



Gender-based genre conventions and the critical reception of Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (Nigeria)

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A gendered spatial schema of war – which creates a dichotomy between a masculine battlefield and a feminine home-front – undermines the credibility of women's participation in battle, impacting on the legitimacy of women's war novels. Through a study of Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, first published in 1982, this article highlights the role of genre conventions in the production and reception of war novels written by African women. Emecheta makes a daring choice to reconceptualise the home and/or battlefield dichotomy. By manipulating the representational genre convention of soldier-hero she subverts its archetypal masculinity. Debbie, the female soldier-hero, is the focal point of this analysis. Within the context of post-colonial African literature, women's writing is portrayed as a process of 'writing back' to a canon that represents women as apolitical conduits of tradition. In Debbie, Emecheta foregoes canonical markers of African 'authenticity' to create a liminal figure that negotiates her identity between modernity and tradition; masculinity and femininity. The article concludes that the principal reason why the characterisation of Debbie is deemed dissatisfying is that it defies the facile categorisation offered by the adherence to the gendered representational conventions. Too often genre is considered a fixed category yet a meaningful analysis of *Destination Biafra* forces one to consider it as an open category whose conventions can be 'bent' to accommodate minority literatures spawning new sub-genres.

Geslagsgebaseerde genrekonvensies en die kritiese ontvangs van Buchi Emecheta se *Destination Biafra* (Nigerië). 'n Geslagsgebaseerde ruimtelike konsepsie van oorlog – wat 'n verdeling skep tussen die manlike oorlogsfront en 'n vroulike tuisfront – ondermyn die geloofwaardigheid van vroue se deelname aan die stryd en die legitimitieit van vroue-oorlogromans. Deur 'n studie van Buchi Emecheta se *Destination Biafra*, eers gepubliseer in 1982 te doen, beklemtoon hierdie artikel die rol van genrekonvensies tydens die produksie en ontvangs van oorlogromans geskryf deur Afrika vroueskrywers. Emecheta se gewaagde keuse om die tuis- en/of oorlogsfrontverdeling te ondermyn deur die skepping van 'n vroulike soldaat-heldin, Debbie, is die fokuspunt van hierdie analise. Binne die konteks van post-koloniale Afrika letterkunde word die werke deur vroue uitgebeeld as 'n proses van die 'terug skryf' aan 'n kanon wat vroue uitbeeld as apolitiese geleiers van tradisie. Emecheta doen afstand van kanonikale merkers van Afrika-'egtheid' met die karakter van Debbie, 'n liminale figuur wat haar identiteit moet vind te midde van moderniteit en tradisie; manlikheid en vroulikheid. Die artikel kom tot die slotsom dat die hoofrede waarom die karakterisering van Debbie as onbevredigend geag word, is omdat dit die simplistiese kategorisering van genre konvensies uitdaag. Té dikwels word genre as 'n vaste kategorie beskou, maar 'n betekenisvolle ontleding van *Destination Biafra* dwing die leser om dit as 'n oop kategorie te beskou, waarvan die konvensies 'gebuig' kan word om minderheidsletterkunde te akkommodeer wat nuwe sub-genres ontwikkel.

Introduction

The very existence of literary genre raises questions about the relative autonomy of literary texts from a historical, aesthetic and rhetorical point of view. The debate about literary genre can be traced from Aristotle (384–322 BC) and his writing on poetics through to contemporary theoretical texts such as Scholes's (1974) *Structuralism in literature: An introduction*¹ and Wright's (1982) *The formal principle in the novel*.² Fundamentally, a genre can be seen as a set of formal considerations that define a category of artistic expression (internal composition of genre conventions) or as a

1. Specifically the chapter in this publication entitled, 'Towards a structuralist poetics of fiction', in which Scholes analyses the history of genres.

2. Wright's *The formal principle in the novel* is credited with advancing the discussion about genre conventions and the manner in which genres have organically evolve as a result of writers manipulating them in order to create new forms.



conceptual schema that can be used to group existing works together (external composition of genre conventions). This article will not enter the debate about the idea of pre-existing conventions but notes that genre as a classification system is, consciously or subconsciously, used by literary critics as a normative framework rather than a descriptive one. The article's specific concern is the way in which gendered genre conventions are implemented whilst perceived as normative and then used to delegitimise and possibly exclude women's writing from the war genre.

The concept of gender raises questions about the stability of masculinity and femininity as a heteronormative framework through which sex – being male or female – is socially defined. Amadiume's (1987) *Male daughters, female husbands*, an anthropological study of the *Nobi* tribe, exposes the myth of fixed gender roles in pre-colonial African society. Likewise Butler's (1999) seminal *Gender trouble – Feminism and the subversion of identity* has gone a long way towards delinking sex as a biological category from gender as a socially defined role and the sharpening of distinctions between sexuality, queer and gender studies. Margaret Higonnet, a feminist critic who has written several essays on the subject of women's literature and war, argues that women's writing has traditionally been excluded from what is perhaps the most masculine of literary genres, the war novel. Higonnet's (1994:144–161) 'Cassandra's question: Do women write war novels?' eloquently makes an analogy between Greek mythology's Cassandra – the prophetess who speaks the truth but is not believed – and women's war novels which are not considered to be legitimate representations of war. By stating that women's war novels have 'ordinarily seemed' a contradiction in terms, she suggests that masculinity is seen as a defining convention within this genre. This echoes assertions by theorists that war literature is closely associated with patriarchal nationalism (see Alison 2009; Dawson 1997; Yuval-Davies 1997). This article will, therefore, identify the spatial schema that underpins the characterisation of wars as 'masculine' and examine the gendered genre-convention that is considered normative.

Higonnet's (1994) thinking about women and the war genre can be used to study the genre conventions and to determine the legitimacy of war novels written by African women. It is worth noting that there is a history of female participation in African liberation struggles – female combatants in *Umkhonto we sizwe*, the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), being a case in point. Gender plays a particularly significant role in post-colonial African literature, where women's writing is portrayed as a process of 'writing back' to decolonising discourses – such as Senghor's conception of *Négritude* – that represent women as apolitical conduits of tradition³ (see Stratton 1994:51). Furthermore, historians (Diabaté 1975; Lyons 2004; Zeleza 2004) have highlighted the link between African historiography's exclusion of women's participation in the continent's liberation movements and

3. An example of which is Senghor's *femme pot-de-culture* in his seminal work, *Les fondements de l'africanité ou Négritude et Arabité*, first published in 1967. In Florence Stratton's (1994) *Contemporary African literature and the politics of gender* this representation of African womanhood is based in the glorification of pre-colonial roots and presented as the 'master-text' that defines the postcolonial African literary canon.

the birth of a 'feminist'⁴ historiography that seeks to re-centre women in history. This dialectic of patriarchal and 'feminist' historiographies provides a rhetorical framework which cannot be ignored when studying the literary works by African women representing historical events such as wars. It adds additional significance to the gendered genre conventions that affect the production and reception of Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* as a war novel.

Nationalism and the conceptual schema of war

The sheer volume of texts generated by the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967–1970) is not only indicative of its continued political and historical importance; it also highlights the contested notion of victimhood in this inter-ethnic conflict. Given this context, it is not surprising that Emecheta's (1983) *Destination Biafra*, first published in 1982, is often grouped with the works of other Igbo authors – notably Achebe's (1972) *Girls at war and other short stories*, Nwapa's (1975) *Never again* and recently Adichie's (2006) *Half of a yellow sun*. Yet Emecheta (1986:64) regards her rejection of a political discourse that puts ethnic identity first and national identity second as the basis for the creation of Debbie Ogedemgbe, *Destination Biafra*'s heroine, 'who is neither Igbo nor Yoruba nor Hausa, but simply Nigerian'. Predictably the Nigerian nationalism it professes does not spare the novel from being judged 'pro-Igbo' (Porter 1996:327), even 'pro-Western-Igbo' (Nwachukwu-Agbada 1996:392) and, therefore, not credible as an unbiased representation of Nigerian nationalism.

Emecheta ([1982] 1983) positions *Destination Biafra* as a transgression into a domain that is taboo for women writers when she notes in the foreword:

I am glad this work is at last published; it is different from my other books, the subject is, as they say, "masculine", but I feel a great sense of achievement in having completed it. (p. viii)

It is significant that this statement forms an integral part of a paratext (dedication, foreword and note to the reader) that foregrounds the Nigeria-Biafra War as a literary and historical subject. Described in the note to the reader as 'historical fiction' (Emecheta [1982] 1983:ix), *Destination Biafra* is explicitly presented as a fictionalised account of a real war yet the foreword highlights the gendered nature of war as a literary subject and, by explicitly positioning the novel as a transgression, the author casts doubt on the text's acceptance as a legitimate example of the war genre.

The war genre uses a spatial schema that can be attributed to ideological considerations such as nationalism and the gendered construction of private and public spheres. This creates a binary opposition between the masculine national and/or public sphere and the feminine home and/or domestic sphere. Higonnet bases her characterisation of the war novel as a 'masculine' literary genre on this opposition.

4. Whether or not feminism is an appropriate term to define the discourse of female emancipation in Africa remains the subject of much debate amongst the theorists and writers of the continent. There is a certain amount of ambivalence towards labelling, which is sometimes construed as a Western term. It is for this reason that it is placed in quotation marks, when referring to African women throughout the article.



She uses this to describe a dichotomous relationship between a 'masculine' battlefield and a 'feminine' home – front (Higonnet 1994:145–146). Similarly Dawson (1994), in his study of masculinity in the British nationalist imaginary, proposes a nationalist conception of war that is based on protecting the motherland. This situates the soldier-hero at the battle front (combat zone), fighting to preserve his nation or symbolic home (conceived according to a patriarchal structure) from an invading army.

Schaeffer's (1989:159) *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?* defines a hierarchy of conventions which can be manipulated by authors. Of the highest importance are defining conventions, *conventions constituantes*, to which failure to conform results in being excluded from a genre. These are followed by regulatory conventions, *conventions régulatrices*, which simply regulate the artistic form and can be manipulated in order to innovate within the genre. Of the lowest order are canonical conventions, *conventions traditionnelles*, through which new works refer to archetypal texts within a genre.

The figure of the soldier-hero – as popularised by World War I and World War II military propaganda – is linked to notions of heroism in the tradition of Greek mythology. It is an archetypal figure, which relates to the definition and protection of national frontiers (Dawson 1994:1). Higonnet (1994:144) identifies the figure of the soldier-hero as a representational convention that is intrinsically linked to the war genre. Higonnet (*ibid*:145) asserts that this convention has the power to exclude women's writing from the war genre. This article argues that Higonnet's view makes the soldier-hero a defining convention of the war genre. In other words, without the soldier-hero the spatial schema of the war novel (battlefront versus home-front) cannot be defined and, therefore, the war novel would not exist. The question raised by Emecheta's decision to create a female soldier-hero and not the archetypal male soldier-hero is whether or not this gendered representational convention is a defining or regulating principle, as this determines the exclusion and/or inclusion of the novel within the war genre.

Higonnet's (1994:144–161) 'Cassandra's question: Do women write war novels?' directly challenges this use of gender as a defining convention which excludes women's writing from the war genre. The validity of gender as a defining convention is further questioned by literary critics, who praise Emecheta for 'engendering' war, by foregrounding women in *Destination Biafra* (see Adams 2001; Uraizee 1997). By reading the novel as a woman's version of the war genre, these two authors consider gender as more of a regulatory convention that can be manipulated in order to innovate within the genre. To consider gender as a regulatory rather than a defining convention, allows one to analyse Emecheta's subversion of the archetypal masculinity of the soldier-hero as a strategy that 'opens' the war genre to incorporate the representation of female combatants.

Rhetorical concerns: Authorial intention and critical reception

Whether it is considered a legitimate representation of war or not, the critical reception of *Destination Biafra* seems heavily influenced by its association with the rhetoric of feminism. Whilst Nwachukwu-Agbada (1996:387–388) bemoans Emecheta's 'feminist temper', Frank (1987:25) calls *Destination Biafra* 'a daring departure from the domestic preserve of most novels written by African women'.

As the principal protagonist, Debbie Ogedemgbe is at the centre of the novel's analysis by literary critics. Furthermore, Emecheta (1986:1) describes her as her 'dream woman', and adds 'I think that she is my best character and the one I would like to identify with' (Ogundele 1994:448). Frank (1987:25–26) considers Debbie the most 'liberated and militant' of Emecheta's heroines because she rejects traditional marriage and motherhood by having sex for pleasure with a British sexual partner, whereas Nwachukwu-Agbada (1996:392) sees the British sexual partner – 'her only known boyfriend is a white male' – as a betrayal of Debbie's authentic African womanhood. He goes on to give Debbie the derogatory label of '*femme terrible*', in stark contrast to Frank's (1987) celebration of Emecheta's modern 'African new woman'.

It is worth noting that although Emecheta's authorial intention has been described in terms of 'feminist' rhetoric, the author herself remains ambivalent towards this externally-imposed label. Describing herself as a 'feminist' with a small 'f', she states:

Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes ... I did not know that by doing that I was going to be called a feminist. (Emecheta 1988:175)

Nevertheless, Nwachukwu-Agbada (1996:392) rather vociferously asserts that *Destination Biafra* represents the unwelcome 'intrusion' of feminism into African literature. Nwachukwu-Agbada (*ibid*:387) bases this reading of *Destination Biafra* on the premise that Emecheta's entire oeuvre comprises female protagonists who 'try to turn the tables against the second-class and slavish status to which they are subjected either by their husbands or some male monster'. Nwachukwu-Agbada's critique suggests that Emecheta's intention is to reinforce rather than to destabilise gender binaries. Furthermore, he deems Emecheta's 'feminist' rhetoric to be 'revisionist' (*ibid*:392) and a misrepresentation of Igbo tradition (*ibid*:377–388). The line of arguments that associates feminism with the betrayal of African tradition is hardly new, but Nwachukwu-Agbada's critique illustrates the Manichean opposition created by critics between 'modern' feminism and 'authentic' tradition.

The trouble with Debbie: Defining African womanhood

I see now that Abosi and his like are still colonised. They need to be decolonised. 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. (Emecheta [1982] 1983:258)



Destination Biafra's conclusion proposes a redefinition of Nigerian nationalism on the basis of gender. This opposes the decolonisation of military men like the Biafran leader, Abosi, to that of the African woman.

Fishburne (1995:130) argues that by representing Debbie as an interstitial figure – at the cross-roads of tribal, gender, class and educational boundaries – Emecheta creates a new type of modern African woman. This reference to Bhabha's (1994:2) notion of interstices – 'the overlap and displacement of domains of difference' – associates Emecheta's representation of Debbie with post-colonial strategies of negotiating cultural difference. Emecheta's refusal to attach Debbie to the singularity of 'authentic' African womanhood highlights her cultural hybridity as a post-colonial subject. It is a far more complex representational schema of African womanhood than a linear progression from tradition to modernity. Based on Bhabha's (1994:4) definition of a liminal space 'in between the designations of identity', Debbie can be characterised as a liminal figure who constantly negotiates her identity between two worlds – England and Nigeria. Placing the emphasis on a constant negotiation with regards to Debbie's characterisation in *Destination Biafra*, can also be read as 'writing back' to decolonising discourses which valorise an 'authentic' African identity that is rooted in pre-colonial traditions without falling into the trap of opposing authenticity to modernity. Given the character's rhetorical significance it seems strange that the author deliberately creates a certain amount of ambivalence towards the heroine through the narrative.

Debbie is introduced as a member of Nigeria's corrupt political elite. Whilst she criticises her father's corrupt practices, her political credibility is undermined by the fact that she has clearly benefited from being a wealthy Oxford-educated socialite: 'Her accent was perfect ... That was what most fathers wanted, a daughter who not only was a been-to but who could talk and behave like a European' (Emecheta [1982] 1983:44). The colloquial Nigerian term – 'been-to' (been to Europe) – is significant in this ironic depiction of a post-independence social hierarchy in Nigeria. It describes the cultural hybridity of Debbie, on who the mask of the 'been-to' fits so seamlessly that it appears integrated into her 'self' whilst Alan, her English lover, who is a connoisseur of Nigerian cultural artefacts, considers her 'too English for his taste' (*ibid*:36). Debbie, therefore, represents a kind of African womanhood of whom the credibility is undermined by the text before she assumes the masculine role of a soldier-hero.

The fact that Debbie does not fit into the neat categories of tradition and modernity says something about the constant negotiation of identity that defines Emecheta's ([1982] 1983) representation of African womanhood. Although it would be simplistic to see Debbie's journey to Biafra as an initiatory quest for her African self, the suggestion that Biafra (in the East) represents an 'authentic' pre-colonial identity cannot be ignored. In a scene that highlights the political idealism behind the military coup that led to the Nigeria-Biafra War, the name of a pre-colonial West African kingdom is chosen

by the coup leaders to represent true independence from colonisation; 'I would rather say our destination is "Biafra", since we're not yet independent' (*ibid*:60), yet Biafra is a political ideal that was never achieved, just as Debbie never succeeded in fully adopting the identity of an Igbo woman on the road to Biafra (*ibid*:157–178). Perhaps inevitably, Emecheta's heroine becomes aware of the vast difference in her life as an ordinary Nigerian woman and begins to question her own authenticity as an African woman:

Debbie made light of it. But as she walked down that dry road in that heat, with the weight of that 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 to walk, yet she was in such pain. What kind of African woman was she indeed? (Emecheta [1982] 1983:191)

The key to Debbie's role as a representation of African womanhood lies at the heart of her rhetorical question, 'What kind of African woman was she indeed?'. Amadiume (2000), a Nigerian 'feminist', defines two kinds of African womanhood in her book *Daughters of the goddess, daughters of imperialism* defines two categories to describe African womanhood. As indicated by the title, Amadiume describes women whose power is rooted in African traditions as 'Daughters of the goddess', as opposed to 'Daughters of imperialism' who draw their power from the modern systems of the post-colonial African nation. On the basis of this categorisation, Amadiume's book argues that imperialism gives certain African 'feminists' (Daughters of imperialism) the power to appropriate the voice of 'authentic' African women (Daughters of the goddess). On the other hand, Western feminists divide the (modern) feminist self and (traditional) African self of the African woman into 'two mutually exclusive subjectivities' (Stratton 1994:110).

By making Debbie a liminal character, Emecheta is able to use her as a literary representation that interrogates the very notion of what womanhood means when one is constantly negotiating between tradition and modernity; African and Western values. Debbie is a contradictory figure whose 'modern' liberation leads her to escape traditional marriage and motherhood by joining the army. As a soldier liberty proves to be a chimera and Debbie loses the biological capacity to be a mother when she is raped by fellow soldiers, yet she symbolically returns to motherhood when she finds herself caring for an orphaned baby on the road to Biafra. The intrinsic link between motherhood and African authenticity is created by the female solidarity that follows the death of the baby on her back:

It was then that she noticed the other women watching her ... On this issue, their common Africanness came to the fore; a child was a child of the community. (Emecheta [1982] 1983:212)

There are, therefore, sound rhetorical grounds for the unstable manner in which Debbie is represented as a post-colonial subject. It does entail reading African literary canon against the grain and questioning perceived notions about 'feminist' representations of African womanhood. The constant renegotiation of selfhood on the basis of gender,



nationality, class and cultural identities provides a reason why Debbie would trade her privileged (but fixed) position as a wife and mother-in-waiting for the uncertainties of becoming a soldier.

Gender-bending and the re-conceptualisation of war

The dichotomy between public and/or political spheres and private and/or domestic spheres creates the soldier-hero who acts by guarding national frontiers and the waiting women whose role is to survive passively in the absence of the soldier-hero. Aggression and pacifism are two concepts that are intimately linked with the gendered conceptual schema of war. This feeds into essentialist notions of masculine aggression or heroism and feminine passivity (Alison 2009:85). *Destination Biafra's* 'Women's war' chapter is characterised by illustrations of female solidarity and collective motherhood as Debbie and the band of Igbo women struggle to protect and feed the children in their care in the midst of the civil war. On the road to Biafra Debbie is capable of nurturing a new-born orphan (Emecheta [1982] 1983:189) but this evidence of 'domestication' does not necessarily translate into feminine passivity. In later chapters she plots to kill the Biafran leader, Abosi, when he refuses to abandon chemical warfare (*ibid*:255) and ends up chasing the fleeing leader's airplane down the runway in a heroic attempt to destroy it with explosives. Debbie is, therefore, an ambiguous figure who defies the gendered notions of 'masculine' aggression and 'feminine' pacifism. This is illustrated by her military career.

When Debbie first becomes a soldier, she is depicted as a caricature of male aggression whose female voice is at odds with the masculine military setting. Waving her pistol to establish her power she screams at bemused junior officers: 'to make her voice carry any weight she had to yell at the top of her lungs until the sinew on her thin neck stood out in relief' (Emecheta [1982] 1983:79). Debbie's gender-bending – acting and behaving like a male soldier – is slightly ridiculous at best and futile at worst. Not only is she an object of ridicule for junior officers, the plot reveals that she is a pawn whose eagerness to adopt male aggression blinds her to the fact that she is being used to facilitate mass murder when she is ordered to separate Igbo soldiers earmarked for execution. By highlighting the dissonance between Debbie's femininity and the military context, Emecheta initially conforms to the gendered spatial schema of war.

In military uniform Debbie is explicitly represented as lacking credibility as a soldier. Her entry into the army is entirely based on the fact that military leaders believe that it will give them the power to use her 'feminine wiles' to procure arms from her British boyfriend (Emecheta [1982] 1983:69). The motive that Debbie is being used as a mere 'tool' at the hands of military rulers is reinforced by the novel's narrative structure. This consists of a principal (political) line of narration that serves as the context for Debbie's secondary (personal) narrative strand. The omniscient narrator of the

political strand ensures that the reader is always one step ahead of the heroine and plot twists depend on the fact that the heroine is oblivious to the deteriorating military conflict. It would seem to justify the criticism that she behaves like a puppet (Porter 1996:326) and is naïve (Nwachukwu-Agbada 1996:393). Indeed, it does seem naïve of Debbie to accept a covert mission from the Nigerian leader (Momoh) to break a peace plan with the Biafran leader (Abosi) on the mere basis of her friendship with the latter (Emecheta [1982] 1983:95). The scene in which she accepts the mission emphasises female sexuality as a military tool when the Momoh blatantly asks the heroine to use her 'feminine charms' to bring his counterpart to the negotiating table and fails to give the mission an official status (*ibid*:123–124). It would, therefore, seem that conventional military schema, which plays on the cliché that men make war and women are harbingers of peace, is reproduced in Emecheta's novel.

The ambivalent narrative attitude towards Debbie's transgression into male territory is epitomised by a description of Debbie's discomfort in military attire, which is juxtaposed with an impending sense of doom (Emecheta [1982] 1983:125). Indeed, the heroine is subsequently raped by Nigerian soldiers who wear the same uniform. Although one could read this rape as symbolic punishment for assuming a male role, I would argue that it also marks a turning point in Debbie's evolution into the antithesis of the male soldier-hero, namely the female combatant. In order to achieve this transformation, Debbie has to first be symbolically stripped of her military attire, her masculine mask. In a key scene, Debbie's attempt to make sense of being raped leads her to interrogate wartime violence and ultimately to reconceptualise what has been presented as a military conflict as a civilian conflict: 'It is not a war between Abosi and Momoh. This is our war. It is the people's war ...' (*ibid*:160). This can be understood through what Waller and Rycenga (2000:Introduction) call a feminist reframing of war into a dynamic battlefield, which is not limited to military zones. Debbie's re-conceptualisation, therefore, constitutes a spatial reordering of war in which the civilian spaces (the home-front) become a part of the combat zone (the battlefield). In the case of civil war, the national space is transformed into multiple battlefronts in which different forms of combat take place. This notion of a proliferation of fronts erases the home-front or zone of non-combat and expands the nature of combat to include acts associated with surviving a war. Thus the participation of ordinary citizens (women, men and children) in war is put on an equal footing with that of soldiers. In other words, everybody become combatants.

This spatial reorganisation of war is far more subversive than a simple inversion of gender roles because it nullifies the entire conceptual schema of the war genre. Anybody can be a hero because everyone can be combatants. The soldier-hero simply becomes a type of war-hero amongst many others. This conceptual shift from a military to a people's war is marked by the chapter entitled 'Women's war' (Emecheta [1982] 1983:206–225), in which the heroine undertakes the



final phase of her journey as a female combatant dressed as an ordinary peasant. The significance of this chapter relies on a metatextual reading which can be read as a critique of historical accounts of the 1929 Women's War. This took place in colonial Nigeria when the rural Igbo women – traditionally responsible for the family livelihood – resisted a tax increase imposed by the colonial administration. Historical accounts indicate that far from being sequestered at home, these women led an anti-colonial movement that led to the destruction of goods in a number of regions, as well as the death of 55 women (Chuku 2005:221–225). Of course 'Women's war' could simply be read as a textual marker for the foregrounding of women but the historical reference links the struggles of Debbie and the women in this chapter to 'feminist historiography' and to 'writing back' to patriarchal African history. Debbie – the supposed writer of *Destination Biafra* – highlights the fact that the 'Women's war' may well be excluded from history:

When the history of the civil war was written, would the part played by her and women like Babs, Uzuma, and the nuns in Biafra be mentioned at all? ... As far as she was concerned, they were all Nigerians. (Emecheta [1982] 1983:195)

Conclusion

All too often, genre is considered a fixed category yet if one views genre as a malleable category, the mere addition of *Destination Biafra* expands the war genre by 'bending' (modifying) gender-based conventions. By explicitly positioning *Destination Biafra* as a female transgression into a male genre, Emecheta raises reader expectations that she will in some way manipulate gender-based genre conventions, and these expectations are indeed fulfilled. Frank (1987:28) criticises *Destination Biafra* for hovering between manifesto and fiction, despite reaching the conclusion that the novel's socio-political relevance outweighs its aesthetic flaws. The aim of this article has never been to judge the aesthetic merits of this literary text, but rather to use it as a means of examining the interplay between gender and genre in the rhetorical context of African women's writing.

This article concludes that Emecheta's rhetorical stance expands the interpretive framework of her novel to encompass contemporary debates about the representation of women, nationalism and historiography in post-colonial African literature. This becomes her basis for manipulating gendered regulating conventions, namely the gendered schema of war zones and regulatory conventions such as the soldier-hero. As a regulatory convention, the soldier-hero speaks to the guiding principle of representing a war hero; however, Emecheta's re-conceptualisation of the spatial schema of war means that this hero is not necessarily a military figure. Re-conceptualising war in a way that women are not excluded from zones of combat is an innovation that puts women's combat on an equal footing with men's combat; civilian combat on an equal footing with military combat. It then becomes superfluous whether the hero is a man or a woman, a civilian or a soldier.

Emecheta's 'bending' of genre conventions in *Destination Biafra* certainly suggests a representational strategy through which 'minority' or marginalised literatures create a space for themselves within canonical genres. By highlighting the liminality or ambiguity of her heroine, Emecheta subverts the stability of the male soldier-hero as a defining convention of the war genre. Although it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Emecheta singlehandedly 'opens' the war genre, the novel illustrates how women's writing destabilises the gendered binaries that have 'ordinarily' been considered the defining conventions of this literary genre. Emecheta's manipulation of the soldier-hero and subsequent reordering of the gendered spatial schema of war exposes them as regulatory conventions that can be 'bent' in order to legitimise the inclusion of women's writing within the war genre albeit as a subversive sub-genre that 'writes back' a masculine canon.

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