

Privileging Politics as the Overriding Denominator in Social Transformation - A Study on Buchi Emecheta's Fiction Novel *Destination Biafra*

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Introduction

Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* talks about the Nigerian Biafran Civil War – one of the predominant subjects of study in modern African literature which has been either ignored or underestimated the literary efforts of female writers. Most critics discussing works dealing with the tragic events of 1967-1970 often fail to include *Destination Biafra*, even though this novel unmistakably adds several new thematic discussions to the genre in Africa.

Emecheta introduces a new theme into her fictional output by way of including the Nigerian Civil War and the role of women in the political life of her country. Where Emecheta is different from other chroniclers of the Civil War, however, is in her presentation of female characters who transcend the traditional and stereotypical roles often reserved for them. Her major female characters in this war - Debbie Ogedemgbe, Dorothy, and Mrs. Uzoma Maddco are presented as people who are forced by either personal experience or idealism, to become active participants in the struggle for genuine freedom.

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Perhaps the most remarkable political phenomenon in Africa in the 20th century is the progressive dismantling of colonialism, and the emergence of individual nation-states. One of the major implications of the nation-state formation in Africa is the conflict between primordial ethnic values and loyalties on the one hand and the demands of a wider nationalism on the other. The contradictions inherent in this development are manifested in the emergent national cultures of Africa, especially in the area of literature.

My writing style is more like my story-telling . . . Nigeria is a land full of stories. Every time I am there I always come in contact with something new. . . . The way I recount things that happenings comes from the way we speak in our part of Nigeria. (Emecheta Interview, 1996)

“When I write, I look for a problem in a certain society and I write about that problem strictly from a woman’s point of view”. (Emecheta Interview, 1988)

Destination Biafra

Destination Biafra is a vivid fictional record of the unwholesome events which started with the pre-independence elections in Nigeria in 1959 and the proclamation of the Republic of Nigeria to the secession of Biafra and the Civil War which ended with the triumph of the idea of an indivisible Nigeria. The novelist dramatises twelve years of political mismanagement, civil commotion, personal and communal greed, unabated selfishness and corrupt leadership which lead ultimately to social chaos, deprivation and death. The high functionaries of the State, civil and military, act with such reckless abandon that nothing but calamity and widespread suffering can result.

So, in order to assess literature in the context of a society where political freedom was abrogated, where cultural growth was stultified, and where words and their meanings were invariably corrupted was something crucial for a writer. It was Stendal, who observed that “politics in a work of literature is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention”. We are also reminded of the observation by Dr. Leavis that “. . . in respect of any art one takes seriously one has to make value judgments, since a real response entails this; it entails forming an

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implicit critical sense of the human significance of the art in question, and the demand of the intelligence is that one should bring one's sense to conscious definition".

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to offer a preliminary exploration of what is entailed in '... forming an implicit critical sense of the human significance of the art in question. .', in this case politics and the African women's writing in English. There exists – indeed, has always tended to exist – a direct relation between political perspective and literary creation in Africa. Further, in this relation, the political perspective has tended to dominate; and this relation has not been static, but it got defined, refined, and described by way of specific time-sequences, class patterns and cultural aspiration. In short, in the area of creativity no less than in other spheres African writing has stressed the dehumanising effect of colonialism on the African psyche. A dialogic interaction between men's and women's writing is one of the defining features of the contemporary African literary tradition, suggesting at the same time that neither men's nor women's writing can be fully appreciated in isolation from the main currents in African history.

Privileging Politics

Destination Biafra is indeed a bold and daring departure from the normal domestic preserve of most fictional works of African women writers. It is packed with a vibrant panorama of action and emotion. Read as a historical novel.

A reading of Buchi Emecheta informs us of the ways fiction, particularly women's writing, plays a part in the process of constructing subjectivity to create a world in which women can live complete lives, a world that affords women opportunities for freedom, creativity, cultivation of the intellect, work, self-expression, political action, friendship, intimacy, and love on the same terms as men.

In *Destination Biafra* her concerns and fictive strategy enjoys an enlarged field of discourse. For the first time, she shows interest in her country's pre-war politics and its

fallout and the thirty-month Civil War. While she is engaged, her feminist temper remains unassuaged and unmitigated.

In *Destination Biafra*, 'war' is used as a metaphor of survival. At the literary level, the novel explores the political and historical implications of the Biafran war. At the metaphorical level, it is Debbie's private war against the rigid traditions and customs of the society, which grant neither superior nor alternative space to the African woman to act on her own. Debbie rejects and refuses to follow the beaten track of circumscribed life of domesticity like her mother.

More so than her female predecessors, Emecheta documents the experience of the modern African woman in her novels. She chronicles their struggle for equality in a male-dominated world.

The bold political statements which her text embodies are certainly of interest. The first is that Nigeria is a country whose real power base lies outside its geographical boundaries. MacDonald, the outgoing British Governor of Nigeria, is nervous over the poor quality of the election campaign of the Northern party and confides in Capitan Alan Grey, his countryman, thus:

I only hope the Hausas turn out to vote for their own men. If not, we'll have a great deal of explaining to do. All I know is that a Hausa man must be Prime Minister. That is the only way to maintain peace in this place.
(Emecheta, 17)

It is the British anxiety over who should control the saddle after their exit that makes Macdonaly hurriedly nominate Mallam Nguru Kano "to be the first Prime Minister of Nigeria" (Emecheta, 22), when "we have only forty results out of a hundred and ninety from the North" (Emecheta, 22). Earlier the Saruana declined going down to Lagos in the South to assume the leadership of the country:

He did not wish to come down to the South, but was sending his 'right eye' down to be his presence in the South (Emecheta, 23).

The neat phrase of British political vileness in Nigeria is “divide et impera,” which chapter 8 of *Destination Biafra* celebrates. At a time, when every Nigerian thought Aburi would restore faith in their country, it is the British who seem to have felt otherwise, as evidenced by the quality of the advice they give to Saka Momoh, now the head of state after the death in a *coup d’etat* of Brigadier Onyemere. Debbie retorts, crying as follows:

“Alan, what happened at Aburi? What part did you play in changing Momoh’s mind? Alan!” (Emecheta, 113).

It is at this stage that Emecheta introduces another new and major theme into this novel, indeed -- the Nigerian War novel and the role(s) of women in the war. How important, then, is Emecheta’s characterization of Debbie Ogebdembe and the other women in *Destination Biafra*? To answer this question, we must remember that though this novel is not, as Katherine Frank suggests, “probably the only war novel within recent memory written by a woman” (1987: 25), it certainly is the first African novel that backs up Margaret Higonnet’s thesis that civil wars, which take place on ‘home’ territory, have more potential than other wars to transform women’s expectations.

Female Characters

Emecheta’s female characters epitomize the difficulty of being a black woman in a changing Nigerian Society, particularly in the early twentieth century. Her novels centre round the extraordinary courage and resourcefulness of Nigerian women which often prevents black families from disintegrating. She reports the problems and pleasures of the black female and not only does she include her personal experiences but also those of other women in her home town of Izu, Nigeria. It is in this way that the young author writes to raise the images of Nigerian women to a level commensurate with historical truths. In the final analysis, one finds in Emecheta’s works complete honesty in recording the experiences of African women. Not everything she reports about male-female relationships is positive.

However, this objectivity is needed to ensure growth and change within Nigerian culture. As a woman living abroad and out of her indigenous African environment, Emecheta is touched and affected by her knowledge of it. As a result, she brings a special clarity to her treatment of African women. For too long, many of the images drawn in her fiction have been

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ignored, overlooked and handicapped by preconceptions, biases and ignorance. Most women, regardless of race, have taken at least some part of the journey portrayed in Emecheta's writings. This factor adds to the credibility of her female characters. She transmits into her art the joys and suffering of both rural and urban women. Her autobiographies and the biographies of some of her compatriots give portrayures of Nigerian women never done before. Hence, her characters are memorable. It is through Buchi Emecheta that the souls of voiceless Nigerian Women in the various social strata are revealed. The aspirations and fears of her characters are, to some extent, those of every woman.

The Heroine, Debbie Ogedemgbe

As in her other novels, Buchi Emecheta gives prominence to women in *Destination Biafra*. The heroine, Debbie Ogedemgbe, is given decisive roles to play at crucial stages in the events of the novel. She is made to grow in our estimation from the spoilt, well-educated child of a corrupt politician to a responsible, loyal citizen of Nigeria who possesses an idealistic vision of her country's greatness and is ready to make a lot of personal sacrifice to achieve the ideal. She joins the army to prove that a woman can be just as useful to the country as a man in times of distress and national reconstruction. She believes fervently in the liberation of women from the submissive role which custom and tradition thrust upon them in home and society. She is anxious to maintain her personal independence and be in complete control of her life. She finds the marital life of her parents a negative example in this regard and decides to continue to assert her individuality in domestic and public affairs:

She loved both her parents very much. It was just that she did not wish to live a version of their life – to marry a wealthy Nigerian, ride the most expensive cars in the world, be attended by servants . . . No, she did not want that; her own ideas of independence in marriage had no place in that set-up. She wanted to do something more than child breeding and rearing and being a good passive wife to a man whose ego she must boost all her days, while making sure to submerge every impulse that made her a full human. Before long she would have no image at all, she would be as colourless as her poor mother. Surely every person should have the right

to live as he or she wished, however different that life might seem to another? (Emecheta, 45)

She needs this independent spirit and more if she is to contribute maximally to the search for a solution to the problems raised by the war. She is sent on a peace mission to Abosi and, in the process, suffers a great deal of hardship. This does not deter her from pursuing her mission or even developing some idealistic concept of what Biafra stands for. To her Biafra represents an ideal which every true Nigerian should work for, the first real fight for independence.

It is not a war between Abosi and Momoh. This is our war. It is the people's war. Our very first war of freedom. Momoh and Abosi started the purge, to wash the country of corruption and exploitation. Now there is a danger of the two men putting their self-interest foremost. If that is the case, the war will be taken out of their control and put into the hands of responsible leaders who will see the purge through and restore to us a new clean Nigeria. (Emecheta, 160)

Prolonging the Suffering of the People

The two leaders prove unreasonable and prolong unduly the suffering of the people. Debbie's costly mission fails to achieve its objective. She, however, displays great resourcefulness abroad as the propaganda officer for Abosi and Biafra. She achieves a measure of success here, but she is still disappointed that Abosi will not see reason and stop the war. She is sad that high hopes for Biafra are fading, and disillusioned that so much corruption, greed, selfishness and inefficiency have crept into Biafran life. When in the end she discovers that Abosi has been in touch with South Africa all the time, she becomes dejected and puts the blame for the war on Grey and his group of foreign interlopers.

Look, we even have a South African plane here offering the same help you are offering. But how did they know about tonight? And how did you know, white man? Oh, Abosi, I wish I had succeeded in killing you. To make us sink this low! If future generations should ask what became of Biafra, what do you want us to tell them? (DB, p. 259).

Involvement with White Lover

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However, it is in her relationship with her white lover, Alan Grey, that Debbie asserts her independence and individuality in the most sensational manner. Here she may be acting as spokesman for the novelist and all others who believe in women's liberation and freedom. The fact that she is openly in love with a white man in a tribal society shows the extent to which she has become detribalised. She sleeps with him quite frequently without any thought of marrying him. Her ideas of marriage are unconventional and demonstrate little regard for traditional beliefs and practices. She decides to join in the army to show that if a woman can have complete freedom of action, she can contribute positively to the development of the country and help resolve thorny problems. She and her friend Barbara are so completely liberated from restrictive traditional social norms that some of their actions constitute an embarrassment to elders like Mrs. Ogedemgbe,

I don't know what has come over you girls. We all want freedom for women, but I doubt if we are ready for this type of freedom where young women smoke and carry guns instead of looking after husbands and nursing babies (Emecheta, 108).

It is this independence of action that Grey often exploits to his advantage in his dealings with Debbie. But he underrates her nationalistic feelings and patriotic intentions. He is disappointed in the end when Debbie rejects him and takes a stand in favour of Africa and African womanhood.

I see now that Abosi and his like are still colonized. They need to be decolonized. I am not like him, a black white man, I am a woman and a woman of Africa. I am a daughter of Nigeria and if she is in shame, I shall stay and mourn with her in shame. No, I am not ready yet to become the wife of an exploiter of my nation . . . Goodbye, Alan. I didn't mind your 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 (Emecheta, 258-9).

Emphasis on the Heroine

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In devoting so much space to the psychological development of her heroine and endowing her with so much education and ability to perform so well at crucial times, the novelist directly raises the status of African womanhood. She achieves this at some price – a large-scale departure from historical facts. Debbie is an imaginative invention devised not merely to demonstrate the equality of women with men but particularly to highlight areas in state and politics where women can excel men. So we see that on many occasions. Debbie constitutes an important factor in the execution of the war. She is acceptable to both sides of the conflict and, through Grey, has connections with the British imperialists. Even so, she shows no political ambition. Her motives are always genuine – to identify herself with the suffering of her people and help her country out of present difficulties. These are indeed noble aims which Debbie prosecutes single-mindedly. The novelist thus succeeds in endearing her heroine to her readers. After this, no longer can the woman be expected to play the role of a second-class citizen, as we have in the novel of that title; no longer will people be too interested in academic feminist writing, but in situations, such as we have here, where women show their mettle and class. This is an important area of achievement in this work.

Women's War

Other areas of achievement concern the novelist's approach to the work and her attractive narrative prose. She appropriately captures the atmosphere of war and, as one may well expect, make it almost a women's war. The common man suffers most. As an enlisted soldier he dies fighting, as a civilian he suffers all the deprivations that war brings on a people. The men are usually quickly eliminated. The women are kept alive somehow to experience the greater hardship. This is the case during operation Mosquito when women are trapped in the bush between Benin and Asaba in their attempt to escape from the brutal might of the invading federal troops. The women are made to experience the bestialities of war, and the novelist records these horrible events without mincing words or wincing.

The pregnant women now began to wail as she was dragged from the main road to the side bush, pushed mercilessly with the butt of a gun; the woman was falling and getting up again, and calling to her husband Dede to help her. Debbie wondered what had happened to the child. She heard the tired, strangled voice of the woman calling out in Ibo, begging for mercy as they took her to a different part of the bush. (DB,p. 133)

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When Debbie is raped we are told.

She could make out the figure of the leader referred to as Bale on top of her, then she knew it 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. (DB, p. 134)

To such horrors the environment, as it were in sympathy, is made to respond.

But the night insects still buzzed. Crickets from the undergrowth cried, 'Shame on you humans', frogs from nearby ponds went on croaking and owls drawled their mournful complaints. This was a place for animals, this was their Time of day; humans should be in their own habitat in their built-up homes, not in this belly of the thick African forest where it was impossible to tell people from trees. (DB, p 170)

These are direct forceful narrations which cannot fail to make a lasting impression on the reader.

Impressive Descriptive Language

The novelist is particularly successful in the description of events, persons and attires. She has a good eye for detail, and this helps to impart realism to her work. She often uses to advantage her intimate knowledge of local styles of dress and modes of behaviour.

'I am sorry to have kept you waiting', breathed Debbie as she sailed in wearing a brightly coloured Itsekiri outfit, with two pieces of vivid cotton George material tied round her. Her flaming red silk head-tie was intricately and artistically knotted, so that for a moment Alan thought that the beautiful woman standing in front of him was Mrs. Stella Ogedembe transformed. She looked very like her mother but with some touches of her own; her bold smile, the confident thrust of her head the way she looked him straight in the eye when talking, were gestures which Mrs.

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Ogedemgbe had never acquired. When Debbie walked in her native attire she seemed to move with measured grace; it gave her an air of still formality, almost bordering on artificiality, but all told it added grace and femininity, qualities which were lost when she put on shapeless green army trousers she had insisted on wearing of late. (Emecheta, 111-112)

Language as a Dynamic Force

Emecheta uses language as a dynamic force, her high linguistic competence manifests itself also in the narrative sections of the work. Because the subject-matter is war the narrative intensity of the prose helps to heighten emotional tension, as we have here in the report of the emergency action taken in Ibadan.

The Nigerian army heads did not sleep. They were in all parts of Ibadan, commanding the still untrained local recruits, keeping an eye on the residences of ministers and important businessmen, patrolling the streets. The few shots they fired were only to scare; a stray bullet did hit one man in the leg but the injury was not too bad. Those who died did so as a result of beating by their opponents. Some of the ringleaders were captured and taken to the army barracks, since it seemed the police had played a disappearing game. As soon as they saw the spirit of the thugs and guessed that some of them were on a suicide mission, the police ran for cover. But meanwhile the soldiers were everywhere like locusts. (Emecheta, 52)

Most Memorable Work

In conception and execution, therefore, this is a successful work, the most ample that the novelist has written so far and perhaps the most memorable. The author has written well, but has she also written with bitterness? The work starts with a dedication to her close relations who died during the war and goes on in an Author's Foreword to say:

‘Yet it is time to forgive, though only a fool will forget’.

It might be argued that unless forgiving includes a measure of forgetting, it becomes only a partial act of grace. The proper role of historical fiction is not to leave scars in the

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heart of readers but to put them in a frame of mind to benefit from the achievements and failures of the past. Without its emotional dedication and an unusual author's foreword, *Destination Biafra* will easily pass for a work devoted to the ideals of national unity and stability.

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