



War as a Humanitarian and Environmental Tragedy: An Eco-Critical Reinterpretation of Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*.

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Abstract

While the prevalence of conflict remains a recurrent feature of social relations, the incidence of war is both an index of the failure of discourse and the manifestation of mankind's self-destructive impulse. This paper interrogates the chemistry of war using the historical reality of the Nigerian civil war (1967 - 1970). With Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* as its navigational compass, this paper examines the impact of war as a multi-dimensional tragedy. The paper contends that in addition to the socio-political problems which gave rise to the war in question, the Nigerian Civil War crisis were underpinned by economic factors with far reaching environmental consequences. It has been further contended in this paper that the intimations of socio-political victimization which constituted the primary drivers of the Nigeria-Biafra war were accentuated by the latent struggle for the control of the hydrocarbon deposits in the Biafran region of the country. Using eco-criticism as its theoretical framework and re-interpretational point of departure, this paper posits that the casualties of the war were (and are not) limited to wanton blood spillage and allied humanitarian disasters but also that they find expression in sundry environmental degradation which cumulatively threaten human existence. The paper recommends, among others, the sensitization of the citizenry to the imperatives of socio-political and environmental justice and the inculcation of the ideals of sustainable development in the populace.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, environment, war, exploitation, conflict.

Introduction

The thematization of the wanton blood spillage and other humanitarian disasters which attended the Nigeria civil war (1967-1970) have found ample ventilation in an avalanche of literary works. From Sebastian Okechukwu Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* (1971) which the literary critic Wendy Griswold (2000) classified as the first novel on the civil war (229), scores of other fictional works have followed in its heels in addition to the non-fictional works on the subject matter. Using Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* as its navigational compass, this paper examines the impact of war as a multi-dimensional tragedy which, frequently, arises from the failure of discourse as well as mankind's self-destructive impulse.

This paper contends that in addition to and apart from, the socio-political issues that engendered the war, the crisis was underpinned by economic factors with far reaching environmental consequences. It is the further contention of this paper that a deep reading of the work provides ample evidential support for the view that beyond the intimations of socio-political victimization which constituted the primary drivers of the war, the tragic conflict was accentuated by the latent struggle for the control of the hydrocarbon deposits in the Biafra area.

Adopting eco-criticism as its theoretical canvass and re-interpretational point of departure, this paper posits that the casualties of the war were (and are) not limited to the spillage of blood and allied humanitarian disasters but also that they found copious expression in sundry environmental degradation which cumulatively threaten human existence. The paper recommends, among others, the sensitization of the citizenry to the imperatives of socio-political and environmental justice and the inculcation of the ideals of sustainable development in the populace.

While Emecheta's aesthetic orbit in general and *Destination Biafra* in particular has, understandably, attracted a well pool of commentaries

and critical opinions from scholars such as Palmer (1983), Solberg, (1983), Perry (1984), Oko (1984), Umeh (1985), Frank (1986), Nnolim (1987), Stratton (1994), Emenyonu (1987), Ogunyemi (1996), among others, most of the subsisting perspectives on the work have centered on the writer's feminist opus. First published in 1982, *Destination Biafra* represents Emecheta's foray into historical fiction and a moving intervention on the theme of war as a humanitarian tragedy.

Apart from Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* earlier cited, other fictional works inspired by the civil war include: Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* (1971) (which is extensively biographical in orientation); Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973); Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War* (1972) and, *There was a Country* (2012); Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975); Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1976), and *Divided We Stand* (1980); Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976); Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976); Eddie Iroh's *Toads of War* (1979); Ken Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006); Adaokeke Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* (2012); and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), among many others, all of which grapple with various perspectives on the war.

However, beyond the employment of artistic weaponry to dramatize the disastrous consequences of war and reconstruct the role of women in times of conflict, *Destination Biafra* is also an eco-critical denunciation of man's tendency to prioritize the exploitation of environmental resources against the imperatives of environmental sustainability. In this paper, we shall employ the term "humanitarian" in its adjectival sense as relating to people's welfare, and the alleviation of suffering, while "environment (al)" is used as pertaining to the incidents of the natural world or the ecosystem and the influences therein. Similarly we shall employ the term "tragedy" in its denotative form as referring to incidents of disaster especially the types involving great loss of life or injury while the term "reinterpretation" is used as a reference to fresh perspective or new vista of appreciation.

The Eco-Critical Trope

The profusion of environmental challenges which cumulatively threaten human existence and the apparent failure of science and technology to find solution to such environmental problems have given rise to a multi-disciplinary approach to environmental vanguardry. Eco-criticism is the outgrowth of, and the response to, the invitation of literature to intervene in environmental protection. It is, therefore, the field of literary theory which concerns itself with the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. According to Heise (1999), the domain of ecocriticism is the analysis of the ways in which literature mediates man's relationship with nature and how the perceptions of the natural world shape literary tropes and genres (1089). Over the years, practitioners of eco-criticism have debated the relevant parameters adoptable in the interpretation of environmental issues implicated in the genre of the novel.

Enger and Smith (2006) for instance, identify what they refer to as the three primary theories of moral responsibility to the environment: the anthropocentric, biocentric and ecocentric orientations. In their view, while the anthropocentric orientation is exclusively human-centered and situates environmental responsibility within the context of human interest, the biocentric theory is life-centered and insists that all forms of life have an inherent right to exist the ecocentric orientation on the other hand, maintains that the environment is deserving of moral consideration as an integrated entity and not merely based on human interest. Consequently, the thesis of ecocriticism is that the environment has direct and inherent rights, that it qualifies for moral personhood deserving of ethical consideration and that it is imbued with inherent worth (2006:2).

Historically, ecocriticism is relatively a recent phenomenon being largely a 20th century development. It is traceable to the United States of America and necessitated by the study of environmental non-fiction otherwise known as nature-writing. Focusing on the study of natural history and pastoralism, this epoch has come to be

categorized as the first wave of ecocriticism. It was rooted in deep ecology which sees human beings and nature as opposed to each other. In itself, deep ecologists advocated a brand of environmental criticism oriented to the protection and preservation of the natural environment from human exploitation. However, the difficulty in the application of the US-inspired type of criticism to fictional literature, accentuated the development of what has come to be regarded as the second wave of ecocriticism.

The thrust of the second wave of ecocriticism is the attempt to identify nature as an ever present, though silent component of literary texts. Thus, the second wave of ecocriticism “categorizes environmental representation as a relevant and significant category of literary aesthetics and political analysis” which takes cognizance of economics, gender, race and other variables in literary texts. The consequence is the expansion of the frontiers of ecocriticism beyond the orbit of “nature-writing”. According to Kovacik (2011), contemporary ecocriticism has attained so much expanded scope that it no longer focuses exclusively on nature qua nature but now incorporates such fields of study as feminism and environmental justice (5). Buell (2005) captures the subsisting temper of eco-theory when he notes that eco-critics no longer see human beings and the environment as opposed to each other but focus on the interdependent and symbolic relationship between human kind and the ecosystem (2).

The corollary is that ecocriticism is a reaction to, and a departure from, the canons of anthropocentrism which place undue premium on man’s exploitation of the environment for his selfish interest. Very often, the conflict of such interests occasion wars leading to loss of lives with collateral instigation of environmental destabilization which also threaten human survival. As Acholonu (1995) has noted, “modern civilization has placed more emphasis on fighting wars thus producing a preponderance of technologies that “subdue”, “conquer” and “destroy”, rather than those that co-operate with nature’s primary rule of “live and let live” (29). In *Destination Biafra*, Buchi Emecheta brings her feminist impulse to bear on the subject of war

and its implications for human survival and environmental degradation.

The novel follows a sequential chronology of the major events that presaged the Nigeria civil war of 1967-1970, the outbreak of hostilities proper, and their eventual cessation. Divided into two broad segments, the first part deals with the preparations for the handover of sovereign powers, by the colonial masters to the newly declared independent Nigeria; the electoral turmoil that followed; corruption among the indigenous political elite; political violence, and inter-ethnic tensions. The first segment ends with the secession of Biafra which foreshadows the bloodbath in the next segment. The heroine, Debbie Ogedemgbe, is introduced in part one as a transitional figure linking the two parts. In her desire to stave-off the brewing bloodbath following the general elections, she offers herself as a peace envoy to Biafra to persuade Abosi - the Biafran leader to give peace a chance. Her journey to Biafra is attended with many obstacles and personal sacrifices. In the end, she succeeds in reaching the land of Biafra but her hope of staving-off war is overtaken by events as the war is well under way before her arrival at Biafra. She manages to find her way out of Biafra and subsequently to England. In Britain, she becomes a vanguard for the sensitization of the international community on the carnage going on in Biafra. She organizes food supplies for the famished citizenry and mobilizes military equipment in order to eliminate Abosi and end the war. However, before she would reach her target, Abosi escapes. The novel ends with the flight to exile of the Biafran leader and the subsequent surrender of the Biafran forces.

Failure of Discourse and the Carnage of War

In *Destination Biafra*, Emecheta dramatizes the trite fact that war is frequently the consequence of failure of discourse. She indicates that in spite of the neo-colonialist manipulation of the levers of political power in Nigeria and the corrupt tendencies of the political class leading to military intervention in the polity, the civil war could still have been avoided if the actors had embraced dialogue. In this regard, the lopsided execution of the military intervention in the political

space for which prominent political and religious leaders of Northern extraction were eliminated without a corresponding elimination of the political leaders of the south especially those of Ibo extraction, leads to mutual suspicion and mounting tension. These cumulatively set the stage for the subsequent retaliatory killing of Ibos in the Northern parts of the country giving vent to “human blood running down the streets like tropical rain” (DB, 72).

With the mounting drumbeats of war, the leader of the neighbouring West African country- Ghana, General Ankrah offers a platform at Aburi for mediation and dialogue to stave-off full scale war (DB, 93). The prospect of peace through the Aburi dialogue makes the heroine of the novel - Debbie to voice the hope of the ordinary citizens: “I hope and pray the two of them (Momoh and Abosi) sink their differences and come to a settlement” (DB, 93).

At the meeting, the Biafran leader’s proposal for peace is simply “for the butchery of Ibos to stop, for the Hausa soldiers to go back to their barracks and for the east to be granted autonomy within the federation” (DB, 100). On his part, the Nigerian head of state, Momoh, accepts the proposal by Abosi in the realization that even with the autonomy which the East craves, they would still be in the same country and he [Saka Momoh] would be the supreme commander of the army of Nigeria. He adds: “I always knew that Aburi would settle our differences. We are all brothers really, and when brothers quarrel they make it up....” (DB, 101). Following the meeting, both sides agree that the Nigerian leader is to publicly announce the terms of the settlement within 48 hours (DB, 101).

Remarkably, the British colonial agents - Alan Grey and his compatriot Giles - instantly declare their determination to truncate the peace agreement for fear that the British economic interest will be adversely served if the East is granted autonomy having regard to the rich oil wells in the area. Part of the fear of the British colonial agent is that the Biafran leader Abosi having studied in England has deep insight into the exploitative mindset of Britain which explains his getting his military supplies from China and France rather than from Britain as

does Saka Momoh (DB, 102). To protect, the economic interest of Britain, the Britons resolve that "...Momoh is not going to make that declaration... and we are starting on him straight away". (DB, 102). In the end, the mercenary Britons goad the Nigerian leader - Saka Momoh to recant and resile from the peace agreement. This is followed by the partition of the country into 12 states in order to carve out the oil rich minority areas of the East from the political control of the Biafran heartland. Following the creation of the 12 states, Biafra announces its secession 3 days later thereby putting a seal to the failure of the Aburi dialogue (DB, 106).

It is instructive to note that in spite of the collapse of the Aburi-inspired peace agreement, the importance of dialogue is not lost on the parties. For instance, in the attempt to open a new channel of communication with his adversary, Saka Momoh mandates the heroine-Debbie to go to the East and hold talks with the Biafran leader with a view to persuading him to back down from the bloody struggle (DB, 124). Although Debbie accepts to undertake the risky mission, it dawns on her, however, that Momoh and her advisers are seeking to exploit her feminine sexuality to charm Abosi to change his stand having regard to the long existing relationship between Abosi and Debbie. (DB, 126).

It is essential to footnote the fact that Debbie's travails and vicissitudes in her capacity as a peace envoy to Biafra constitutes the writer's parabolic statement on the difficult road to peace. Apart from contending with incipient hunger, recurrent rape by Nigerian and Biafran soldiers respectively among other physical and psychological indignities, Debbie perseveres in her assignment to reach Abosi in her desperation to stop the costly bloodletting. Unfortunately, by the time she reaches Abosi, the war has not only gathered momentum, he also rebuffs all entreaties to abandon the bloody path (DB, 240). In the main, Debbie's failure to persuade Abosi to call off the war is both a reaffirmation of the failure of discourse and the dramatization of man's self destructive impulse. The collapse of the Aburi agreement marks the inauguration of total hostilities following the creation of the state of Biafra. In contriving to dispatch Debbie on the peace mission

to Biafra, the writer enables her heroine to be both a partaker and witness to the carnage that follows the failure of discourse.

Indeed, Debbie is crucial to the message of the novel because as Roopali (1995) has noted, Debbie is Buchi Emecheta's favourite heroine because in many ways she most transparently enacts her creator's political conviction (95). In the course of her journey, she comes face to face with the fact of war as humanitarian disaster. Like other women caught in the throes of war, Debbie is recurrently raped (DB, 134, 176) and this is also the fate of hundreds of other women (DB 135); she witnesses a scene where four men whose legs are tied together with rope are trying to escape by hopping into the bush to save their lives only to be shot by the federal forces (DB, 171); she witnesses another scene of mass murder of over two hundred defenseless men along the Benin-Asaba road after which the Army Commander – Lawal orders military jeeps, trucks and ambulances to run over the bodies of the men because "we don't want it known that they have been shot" (DB, 177).

Overcome and nearly broken, Debbie informs the reader that "over two thousand Ibo men died along the Benin-Asaba road on operation mosquito" (DB, 177). The scenes of carnage and human butchery are replicated throughout the novel spanning the Nigerian side to the Biafran heartland where starvation is an added source of death. As Debbie and other women journey through the bushes on their way to Biafra, a pregnant woman gives birth and the child is given the symbolic name - Biafra (DB, 189) but the child does not survive the war as he dies en route the land of Biafra (DB, 212). Similarly, in the course of the war, Elizabeth- the pregnant wife of Saka Momoh – (the Nigerian Head of State) is delivered of a baby by caesarean section but like baby Biafra, this child does not survive (DB, 203). The death of the two emblematic babies represents the writer's artistic foregrounding of the fact that in war there is no real winner on either side. The tragedy of war finds resonance in the words of the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Peter Maurer (2017) who characterizes it as follows:

War has rained chaos on millions of lives; separating families, destroying access to food, water, education, shelter, health care. The scourge of sexual violence has left dreadful physical and psychological scars.

In *Destination Biafra*, these atrocities ring palpably true.

In the failure of her peace mission and through her final encounter with her boy friend and British neo-colonial agent-Alan Grey in London, Debbie comes to the zenith of her realization that many African leaders are mere stooges to the former colonial masters who posture as benefactors to their former colonies as a pretext to exploit them economically. The heroine explodes the hypocrisy of British war policy on Nigeria when she realizes that Britain sends tokenist food aids to the starving Biafrans while at the same time arming the federal forces to execute the war. She confronts Alan Gray as follows:

You mean you send arms to Momoh and food to Abosi? Well, I have heard of hypocrisy, but to see it practiced this way is something else. (DB, 242)

In the end, Debbie's awareness is complete and through her, ours to the effect that the bloody war is facilitated by the failure of dialogue and a latent struggle for the control of the oil wealth.

The Environmental Trajectory of the Oil War

From the beginning of the novel to its very end, the writer leaves no one in doubt that in spite of the socio-political factors which watered the ground for civil war, its intensity and protraction are underpinned by the struggle for the control of the oil wealth of the East. The British neo-colonial agent - Alan Grey harps on the quantum of the hydrocarbon deposit in the Eastern region as a reason why Britain must maintain a strategic interest on who holds the reins of political

power upon Nigeria's independence. Indicating the Eastern region and the Benin areas on the map, he says:

These vast areas are full of oil, pure crude oil, which is untouched and still needs thorough prospecting. Now are we to hand it over to these people...? (DB, 6).

The awareness of, and interest in, the crude oil endowment of the East informs Britain's active manipulation of the electoral process to ensure that political power is held by elements amenable to British neo-colonial control. This explains why the British economic agents symbolized by Grey and Giles put in everything to abort the Aburi agreement for fear that granting autonomy to the East where the oil wealth is located will not serve the interest of Britain:

The country is in debt and her only hope is from the oil wells in the East. Yet he (Momoh) is letting Abosi take all that... Then Momoh is not going to make that (peace) declaration (DB, 102).

Furthermore, if anyone is in doubt that the nation's undoing is its natural endowments, the heroine - Debbie removes such doubt by her revealing insight:

Trouble is, how long will it remain a civil war, with those foreign vultures hovering ready to pounce on the mess we leave behind. Our natural resources, our oil will be the end of us. (DB, 117).

Goaded by foreign economic interest, the federal government refuses to address the issues that breed discontent and disillusionment among the victimized Easterners because the rest of the country think that the Biafran leadership is only agitating because of the desire to control the oil wealth (DB,119). With this mindset, the Nigeria Head

of State-Saka Momoh pulls back from the Aburi agreement which would have averted war. Instead, he proceeds to partition the country into 12 states in order to remove the oil rich Delta areas from the political control of the Eastern heartland (DB, 121).

As if the humanitarian tragedy of the oil war is not enough, the British agent - Alan Grey urges the Nigerian Head of State to unleash more fire power against the secessionists lest they gain the upper hand and take the oil wealth:

Oh, for God's sake, Saka. If you have more arms and ammunition than Abosi then use them... The whole Mid West is rich in oil; part of the breakaway state is very oily; Id sign percentages of the oil revenue over to people who would help you win the war. The best combat would be heavy yet quick, an all-out thrust into the Ibo heartland (DB, 153).

Remarkably, Saka Momoh falls for the manipulative antics of the neo-colonialist by proceeding to "sign away the greater percentage of the oil wells to some Western powers, on condition that they settled the Biafran question quickly" (DB, 154). To ensure that the oil wealth does not elude Britain, Alan Grey secures a steady flow of arms and ammunition from Britain to Nigeria to prosecute the war effort in an enterprise the narrator labels as "a new trade in ammunition and human blood" (DB, 156).

However, the indigenous political elite are not insulated from the greed that drives the war. Thus, for all the pretense of the Biafran political leaders that the war is actuated by public interest, many ordinary people believe differently. The wife of Dr. Eze - one of the Advisers to the Biafran leader Abosi, lays it bare when she rhetorically queries: "was not the oil the reason for all these mess in the first place?" (DB, 254). As the war ends, the foreign exploiters and their local collaborators cannot wait to commence the lucrative

enterprise of oil exploration and exploitation (DB, 25). Through the mechanism of repetition, the writer succeeds in driving down the point that what has been fought is actually an oil war.

Emetcheta's denunciation of war is attended by a corresponding sensitization of the reader that the impact of war is injurious to both man and nature and that environmental degradation arising from oil exploitation is an added threat to human existence. It is noteworthy that in the course of the war, the bushes and forests are also victims of bombing and heavy artillery. This leads to the scorching of the earth giving rise to ozone layer depletion and excessive heat (DB, 80-81). With the indiscriminate butchery of human beings and dumping of dead bodies all over the place, the environment is terribly polluted so much so that water sources smell and the air is rancid with decomposing bodies (DB, 89).

Furthermore, many of the Ibos who are running for their lives take to the bushes and forests to shield them from detection. But the security forces chase them to the forests where most of them are killed and hundreds of women are raped (DB, 134). This is both a physical and metaphysical violation of nature. For instance, in "operation mosquito", the writer graphically describes the nexus between the decimation of human lives and the despoliation of the environment:

It seemed as if the sky, which up till then had been so innocently clear and blue, was torn into two and the gaping hole between the parts coughed out some horrible black mucus of smoke. It was death coming from the sky. People screamed and shrieked, and called these fires 'bombs'. Aeroplanes were seen flying low in and out of the smoke and fire, belching out more and more of it (DB, 150).

The shriek, scream, fire, bomb and death from the sky imagistically accentuate the death of human beings and the destabilization of the

ecosystem as the sky loses its innocence and the streets are littered with corpses and burnt houses (DB, 165). The picture seems complete that the oil war is both a humanitarian and environmental disaster.

The consequence of man's war with his kind and with the environment is that nature becomes his enemy and contrives to fight back. Using the literary device of personification, Emecheta outlines the litany of complaints of nature for man's disruption of the ecosystem:

But the night insects still buzzed. Crickets from the undergrowth cried "shame on you humans", frogs from nearby swampy ponds went on croaking and owls drawled their mournful complaints. This was a place for animals; 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, 170).

In the face of man's disruption of the cohesive order of the ecosystem, the environment rebels against him thereby making his survival difficult. This explains the death of the just delivered baby of the Nigerian Head of State (DB, 203) as well as the death of baby Biafra (DB, 212). It is parabolic that both babies (representing the two warring sides) do not survive the hostility of an environment polluted by bloodletting and ecological distortion. This is the writer's means of sensitizing humankind that in war, all sides are losers. Gras (2011) adumbrates the transactional impact of human negative attitude to other humans and the environment when he notes that:

The catastrophe that awaits us is due to anthropocentrism. We ignore nature except as a material resource to serve human ends, as we continue to exploit nature- arguably our most basic

relationship-we take on a bogus position with it, harming both nature and ourselves (65).

Conclusion

In *Destination Biafra*, Emecheta gapples with the issue of war as a humanitarian and environmental tragedy. By situating the Nigeria civil war as an oil war, the writer highlights the linkage between the quest for the control of the oil wells and the perpetuation of bloodletting with collateral environmental hazards. By a dint of creative engineering, Emecheta brings the issues of hydrocarbon exploitation, global warming, deforestation and pollution to the sensitive lens of literature. By so doing, the writer intensifies the paradox of environmental destruction as one in which humans destroy themselves in the process. This constitutes the rallying cry of eco criticism for as Acholonu (1995) has pointed out:

It is obvious that modern civilization, science and technology have not the right disposition to solve environmental crises. We have no alternative choice but to take refuge in the potency of literature to educate humanity about environmental challenges.

In *Destination Biafra*, Emecheta not only demonstrates that women and children often bear the brunt of war, she also brings to the forecourt, the dynamism and resilience of women in the face of conflict while sensitizing humankind on the nexus between man's socio-economic activities and environmental habitability. By so doing, the writer heeds the exhortation of Azeez *et al* (2014) that literature must become a channel of unwavering advocacy "for the philosophical valuing of the earth, not economic one. The interactions between man and the environment should be based on love, admiration and respect". In the final analysis, Emecheta shows that war is an ill wind

which blows neither human nor the environment any good and that change of attitude is imperative for sustainable development to save man from himself.

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