way much of one's ill gotten money got returned to the society. (16)

The elections for the first set of leaders is therefore more of a mockery than anything else. Instead of discussing serious issues, the campaigns instigate a sinister kind of tribalism.

Grey sat by the mahogany boxed radio listening to the greatest string of gibberish he had ever heard. One candidate claimed that the mother of his opposition member used to sell cocoyam leaves. Another burst into song in the air and, to the accompaniment of talking drums, told his constituents that if they voted for a constituent from a different tribe, they would be selling their soul to the devil. (17)

Unfortunately, in spite of some pragmatic leaders like Ozimba, Ahaji Malniki and such like, the greater part of the election is fought purely on the tribal basis. The depravity of tribalism is seen in the Bakodaya episodes in Northern Nigeria where the Northern or the Hausa candidates get over 400,000 votes while their non-Northern opponents get Bakodaya or no votes at all. In fact an elected Minister was supposed to serve his community first before he made any contribution to the Government.

If a man became an MP it was his duty to see the well being of all the members of his extended family; he must show his wealth by helping this ageing farmer, that clever boy born of poor parents, made sure that his village had the best amenities, the largest buildings and all the paraphernalia of modern living. Of course no government minister was paid enough to be able to afford this. and so
as not to lose face they would go behind the scene for their percentage. Some posts carried greater rewards than others. (40)

Emecheta also exposes the childlike and asinine war between two Yoruba leaders which triggers off the first set of killings. The men want the power and position not because they wish to serve their nation but because they wish to make as much money as is possible. The fratricide was initiated by the Nigerians themselves as Chief Odusomu and Chief Durosaro vie for each other’s blood not caring about how many human lives are lost in the process.

The paid thugs outside began to shoot into the air and at the sound of the gunfire all the members ran for their lives. The House could not vote at all, to say nothing of voting against Chief Durasaro. Chief Odumosu fumed with rage as he dashed home through the streets inciting his own thugs. The whole town found itself in a mini civil war. Bullets sang in the streets of Ibadan. The police could do little, faced with groups of armed hooligans. Most of them were normally unemployed but had been given large sums of money if they saw the operation through. (49)

According to Emecheta, the causes for the war are multifarious. Britain’s interference is just a part of it. The local politicians were entirely to be blamed. She also shows that the first set of killings could not be controlled as there was a very ineffective Prime Minister at the helm of affairs. In his pretence to appear dignified, he failed to take any decision. Finally, when things get out of hand, Abosi and his band of men decide on eliminating the corrupt ministers. What follows is a spate of mass killings where Debbie’s father, the revered Sardauna and Prime Minister Nguru Kano are killed mercilessly. The army boy’s coup had created yet another problem. No Ibo politician of any significant repute had been killed. To make matters worse provocative graffiti began to appear on the walls mocking the corrupt leaders’ death.

They had not turned many sandy roads when they were confronted with some of the Ibo’s provocative graffiti: a drawing of Dr. Ozimba treading on the crumpled
head of the Late Sardauna. Alhaji Malniki was right to be alarmed. If nothing was
done to restrain the Southerners then the Hausas would be aroused to a point
where a holy war may result, with human blood running down the streets like
tropical rain. (69)

Soon after the first coup, the army tried to assure people that there was no tribalism in the
army. However, that was hardly reassuring as the hatred and mistrust among the tribes
continued to escalate. In the second coup, Brigadier Onyemere and his Yoruba host,
Oladapo who chose to stand by him were killed. That sounded the death knell to the
friendship between the tribes. With the Brigadier’s death, the whole of Nigeria was
thrown into the worst confusion ever where people killed each other mindlessly.

With the death of the Brigadier, Nigeria was plunged into the bloodiest
carnage ever seen in the whole of Africa. And the greater part of the blood
that flowed was Igbo blood. (74)

A final effort for peace is made at Abosi, Ghana where Abosi and Momoh embrace
before the foreign cameras. But immediately upon return, Saka Momoh divides Nigeria
into twelve states. Abosi sees that as a ploy to divide and rule Nigeria as the British had
done before him. This spurs him into action and he decides to secede. On the 30th of May
1967 the State of Biafra is declared.

The Ibo leaders could hardly restrain the joy and celebration of people of Eastern
Nigeria when the state of Biafra was declared on 30 May, three days after the
news from Lagos about the division of the country. This was a major move
against the first republic of Nigeria. (69)

Emecheta’s portrayal of Debbie Ogedemgbe has come under much criticism. She is said
to lack the sensitivity and growth which most of Emecheta’s other women protagonists
have. In some cases she may seem almost puppet like being used by the author merely for
her political propaganda. However, the portrayal of Debbie may have its own flaws; she
comes across as the fascinating young woman who might spell the future of Nigeria. It is true that Emecheta casts her more in the garb of the masculine than the feminine. As Debbie dons the army garb, she tries very hard to forget that she is a woman. But unfortunately her womanhood is thrown time and again on her face as she is subjected to rape. In fact her mission, for which she puts her life at stake, is a mockery of everything she stands for. Saka Momoh sends her to Abosi to convince him to give up this madness and join the federal state of Nigeria. But Momoh, like most men see Debbie’s value only in terms of her body. He asks her to use her “feminine charms” to break Abosi’s “icy resolve”. Her having been to Oxford and their families having been friends is said to add weight on her favour. Not only Momoh but also Alan Grey, her lover, can only see her as a woman and not a person even after Debbie has proved herself stronger for the war.

‘Good. Do your woman bit tonight,’ he said. ‘Abosi used to fancy you. I used to see the desire in his eyes when he talked to you in the Governor’s house in Lagos… well, use that part of you to make him do as you say.’ (242)

Initially Debbie is drunk with power. Her first foray into the army is rather shameful. She experiences the thrill of forcing the men to listen to her. In her eagerness to succeed she does not realize that the poor Ibo soldiers whom she rounds up die a very painful death. Later, she realizes that she has been used by Saka Momoh and her heart is full of remorse.

No one told me they were going to be killed, though I must admit I enjoyed making the men obey me, Alan. Now they are all dead and I was the one who arrested them. I put them in a position where they could not lift a finger to defend themselves. And you stand there talking to me about guilt. (87)

Then begins Debbie’s travails as she begins her arduous journey across the blazing Nigeria to meet Abosi and give him Saka Momoh’s message. Debbie is reminded again and again that she is a woman. She is forced to pay with her body for having dared to invade a male bastion. She is subjected to brutal gang rape. Rape features as a trope in
several of Emecheta’s novels. Whether it is marital rape, or in this case, a gang rape— it is the ultimate insult and humiliation to a woman’s self when she is subjected to it. And then there is the conspiracy of silence where the victim is victimized and punished by the patriarchal society. She becomes the tainted one. Debbie defies most of these norms. She watches helplessly as her mother is asked to undress. Debbie’s superior education or standing in the society fails to help her, as she is unable to help her mother. However, Mrs. Ogedemgbe, a woman Debbie had always viewed in a poor light fights rape, keeping her dignity intact. When she is asked to undress she says: “What do you want to see eh? You want to compare my nakedness to your mother’s? (127) She undresses in a dignified fashion and tells the leader to do whatever he wants with her but to spare her daughter. Debbie, unable to do or say anything can not help but admire her mother’s courage. When Debbie is raped she tries to keep her mind blank as if to distance herself from the torture she is being subjected to.

She could make out the figure of the leader referred to as Bale on top of her, then she knew I was somebody else, then another person... She felt herself bleeding, though her head was still clear. Pain shot all over her body like arrows. She felt her legs being pulled this way and that, and at times she could hear her mother’s protesting cries. But eventually, amid all the degradation that was being inflicted on her, Debbie lost consciousness. (128)

Stella Ogedemgbe wills Debbie to live. There is a conspiracy of silence between the women as Debbie knows she can never ask her mother if she had been raped as well. However, Debbie refuses to bow down to rape. She puts it behind her and moves on. Though she hides her scars well, Debbie knows she can never be “moist and soft” (166) for any man ever again. Something within her had died. When Salihu Lawal rapes her, he does so thinking that he is sleeping with a white man’s woman. Debbie offers no physical resistance. She shuts her mind. Unable to rouse Debbie, he accuses her of being as dry as his great grand mother. Instead of giving in to him, Debbie uses her status as a rape victim to taunt him. She hits at the rapist’s masculine pride of wanting to possess a “tainted woman”. (167)
‘Allah will never forgive you now because you tried to violate a woman who has been raped by so many soldiers, a woman who now may be carrying some disease, a woman who has been raped by black Nigerian soldiers. You thought you were going to use a white man’s plaything, as you called me, only to realize that you held in your arms a woman who slept with soldiers.’ (167)

Debbie’s words have the desired effect. Lawal is taken aback as he realizes that he is seeing a new breed of women, the like he has never seen before. Debbie also debunks the theory that a rape victim can be reintegrated into the society if she gets married. Her mother and Alan Grey both propose marriage as a means to reinstate her in the social scenario. Debbie declines Alan’s offer of marriage. She also protests against her country’s rape by the White man. Debbie becomes Emecheta’s spokesperson as she says:

Goodbye Alan, I don’t mind you being my male concubine, but Africa will never again stoop to being your wife; to meet you on an equal basis, like companions, yes, but never again to be your slave. (180)

Through Destination Biafra, Emecheta puts the women’s movement on the forefront. The war is fought because of egotistical, high headed men but the brunt is borne by the women. Emecheta explores the common woman’s contribution to the war, thereby setting the historical records straight. The women were not merely spectators; they were actors who were forced to take the centre stage not because they wanted to but because they were left without a choice.

On her perilous journey to meet Abosi, Debbie befriends a group of women. Under normal circumstances she would never have come across these woman vastly removed from her through social strata and education but in this moment of extreme suffering they all come together. The women’s husbands are shot before their eyes and they are forced to flee along with their children. In this fight and flight for survival, a poor mother has to stay behind as she is unable to walk, urging her young ones ahead. Initially the women
are suspicious of Debbie with her foreign accent but soon they form a strong bond of mutual support brought together by their immense suffering. Debbie realizes she has much to learn from these women who are less educated but have a wealth of worldly wisdom. Mrs. Makado explains the class and sex dimension of warfare to Debbie while Dorothy, the young nursing and starving mother feeds baby Biafra, the orphan whose mother dies after giving birth to him. The death of baby Biafra symbolizes the death of the new land Biafra. This journey sensitizes Debbie to the strengths and sacrifices made by African women from time immemorial. Her back seems to break with pain when she tries to carry one of the orphaned toddlers.

As she walked down the dry road in the heat, with the weight of the child almost breaking her back, it struck her that African women of her age carried babies like this all day and still farmed and cooked; all she had to do now was walk, yet she was in such pain. What kind of African woman was she indeed? (181)

The slowly dwindling number of women and children are helped by the nuns who foolishly believe that doing God’s work has made them immune to the debauchery of men. The saintly nuns are raped brutally by the soldiers. When the young and courageous boy Ngbechi is shot by a gung ho trigger happy soldier, Debbie, and her hapless band of women react violently:

Debbie, Dorothy and Uzoma left the children and ran up to the soldiers, screaming: ‘go on shoot us, shoot all of us. ‘Debbie did not realize what came over her. She jumped on top of the bewildered officer and began to wrestle with him. She was badly torn and beaten before she became too exhausted to cry any more. (161)

Though a foolhardy reaction, it shows the women’s strong protest against this raging madness. Emecheta shows how in the Biafran war; it is the poor and the powerless who are targeted against. The rich are able to keep their sons away by smuggling them out of the country like Mrs. Eze and Mrs. Ozimba. The words of a farm woman echo the
sentiments of the commoners. At one point of time the common man/woman may have sympathized with Biafra but now he/she realizes that she has been cheated and made fools of by those in power.

One woman stepped boldly forward and said "Biafra, Biafra, what is Biafra?" You killed our man from this part, Nwokolo. The Nigerian soldiers came and killed what your soldiers left. We are Ibuza people, but now we live in the Bush thanks to your Abosi and your Biafra.... Where was your Abosi when our girls were being raped in the market places and our grandmothers shot? (211)

Debbie’s biggest contribution is her wanting to document the women’s contribution to war. She wants to record the immense suffering and the indomitable courage of the women. When a woman’s child is shot on her back, instead of mourning the child, Dorothy mourns the rape of the old Mother Superior. Debbie wills herself to live to be able to record the women and the children’s struggle – a struggle ignored by History. Through Debbie, Emecheta writes back into history the saga of the woman’s contribution to the war. Debbie poses the rhetorical question “when the history of civil war was written, would the part played by her and women like Babs, Uzoma and the nuns in Biafra be mentioned at all? (245)

**Conclusion**

Both Nwapa and Emecheta record their lived experiences. War and Women are not natural allies. Yet in times of war, the woman, has, time and again proved her mettle. She is also the worst sufferer. She pays with her body and soul for a situation she has never bargained for. But her indomitable courage and her resilience in the face of severe oppression makes the contribution of the women significant. However, history chooses to ignore her contribution time and again. Both Nwapa and Emecheta retell the story from the women’s point of view. While recounting the indomitable courage of the women, the one sentiment that both authors echo is- why should there be war? In Emecheta’s words “who wants wars anyway?” (Emecheta 1982 II)
In recreating the war through the women’s eyes, Nwapa and Emecheta are not oblivious to the fact that some women have actually aided the war propaganda. In *Never Again*, Nwapa reveals the hypocrisy of one such woman. Madam Agfa is one such leader who claims to have lost her husband in the war. However, it is common knowledge that he has died of diabetes. Her exhortations to the people to stay and not flee the Nigerian soldiers are therefore empty rhetoric, which Nwapa produces to comic effect.

Why am I a woman? God you should have made me a man. I would have said to the young men, to the youths whose blood I know is boiling now in their veins, follow me. I’ll lead you. I’ll fight the vandals. They will not be allowed to pollute our fatherland. They will not be allowed to set their ugly feet on the soil of Ugwuta. Never in history, had my grandmothers and great grandfathers told me that Ugwuta had suffered from any aggressor. This will not happen in my lifetime! (12)

From the numerous factual and historical accounts written about the civil war, especially by those who were in Biafra during the fighting, one could see that women remained consistent with their age old role of providing support services, food and sustenance to the families. It is rather disappointing that most male writers who recreated the events of the war chose to highlight and exaggerate women’s moral laxity forgetting that it was insignificant in comparison with women’s efforts towards winning the war towards the survival of the family and towards rearing of children. What makes Nwapa’s and Emecheta’s war writing stand out is their refusal to delineate women in war situation as prostitutes whose personalities are crippled by malignant moral lapses. Their women characters are independent, assertive and economically active. Neither do they indulge in sensational details of women’s infidelity as seen in Ekwensi’s *Survive the Peace* and Aniebo’s *Anonymity of Sacrifice*. Nwapa’s women are nurturers, caretakers and providers. She writes against the female stereotyping that has been a feature of most male authored texts in Nigeria, before and after the civil war. Nwapa focuses on respectable and married women who are determined to survive the war. Like Buchi Emecheta, she is
engaged in a reversionary act to commemorate women's activities in the war. Emecheta subverts male dominance by making Debbie not only an independent and assertive woman but also a soldier. Nwapa's form of empowerment for her heroines is more feminine but no less effective. Her characters perform the traditional feminine roles of care giving and they do it with grace and courage.

Writing about the war is therapeutic for both Nwapa and Emecheta. Nwapa tells Brenda Berrian in an unpublished interview: "Never Again is about my personal experiences during the war. The book is intended to depict the evils of war and demonstrate that people should not indulge in wars. During the war I encountered many difficulties when I espoused thoughts different from the false propaganda. My choice was to think like the majority in order to survive. Personally I would not swallow anything without asking questions." (Berrian1) For Emecheta, who was not in Nigeria during the war, the experiences of the war were recreated from the narratives of her friends and family. In her Foreword to Destination Biafra, she writes: "I have to thank...Mrs. Nwukor for telling me of the Ibuza incidents and the story of her son Boniface and his kettle; my brother Adolphous Emecheta for narrating his journey on foot on the Benin – Asaba road and all the killings he saw; my brother in law Charles Onwordi for accounts of Ibo massacre in Lagos...Yet it is time to forgive but only a fool will forget." (VII)

The written war narratives are a distinct effort on the woman writer's part to show that "they were there too." (Amuta 1) Nwapa says in Wives At War, "You wait until the end of this war. There is going to be another war, the war of the women." (13) It is perhaps in the post war writing of the Nigerian women that the implications of those wartime social upheavals become apparent.
Works Cited


Acholonu, Catherine, Western and Indegenous Traditions in Modern Ibo literature. Dusseldorf: University of Dusseldorf, 1985


Amadiame, Ifi. “Women’s Political history”. West Africa. Vol.3 no 11984


Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. NY: Routledge, 1994


Goldstein, Joshua S. *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*. Cambridge University Press. 2001


Jameson, Frederick. “Periodizing the 60s.” *The 60s without Apology*. Ed. Sonya Seyers et al. Minneapolis: Social Text and University of Minnesota Press, 1984


Mba, Nina E. "Heroines of the Women's War." *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*. 


--------. *Cassava Song and Rice Song.* Enugu: Tana, 1986

----. *One is Enough.* Enugu: Tana, 1981.


