

Impact of Pan-Africanism on African Feminism: A Study of Buchi Emecheta's Destination Biafra

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Abstract

Women's contributory roles in the development of their nation have been demonstrated by female writers as well as male writers like Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiongo among many others. In the war novels, especially Buchi Emecheta's Destination Biafra, the author demonstrates the changing roles of the African woman in her effort to actualize self and contribute to the growth of nation building, as well as the development of children, women and the society at large. The women's war efforts help to highlight the need for collective action which fosters female bonding and enhance growth. These women, Debbie Ogedemgbe, Uzoma, Babs, Dorothy etc take up the challenge of caring and nurturing of children and the elderly. They even venture into male domains like digging graves and burying the dead. They mobilize, educate and encourage other women. In so doing, they build up confidence and help develop other women's consciousness. These are feminist ideals which underscore the life of African women. This paper therefore sets out to demonstrate the ideals of Pan-Africanism and African feminism. The paper shows that Pan-Africanist ideals are closely linked to feminism since the thrust of these ideologies are cognition of dignity, recognition of fundamental human rights of people-men and women, especially the black women who have suffered marginalization, oppression, deprivation etc, because of their sex. The paper advocates that equal opportunities be given to women to showcase their talent, instead of being tied down with the tedium of life as wives, mothers, farm hands, punching bags, sex partners, hewers of wood and drawers of water.

Preamble: When male writers started writing African literature, little attention was given to women. They were placed on the periphery as wives, mothers, farm hands etc who played little roles in male-authored texts. These men wrote about heroism, society, colonialism etc. This is due to the fact that colonial education privileged the men while women were traditional home-makers and keepers of cultural mores. Yet, women related issues in economic, social and political spheres etc continue to dominate discourses. It is against this backdrop that Helen Chukwuma contends that

"The irony of the African female writers' late entry into the creative arena is that women are tradition bearers, tradition-effecters and transmitters in the home, yet they felt incapable of translating the same functionality into the printed word. For writing was as indeed education the sole prerogative of man. How can she "intrude" into this masculine world and write on what" (102).

Chinweizu is of the opinion that "women lack skill and excellence in writing" (228). Gilbert and Gubar (1984) argue further that Chinweizu's position "implies metaphorically that the pen is symbolic of male generative powers, therefore women should not tread on traditionally male domain. Femi Ojo-Ade attests, to the phallic nature of African writing when he states that:

The male writer like the male social animal is more fortunate than the female. His presence is taken for granted. It is believed that woman must keep quite when men are talking. Woman is woman, mother, child-bearer, supporter of man. If woman talks too much, she is considered uncouth, uncivilized. If she is educated, she is classified a weird specimen (159).

Perhaps, these criticisms, derogatory remarks, ridicules etc which greeted early female African writers served as motivating factors in propelling women to write. Though their entry into the male – dominated sphere was shaky with Nwapa, Aidoo, Emecheta, Ogot among others blazing the trail, they have come to create literary landscapes for themselves. These authors write from the female point of view because it is only a woman who can really write about women's issues. It is however heart warming that some male writers like Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi Wa Thiongo to mention a few show empathy for women and accord them their rightful places in their novels. Marie Umeh states that "African women writers are engaged in a literature of demystification and complete liberation" (198). They are challenging patriarchal roles which impede the growth and development of women in their works. This is why Barbara Christian avers that "the African woman is not content in being a victim, she opts to be an actor in the post-colonial world" (147)

1.1 Female Writers and the War Novels in Nigeria

The Nigerian civil war has become topical both in history and literary discourses. No literature is complete without the mention of the Nigerian civil war. Kole Omotosho agrees that "since the Nigerian revolution, the civil War has been the most important theme in Nigerian letters" (8). Before now, war novels were written by male writers like Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, John Munoye, Festus Iyayi, Isidore Okpewho, Eddie Iroh, Kalu Uka and recently Chinua Achebe, yet Marie Umeh holds that "without the female voice, no complete picture of the Nigerian civil war (1967-70) will be recorded in Nigerian literary history" (194). This is so because women and children bore the brunt of violence, torture, physical and psychological deprivation during this war.

Umeh contends that "African women writers have not been treated as major contributors to the general output of war literature ...this trend point of the dominant male tradition in Nigerian letters and the phallic criticism which continue to repudiate the validity and complexity of the female"(194). It is however encouraging to note that this trend has changed. Grace Okereke's submission is that "now female writers among whom are Flora Nwapa, Rose Njoku, Pauline Onwubiko and Buchi Emecheta have stormed the male literary bastion by contributing to Nigerian war novels"(145). Today, Adichie, Ezeigbo etc have joined their literary foremothers to write on the Nigerian civil war. This according to Umeh is because African women writers are challenging patriarchal roles which impede the development and growth of women. Umeh cites other critics thus:

Virginia Woolf speaks of "rewriting history, Andrienne Rich notes that women's writing must begin with a "revision of the past; Carolyn Heilbrun observes that we must "reinvent" womanhood. Joan Kelly declares that we must "restore woman to history" and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie revives the idea that there's a need to find androgynous and generic term to discuss what concerns and affects both men and women in society (203).

The Nigerian Civil War literature is significant according to Chidi Amuta because, it belongs to a global tradition of war literature. By joining their male counterparts to write war novels, African female writers and indeed women, have broken the culture of silence and invincibility, thereby asserting their selfhood. Katherine Frank is of the opinion that "the feminist novel in Africa is not only alive and well; it is in general, more radical, even more militant than its western counterpart..." (15).

1.2 Pan-Africanism and African Feminism

Pan-Africanism is an ideology which emphasizes the brotherhood of people of Negro blood whether in Africa or the New World. The first Pan- African conference was organized by the West Indian Lawyer, Henry Sylvester – Williams in London in 1900, but the movement was launched with its charter of Human Rights for Negroes between 1918 -1919. However, it was not until the 10th and last conference which was held in Manchester in 1945 that a strong African interest, represented by Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta and Nnamdi Azikiwe, that its impact was felt. Colin Legum defines Pan-Africanism as "the expression of the desire for African unity as well as the unity of all people whose ancestors originally came from Africa"(528).

Interestingly, Pan-Africanism was born in the New World. This is because the descendants of the Negro slaves, through their dislocation from their cultural heritage and submission to alien culture saw themselves as orphans of Africa and strangers in the world of white domination and exploitation. They therefore considered themselves “Black outcasts” who were robbed of their dignity but they were determined to search for freedom and equality in the New World. The major impact of Pan-Africanism on the African psyche which is manifest in the works of Du Bois, Jomo Kenyatta, Nnamdi Azikiwe among many others, is the awareness of self dignity and the need to insist on the realization of individual dignity above collective repression. These ideals are also manifested in the women’s movement which started and later spread through different historical situations. Du Bois was an outstanding Negro scholar and writer as well as the father of Pan-Africanism. With him, the movement reached its peak, a fact which he affirmed by leaving the United States for Ghana, where he eventually died.

The women’s movement in Africa arose out of different historical perspectives and from contexts in which the process of making history was different. In Africa, women organizations have different relationship to political parties and government. In similar vein, the women’s movements in the West and Africa have different priorities. For instance, Western feminist issues such as sexual freedom, take a lower priority in Africa, where women face immediate challenges such as hunger, disease, dispossession, female genital mutilation, obnoxious widowhood rites, male-child syndrome, polygamy, wife battering, social taboos like the caste system among others. It is against these backdrops that Rose Acholonu opines

The tragedy of our underdevelopment, dehumanizing poverty, institutionalized and malignant sexism, as well as the degraded status of womanhood, have continued to bog down the life cycle of the average female, who whether as a daughter, sister, wife, mother or worker is often harassed or denied equal opportunities to enjoy the full benefits of her human rights (93).

Feminism started in Europe in the 17th century when women in the aristocratic class began to demand for improved rights and opportunities. Back in Nigeria, Aduke Adebayo states that “feminism can be said to have taken roots in Nigeria in the 1980s through the efforts of NGOs like Women in Nigeria (WIN) and academics such as Bolanle Awe, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Helen Chukwuma, Theodora Ezeigbo, Chioma Opara among others” (24) Elizabeth Ogini is of the opinion that feminism has found wide acceptance in Africa, especially among the down-trodden and long abused African women and their sympathizers. Others have misinterpreted this ideology especially phallogocentric critics as well as few female critics like Ama Ata Aidoo, who view feminism as western and a destroyer of nice African homes.

Nevertheless, feminism, like Pan-Africanism advocates the recognition of people’s fundamental integrity as well as human rights. Lisa Tuttle defines this ideology as “the advocacy of women’s rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes, and in its broadest use, the word refers to everyone who is aware of and seeking to end women’s subjugation in any way and for any reason”(107). Helen Chukwuma adds that feminism means “...a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seek to give the women a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity ...”(ix).

Over the years, feminism has gathered new meanings, shades as well as nomenclature. For instance, Alice Walker advocates the use of womanism. She defines womanism as

A black feminist or feminist of color.....who loves other women, sexually and/or asexually Appreciates and prefers women’s culture...sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and survival of entire people, male or female Womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender (xii).

Catherine Acholonu in her book titled *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* rejects Walker’s womanism because:

Walker's womanism is first and foremost a lesbian. Thus black feminism has become synonymous with lesbianism. This is a negative development, especially for those for whom lesbianism is a taboo. A womanist "prefers women's culture, loves individual men, sometimes" (not all men as members of the human family) yet Walker maintain that womanism is not separatist, except periodically for health (whatever that may mean). Such an ideology can certainly not be "universalist" ...we realize that certain vital items which have formed the basis of feminist discourse are omitted: Vital concepts such as the family, the child, nature, mothering and nurture" (90).

To Chikwenye Okonjo "black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates Blacks" (63).

Kolawole opines that Hudson-Weems stresses the conviction that Africana womanism is not a man-hating ideology, as all Africans need a concerted effort against racism and all forms of oppression that undermine Black people. Hudson-Weems defines Africana feminism as:

...neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism, Africana womanism is not black feminism or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and therefore it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desire of Africana women" (22).

Since Pan-Africanism advocates and anchors on unity and the recognition of people's (blacks) fundamental human rights, these tallies with the women's agenda of feminism. African feminism is accommodationist, though some African female writers are radical and at times militant in their approach. Chukwuma argues that "African feminism should be understood in the context of the family, where family transcends the nuclear family of husband, wife and biological children. The extended family is the main support base where a woman can always find acceptance and acclaim should her marriage fail. The centrality of the family informs the accommodationist stance of African feminism. Men have a place in it, so do the children" (109).

On her part, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie limns feminism in another context. This she tags stiwanism. "Stiwa" is her acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. Here feminism is not about warring or finding equality with men, it is trying to build a harmonious society. This is because Africans need social transformation and this transformation is the responsibility of both men and women.

Since the descendants of Negro slaves felt alienated and homeless by their transfer to foreign lands, the need to fight for equality and freedom arose, just as women want freedom and equality from patriarchy. Colonialism has taught African women lessons of civilization and emancipation through Pan-Africanist activities. Emvo Biakolo argues that "Ngugi's ideal is a culture which is not narrowly confined by the limitations of tribal traditions or national boundaries but looks outwards to Pan-Africa and the Third World, and the needs of man (which) awareness must be transformed into a socialist programme" (Ngugi, 1972:19).

1.3 Pan-Africanism, feminism and the role of women in the Nigerian Civil War: A study of *Destination Biafra*

Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* is a vivid demonstration of the ever changing role of women in the African milieu. From the stereotypes in her early novels, Umeh writes that "*Destination Biafra* transcends enacting the selfless roles of women in Emecheta's earlier fiction ...Debbie feels the need to dissociate herself from imprisoning myths which work to force her into carrying out roles she finds suffocating. Consequently she kills "the angel in the house" to use Virginia Woolf's expression by daring to seek her happiness and self – fulfillment outside prescribed gendered roles ..." (197).

Debbie, the protagonist of the novel chooses to join the army in order to make a difference. Emecheta writes "...she wanted to do something more than child bearing and rearing and being a good passive wife to a man whose ego she must boost all her days ... yes she would join the army... not as a cook or nurse but as a true officer!" (45). In her capacity as a soldier, Debbie smokes and carries a gun.

These are phallic symbols. She gives order to a group of soldiers: “Everyone stand up and put your hands on your head. Any false move means death. Shoot to kill any soldier who moves. You there, take all their guns and ammunitions. You search them! Unarm the soldiers, unsoldier them all” (*Destination Biafra*, P. 79). The men she commands still see her as a mere woman. Gloria Chukwukere agrees that “Debbie’s dilemma derives largely from her limited status as a woman...”(196). Debbie’s friend, Babs Teteku is sent to train female recruits in Abeokuta and towards the end of the story, Debbie tosses a grenade at Abosi’s fleeing plane.

Destination Biafra starts with the end of British rule and independent Nigeria, but the new Nigerian leaders fail to live up to expectation as they are involved in bribery, corruption, nepotism, thuggery, election malpractices, arson, tribalism, self aggrandizement etc. Emecheta depicts the greed and love of power of Nigerian rulers. Umeh “castigates Saka Momoh’s (the fictional Head of the Republic of Nigeria) ineptly giving Britain access to Nigerian oil wells in exchange for second-hand planes, and firearms to be used to wipe out another tribe. Chijioke Abosi (the fictitious Biafran leader) is just as insensitive; he leaves fighting soldiers and dying civilians at the hand of sadistic mercenaries and escapes to the Ivory Coast with his family and materials possession”(199).

As the battle rages and more casualties are recorded, Debbie risks her life and comfort and embarks on a metaphorical journey from Lagos to the East to try to persuade Abosi to end the senseless war. Katherine Frank views this journey as seduction. This critic writes that “sexual bargaining writ large, in short and not all that different from shrewd prostitution in the heroines of *One is Enough* and *Double Yoke*, though it is true that Debbie is supposed to engage in this manipulation for the good of her country rather than her own self-interest”(26). Umeh adds that “the journey is emblematic of her psychological growth from innocence to experience, from ignorance to a profound knowledge of evil in the world” (199). Since Debbie’s journey tallies with her search for a rightful place in society and is symbolic of Nigeria in search of its rightful place in the world history, this is the meeting point between Pan-Africanism and African feminism. As a Pan – Africanist, Dr Ozumba is interested in the African race not in division and tribalism as demonstrated by the killings in the north and eastern parts of Nigeria. This pogrom is also depicted in Wole Soyinka’s novel, *Season of Anomy*.

Debbie’s “epic journey” (155) to borrow Okereke’s expression opens her eyes to the realities of life. She is raped by soldiers and completely dehumanized and traumatized, yet she did not give up. Okereke holds that “even in the absence of man, the traditional protector of woman, women can still survive on her own inner resources” (155). Even the nuns, who did humanitarian jobs in helping to cater for women and children, were not spared from rape. This of course is a sacrilege beyond imagination. Okereke agrees with Frank that

It is a war in which men are the victimizers, be they Biafran or Nigerian soldiers or even white imperialist like Alan Grey and women are the victims subjected to such indignities as rape, exposure and death...and the women’s ability to survive in the face of the murder of their husbands, deprivation, having to care for their children alone with no food, water, or shelter while being exposed to the elements, the depraved soldiers and the irate war-torn villagers gives the lie to the myth of female dependency and debility so often orchestrated by patriarchal society and culture (148).

Debbie’s feminist/nationalist ideologies come to the fore when she helps to mobilize other women during the war. By helping them in the struggle for emancipation of their race and gender, Debbie joins the ranks of African women like Bolanle Awe, Lauretta Ngcobo, Simi Afonja, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie etc. These mobilization and emancipation foster female bonding, create awareness and help strengthen the women. Emecheta depicts man’s inhumanity to man and hints on role reversal where women bury fellow women and children in the absence of men. Debbie becomes a nurturer as she helps deliver Baby Biafra while Dorothy breast feeds him. The women are very resourceful as they ate anything edible including frogs just to survive. During their journey, they were helped by an old widow who harboured the group of eighteen people, fed and bought foodstuff for them. This widow misdirected Nigerian soldiers to Umunede so that these people will not be found and killed. Ironically, Saka Momoh is eager to save the life of his wife and unborn child while others like her had been killed by his Nigerian soldiers.

Uzoma, one of the strong women berates and encourages other women, because she “was determined that no one in that company was going to wallow in any kind of sadness” (*Destination Biafra*, P. 213). Uzoma tells Dorothy: “your husband has given you two children, this baby boy and the girl at home with your old mother.

Don't you think you have to make sure you live so that you can look after them...? (*Destination Biafra*, P. 213). The above encouragement and bonding validates Mary Kolawole's claim that "African women's traditional bonding is robust and positive as it is based on cultural, economic, political and spiritual collective actions" (53). Okereke agrees with Kolawole that "Emecheta is here suggesting female solidarity that cuts across class and ethnic boundaries to help prop up weaker women in the race for survival and fulfillment in a patriarchal culture that undermines female capabilities. Emecheta thus recognizes with Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* that the antagonism and rivalry generated by class consciousness among women within patriarchy is a stumbling block in the path of a united front in the struggle for women liberation"(38).

Again, in the image of a typical emancipated African, Debbie rejects marriage to her lover Alan Grey, an imperialist/predator, who is more interested in working for the benefit of his country. By repudiating marriage, Debbie debunks the myth that marriage is the traditional role of women, thus breaking the yoke of the fixation of women in the patriarchal culture. "Debbie's sexual relationship with the imperialist symbolizes the Western exploitation of Africa, and her final repudiation of Alan and his marriage offer signifies Africa's overthrow of western exploitation and her decision to fight her own survival battle alone" (Okereke, 147). Debbie tells Alan:

... I am a woman and 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 being your male concubine, but Africa will never again stoop to being your wife, to meet you on an equal basis like companion, yes, but never again to be your slave..."(Destination Biafra, P.258-259).

The above assertion encapsulates not only Debbie's feminist streak but her Pan-Africanist/Nationalist commitment, hence Frank states that "Debbie transmutes the personal into the political and asserts that her affair with Grey was a kind of allegory of the imperialistic rape of her nation" (27). Debbie's feminism elevates her "to the status of a black culturalist Nationalist" (198), to borrow Umeh's words.

Unlike Abosi, who flees to Ivory Coast with his family, Debbie the prototype of African Nationalism/feminism stays till the end of the war. Okereke concurs that "by creating a self assertive, politically informed heroine like Debbie Ogedemgbe, Emecheta has successfully taken women from the periphery of Nigerian politics and made her an active agent of history in true image of daring female predecessors like Queen Amina, Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, Mrs. Fumilayo Kuti and the Amazons... the Nigerian woman and indeed the African woman emerges from the shadows of history as the object behind every successful man to become herself a subject of history on who depends the redemption of many lives and the restoration of peace to a nation.." (149). Chioma Opara argues that "when an inspired African female writer delves into iconoclasm, it is analogous to unmasking the male ogre or oga (master)... it is significant to note that the uninitiated female writer unmasks the overbearing male as one would dare a sacrosanct masquerade"(7). This is what Debbie and other women do in *Destination Biafra*, "for if the masked spirit is a repository of the sacred, unmasking is a profane feat that debunks the sacrosanct in subversion" (Opara, 8).

Conclusion

Though Emecheta rejects the term feminism when she state thus:

I am a feminist with a small "F". I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital "F" (feminist) women who say women should live together and all that, I say, No. Personally I'd like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if it doesn't work, for goodness sake, call it off (Kolawole, 1997:15).

Debbie's actions, assertion, liberation as well as total emancipation show otherwise. Debbie and other women like Babs, Uzoma and Dorothy etc do not reject men; they simply decry the subjugation, deprivation subordination as well as the inhumanity which women and children are subjected to due to the war. In re-creating themselves therefore and re-writing women's role in the society, in history and the literary space, these women seek to change their passive roles in a male dominated society. They can be viewed as nationalists and Pan-Africanists in their struggle to actualize self.

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