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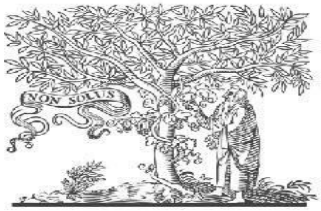

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# A STUDY OF POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN WOMAN IN DESTINATION BIAFRA AND DOUBLE YOKE

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**ABSTRACT**
The world or the idealized super lady, current African women writers provide new paradigms for the self of African femininity in their literature. Contemporary authors such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Bessie Head highlight the double oppression African women face because of their race and gender. Contemporary African women writers often return to the subject of the double yoke that women experience as a result of cultural clash. Emecheta's heroines span the gamut from the wild and independent native lady to the migratory diasporic people who come together to build a new tribe. Her Destination, Biafra, shows a heroine who is a contemporary woman willing to play her own distinctive role in the development of the country, and it is set in the middle of the Civil War after Nigeria's independence. In Double Yoke, another of Emecheta's feminist writings, the protagonist takes a stand against racial and gendered injustice. The upper-class city dweller Deborah in Destination Biafra and the rural Nigerian Nko in Double Yoke both represent the spirit of resistance. Destination Biafra is one of the many war novels that appeared after this seminal event for African thought. As a result of the British colonialism of Africa, neocolonial circumstances developed, and women were directly affected by the conflict. Debbie, the protagonist, is a prototypical member of the educated indigenous elite; she is able to stand up for herself and her country while not relying on her traditional African womanly strength.

**KEYWORDS:** Postcolonial, African Woman, Destination Biafra, Double Yoke, African femininity

## INTRODUCTION

The novel's premise revolves on Debbie, the daughter of a wealthy but crooked father, and serves as a rebuke to the widespread corruption and nepotism in African politics during the postcolonial era. The protagonist, instead of accepting the traditional position of wife and mother, dons military garb and sets out to broker peace between the two sides so that colonial tensions may be put to rest. Since she was able to get an education because of her social standing, she stands out from the typical African heroine canon as the embodiment of the contemporary woman whose intellect carries the mark of Western feminist ideology.

She is "the most compelling example we have of the New Woman of Africa," as described by Katherine Frank. She represents the promise of a man-free future for African women, and that future is loaded with possibility. (quoted in Biswas 85). When it comes to Emecheta's political beliefs, Debbie might be seen as her voice. The Nigerian Civil War serves as both a backdrop and a central motif throughout the book. Conflict sprang out between the Yoruba, the Hausa, and the Igbo, the three largest ethnic groups in the country. A

civil war had broken out in the Western Region by the end of 1965, and the federal government had lost control of the nation. The Eastern region broke away in 1967 and established a new nation called Biafra. The Ibo officers' codename for the operation that resulted in the coup in January, 1965, was "Destination Biafra," and the goal of the new country was to correct the corruption, ethnic strife, and personal ambition that had plagued Nigeria since 1960. The novel's setting is the struggle for racial equality and national unity in the past. Emecheta emphasizes the ugliness of the Civil War via her character Debbie's trials. According to Emecheta, Nigeria saw the worst violence that the rest of Africa has ever witnessed. It was unclear to the Western Ibos, who had suffered at the hands of both the Biafrans and the Nigerians, whose side was the genuine aggressor throughout the civil war. Reflecting this anguish, an Ibo lady screams at a Biafran soldier, "Biafra, Biafra, what is Biafra?" You wiped off our guys over here, and then the Nigerians arrived and wiped out the rest of your troops.Retire to Biafra, please. You refer to us as Hausa Igbos, right? (DB 218) Destination Biafra, as a war book written by a woman, chronicles the wartime experiences of women and the increasing self-awareness of African women. Since Emecheta takes us on Debbie's trip to the Eastern territory of Biafra, the title of the story takes on more significance: the heroine chronicles her own journey to the ideal state envisioned before the Civil War, where justice would rule supreme among all men and women. Biafra was supposed to be a utopia where "righteousness would rule, where there would be no bribery" (DB 223). She is shown as a member of the Istekeri, a smaller ethnic group than the majority. Emecheta's attempt to show that "beliefs can go beyond tribes" is evident in her moving albeit sexist depiction of the Civil War.

Debbie Ogedemgbe comes to terms with the fact that she and the Civil War are both fighting corruption stemming from class and ethnic inequality, an encouraging sign of neocolonialism, in order to make their dreams a reality. Her father was a neo-colonial force that benefitted from the conquerors' legacy of wealth and influence, and Emecheta expertly shapes her into a strong, independent African woman. She rejects the security that her family's status provides in order to aid in the fight against the corrupt regime in her nation. She eventually has to choose between her father Samuel Ogedemgbe and her English boyfriend Alan Grey. With class tensions roiling throughout the country, Debbie has an uphill battle as she travels to the east to complete her goal. She has to constantly be on the defensive and deny her ethnicity in order to avoid scrutiny. Since Debbie was socially superior, she had the additional obstacle of overcoming the norms of her own social group. She bravely confronts it by opting to enlist in the armed forces and therefore escape the lavish lifestyle and unscrupulous practices of her parents. Abosi, the "symbol of Biafra," turns out to be a traitor, and she quickly learns that the other major military commanders are no better. Her history is stained by class disparities, but she manages to subvert them by using her father's money to raise orphans after the war and apologizing for

her past. Because of her privileged position as a mentor to the indigenous elite, Debbie also struggles with an identity problem throughout the narrative. Alan Grey's thoughts on her reflect her complicated identity as an African lady who has adopted western ideals thanks to her schooling. He describes her as "intelligent, nice to be with, but independent." She spoke too much English for his taste...From his perspective; Debbie and her ilk were just setting themselves up for serious identity crises. (36). Debbie experiences this later on during her own cross-country trek with her less fortunate sisters. Debbie felt quite alone while being in the company of other females since she was unable to open up to them about her formative years. Her training, the imported sign of social difference, was nonetheless an obstacle...She had to stay quiet about her life history since the ladies would never accept her if they knew the truth. (202)

When Debbie struggles to "back" a kid in an oja, she stands out as a stark contrast to the other African women. Exactly "what kind of an African woman was she?" Debbie ponders. She feels inadequate (181) when she considers that ladies her age carried kids like that all day long while still farming and cooking. Despite gaining their freedom, Africans remained highly reliant on former colonial powers, making their new country vulnerable to neocolonialism. While no longer under colonial rule, the ex-colonies remained economically and strategically tied to their former masters and the emerging global superpowers. The new elite, educated in the West, exploit their own people and serve as proxies for the colonial powers that formerly oppressed them; this phenomenon is also known as neocolonialism. The resulting social divisions and political unrest were a direct result of this situation. The post-colonial African political environment was riddled with corruption. The protagonist, Debbie, is first presented as the "dutiful daughter" of a corrupt politician named Ogedembge: "I had no option.... Apparently, I was mistaken. My father spent ten thousand pounds on a vehicle just so he could drive through this crowd, despite the fact that the people who showed here today were dressed to the nines. (39) Debbie was able to go to Oxford because to her father's wealth, but she never changed her judgment about him. Her father was slain in the federal coup, and as a result, she has decided to enlist in the Federal army to help rebuild the country. Debbie's formal duties include mediating negotiations between the warring groups' respective leaders, Momoh and Abosi. When racial tensions replace socioeconomic inequalities, conflict spreads like wildfire. Debbie, the novel's lone character with a clear perspective, is confused by the racial strife: "[W]hat was her position in all this mess?" She identified herself Nigerian rather than Igbo, Yoruba, or Hausa (121). Like like Debbie overcame racial barriers when she embarked on her peace quest, so too does her perilous crosscountry trek bridge socioeconomic gaps. Everyone else in the group of ladies was also solely known by their shared gender and their shared vulnerability as women.

The colonizers' education may have contributed to the feminization of African culture, but it also gave Africans a fresh perspective and made them more up-to-

date. When the colonized were educated, they began to act and speak like Englishmen. This posed a challenge to the colonizer since his inferior subjects were now "more English than the English." since of this, colonized people often experience a mental state known as "dislocation," in which they feel like outsiders since they are neither fully local to the land nor fully accepted by the colonial powers. In Destination Biafra, we saw Alan Grey's ambivalent relationship with Debbie, which aroused alarm among the colonists over the new subjectivity of the people they had oppressed. Debbie is the African lady who has absorbed western concepts of women's independence and gender equality thanks to her prized foreign education. Debbie's radical feminism won't let her be treated like a doormat by her legal "owner" in marriage who operates under patriarchal norms. As seen by her choice, she clearly does not believe in marriages in which the spouses are on equal footing. She yearned for more than just having and raising children, or being a nice submissive wife to a guy whose ego she must bolster all her days, or burying every instinct that made her a whole human being.Everyone should be free to do as they like, right?...She realized she was beginning to feel like an outsider and resolved to do something about it. Yes, she would enlist; she would serve the Nigerian military not as a nurse or cook, but as an officer. (44) Stella Ogedembge's mother, Debbie, and their mutual friend, Babs, disapprove of this behavior. She warns Debbie that marriage is the more secure, tried-and-true option for a woman, and she urges her to reconsider pursuing a job. Debbie's mother has urged her to conform to the norms of birth, socialization, and marriage that are expected of all women in Africa. Debbie's decision to pursue a traditionally masculine occupation is unconventional, but she sees being a soldier as a route out of the traditional female roles of housewife and mother that prevailed in her culture. Debbie and Babs, two young women of the age represented by their moms, embody modernity by choosing the army as a professional path. They reject the status quo in favor of forging a fresh path that will allow them to blossom as unique individuals. The story also portrays women as more powerful than males due to their tolerance for hardship and ability to bounce back from adversity. Instead of being a submissive housewife, she takes part in nationalist fights, which the ladies of her mother's age saw as "women behaving like men" (104). Mrs. Ogedembge claims, "I doubt if we are ready for this kind of freedom where young women smoke and carry guns instead of looking after husbands and nursing babies" (104).

**AFRICAN WOMEN, MOTHER FREEDOM**

For this new generation of African women, Mother Africa's freedom is also their freedom, and Debbie represents that. The process of national independence from colonial powers has been criticized for being skewed against men in the available documents. Most postcolonial nations' written histories have neglected women's contributions. The role of many women in these colonies has been carelessly forgotten as the "violent act of decolonization" is often portrayed as a male-centered act. "Nationalism so far

appears to exist essentially as a male activity with women left out or peripheralized," writes Carol Boyce Davies in Black Women, Writing and Identity (72), "the feminine was utilized at the symbolic level as in 'Mother Africa' or 'Mother India. Despite the sexual politics of the mainstream male narrative, reading Nwapa's Wives at War and Achebe's Girls at War will make clear the significant role women played in the patriotic movement. However, in the majority of situations, women were seen as little more than sexual objects throughout the conflict. Debbie is used sexually by both patriarchal men and imperial rulers in Destination Biafra. Debbie, despite her impressive credentials, continues to be seen only through the lens of her gender. Abosi's response to her request to join his army is, "it would certainly add glamour to the regiment" (55). Later, even her lover Alan Grey asks her to use her sex appeal to deal with Abosi on the English side. The Nigerian government selects her to handle Abosi since he had a crush on her before she started dating Grey. Emecheta emphasizes the sexist mindset of males who see women just as sexual objects and prey for their own lusts. They are not only dehumanized intellectually, but also emotionally and ethically, by being utilized as pawns in men's political games. When she sends him Momoh's peace message, Abosi refuses to listen to her, saying, "What good could you have done, just you, little you?" This provokes her to ask, "Tell me, if I were a man...would you have dismissed my mission?" (227). Debbie may try to position herself as a national object, but in the masculine perspective, she will always be seen as a woman (Stratton 124).

By demonstrating that literature is the "record of the collective consciousness of patriarchy" (Humm 33), Kate Millet's Sexual Politics is a significant feminist classic that opens up the canon to feminist critique. Women, she says, are nothing more than sexual objects to be exploited for pleasure, whether that be by coercion or not. This facet of the male-female dynamic is also discussed in Andrea Dworkin's History of Rape. Emecheta addresses rape as a powerful tool of the dominant to build and declare their dominance over the weak in this realistic portrayal of the Civil War. Both Federal and Biafran troops were responsible for the sexual assault of young ladies. Debbie, in her pursuit of peace, suffers the indignity of rape as well. A pregnant friend of Debbie's is murdered by having her baby ripped from her womb. The nuns who helped the injured refugees were also targeted by the troops and raped and killed. This iconoclastic work by Emecheta debunks the dominant narrative that males have authored history, which tends to celebrate male heroes and champion masculine interests. She proves that women's bravery is just as genuine as men's, and that women's suffering is just as devastating. The other male troops make Debbie painfully aware of incursion into masculine bastions since she has chosen to inhabit the manly territory of army officership. The officers in her own army, who do not believe her story, gang-rape her. Lawal Salihu, an officer, seeks to demonstrate her that she is "nothing but a woman, an ordinary woman" (167). Soldiers resort to rape as a sexual weapon

to cement their superiority over the opposing force and to exact revenge on women who want equality with males. The patriarchal status quo of the African male/female frame of reference was disrupted by colonization, which introduced new ideals for women and reminded them of their due rights and responsibilities. Because of this, women were subjected to atrocities throughout the Biafran conflict. According to Emecheta's research, colonialism shattered the last vestiges of equality for women in that portion of Africa in the distant past. Now that independence had finally arrived, young ladies like them were eager to contribute to the new country, and the army lads were responding by becoming more violent against women in vulnerable positions. (113)

Debbie's mother urges her once again to return to the conventional way of life as she encounters difficulties in her chosen manly career. Because she is worried that her daughter would have trouble finding a spouse after being raped by soldiers, Debbie's mother pressures her to abandon her mission and get married: "In marriage you'd have all the security you need and no one would dare allude to what occurred again... In this context, men predominate. Nobody would believe you even if you stayed a single adult by choice (152). Debbie is the progressive daughter of Africa, thus she can figure things out for herself. Debbie, an independent African woman, makes the choice to raise her daughter alone when her husband is killed in the Biafran War. The battle has taught her that men can be cruel, and she now thinks she can get along just fine without any male companionship.

**CONCLUSION**

The novel's heroine, a woman, is well situated in the novel's feminine storyline because of the novel's severe patriarchal atmosphere. Emecheta does a fantastic job of describing the first novel's protagonist, Adaobi, as she is subjected to daily brainwashing by the Law of the Father and forced to conform to traditional notions of femininity. As a significant topos in female-oriented fiction, Nnu Ego's occasional lapses into insanity in Joys of Motherhood are an act of rebellion. The only way out of the feminine position for these conforming ladies in feminine fiction is death. Many people prayed to Nnu Ego before she died to help make women fruitful, but once she passed away, their prayers were unanswered. Even further, the desire to "break from the yoke of biological feminity also expressed itself as the wish to be male" (Showalter 192) is a central theme in Emecheta's feminist works. of Destination Biafra, we see Debbie embody this shift of perspective. The feminist aesthetic is exemplified by her androgynous figure, who dresses like a man out of a desire to be one. Nko in Double Yoke is an African lady who questions the rigid gender norms of her community. She's got the strength of the African superwoman, juggling the demands of her family with those of forging her own path in the world in the face of relentless male hostility. The third stage, represented by the books Gwendolen and Kehinde, is one in which the woman is unabashedly and insistently an uncompromising female, in which the presence of a man is secondary. Here, the lady has cast off all vestiges of inferiority and self-consciousness. The lady has

realized that she deserves respect and a place in this world. Gwendolen, Nko's successor, runs away from her mental and sexual discontents in order to find peace for herself. Kehinde, who we meet as a refugee from the First World, eventually establishes herself in her new home and proudly proclaims her independence.

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