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Dualisms and the Representation of Victimhood in the Conflict Spectrum: An Ecofeminist Reading of Adaokere Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*

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Abstract **Conference Article**

This paper explores Agbasimalo's representation of universal victimhood as a factor in the eco-feminist thrust that reconsiders the male/female binary oppositions established by patriarchal institutions. Some of the recent works emanating from the perpetrator-victim discourse in war or conflict studies conceptualise men as mindless oppressors on the one hand, and women, children and the environment as helpless and defenceless victims on the other hand. The exclusion or insignificant consideration given to the phenomenon of male-victimhood thus far, has created gender acrimony and a polarised struggle to root out social and environmental injustice. The non-consideration of male victimhood has formed a significant gap in scholarship which this study seeks to address. Using Plumwood's approach to ecofeminism as a theoretical frame and basing on the qualitative model of data collection and analysis, the paper argues that patriarchy is the real problem since it entrenches mental dispositions, orientations and gender roles that set the psychological frame for the unprintable actions of soldiers who are yet to be liberated from institutional or cultural conditioning. The study concludes that the universality of victimhood in the conflict spectrum invalidates the male-female binary opposition and that both genders can unite to fight against patriarchy for an egalitarian society.

Keywords: Dualism/binary opposition, universal victimhood, Ecofeminism, Environmental and Social Justice.

Introduction

Ecofeminism is an academic movement that draws parallels between the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women by patriarchal structures. It is a theoretical frame that challenges the belief that women and nature are objects for abuse as well as the patriarchal paradigm of male supremacy. Generally, the ecofeminist philosophy views women as closer to nature because of their natural inclination to motherhood (Dirscharl, 2020, p. 4). Shrestha (2024) describes ecofeminism as an ideology and movement which is developed to oppose the subjugation and suppression of women and nature (p. 79). Many scholars have described the objectification of women as a major constituent of the dynamic behind their treatment. Ecofeminism began with the essentialist dispositions that related the social status of women with the poor conception of nature. Some scholars considered the essentialist position as problematic on the grounds that it was impossible to attain social justice if women were continually objectified and inferiorised. Other eco-feminist theorists sought equality within the existing social and political structures. Yet other scholars flawed this position by

rejecting, in its entirety, the notions and dualisms instituted and sustained by patriarchal structures.

Plumwood (1993) describes dualism as "the process by which contrasting concepts are formed by domination or subordination and are constructed as oppositional and exclusive" (p. 30). She adds that the development of dualisms can be traced back to ancient philosophy. Some of the original dualistic pairs originated from philosophers. For instance, the reason/nature dualism is ascribed to Plato, mind/body dualism is traced to Descartes and culture/nature, freedom/necessity and production/reproduction dualisms are connected to Marx. Modern dualisms like male/female, subject/object, etc developed from the traditional dualisms (Plumwood, 1993, p. 45). The most conspicuous string of dualisms is that which juxtaposes qualities associated with men and those associated with women, presenting the former as inherently different and oppositional from the 'inferior' latter.

Interestingly, some scholars have advanced the argument that the levels of oppression and injustice meted to women in the conflict sphere are better attributed to binary notions instituted and sustained by patriarchal societal structures. Yet other scholars aver that the female-victimhood theme, which has gained ascendancy especially in the works of female war writers, is gradually becoming a single story since the equally ugly experiences of male war victims seem to be downplayed or ignored. Even theorists are beginning to advance platforms that will enable a more objective and expansive consideration of victimhood in the conflict spectrum and beyond. Val Plumwood is one of them. Consequently, scholars who approach ecofeminism from the anti-dualistic perspective present universal victimhood as a more realistic portraiture of war-time experiences and other manifestations of violence.

The Nigerian civil war commenced in July 1967 when the aggrieved Eastern region of Nigeria, under the leadership of Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, declared 'The Republic of Biafra' as a result of the political turmoil and pogrom that started in 1966. The Federal government of Nigeria viewed this act of secession as rebellious and matched it with military action. At the time, the Eastern region became the theatre of war; so, men, women and children, including the environment, who had been roped into the war, became endangered. In the heat of combat, the Federal and Biafran soldiers deployed munitions and engaged in war activities that left physical, emotional, psychological and environmental scars. When the war ended in 1970, Nigerian Civil War literature evolved and since then, many writers, especially in the prose genre, have captured the nature and scope of suffering during the war.

Incidentally, many of the trailblazing Nigerian Civil War narratives were anchored by male writers and were steeped in the portrayal of the socio-political and economic factors connected to the war, combat dynamics and celebrating the heroism of some war veterans. However, a few years after the war, many of the upsetting situations that led to the war resurfaced; this was an indication that it was time to change the narrative and evolve ways of discouraging the reading populace from resorting to violence as an option for resolving grievances. Consequently, the entry of female writers into the mainstream of Nigerian Civil War literature contributed immensely to the process of drawing the Nigerian Civil War narrative towards the portrayal of the experiences of the ordinary people entangled in a war they did not initiate, an aspect that had been ignored. Udumukwu (2011) explained that "in relating the facts of the civil war, it is too common to ignore the effect of the devastation on the lives of ordinary citizens within Biafra itself, especially the lives of women and children" (p. 226). John and Afolabi (2024) argued that people whose stories are not told remain historically dislocated and believe that the experiences of women have been underrepresented in scholarship. Hence, they identified significant works which have emerged to signify the entry of women into the mainstream of conflict narratives. Some of them include: Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), AdaOkere Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* (2019). (p. 1).

Hopefully, by highlighting the scope of war-time injustices suffered by the environment and ordinary people like women and children, relevant stakeholders will be made to appreciate the ills of war and reject dysfunctional structures that facilitate wars. Basically, what the female writers have done differently is that they have illustrated other ways the war narrative can be deployed in the clamour for social and environmental justice. Many female writers, in their narratives, have consciously highlighted the horrible experiences of women, especially the ordeals of women in the hands of soldiers, during the war. Generally, female writers have distinguished themselves by highlighting the long-term and trans-generational effects of the war on the environment as well as the ordinary people implicated in the war. They have also drawn parallels between the vulnerability of the environment and the agonising plight of girls, women and children during the Nigerian Civil War.

But in doing this, most of the female writers have turned in narratives that may be interpreted as single stories considering the fact their works usually focus on female experiences alone. But burgeoning arguments on universality of victimhood in the conflict spectrum show that war-time ills impact heavily on all – human or non-human, male or female, young and old. Recently, the notion of women as vulnerable victims of war has become popular in literary circles. Consequently, scholars have evolved the perpetrator-victim discourse which thrives on the claim that the sufferings of women in the society are caused by men who take rash decisions among themselves, implicate people and escape the dire consequences of their indiscretions. Yet the reality of conflict situations is that the monumental wave of pain does not recognise binary oppositions but rages in its urgency, breaking the will of men and women and forcing life forms into extinction.

Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* is selected for this study for three reasons. Firstly, because of the writer's lucid portraiture of the parallels between environmental abuse and female abuse during the Nigerian Civil War. This representation places the work as an appropriate fictional creation for an ecofeminist reading, considering the fact that the links between the plight of women and the environment is a cardinal concept in ecofeminism. Secondly, the work yields to the eco-feminist assumptions of Plumwood. Plumwood argues that forms of abuse meted to women as well as the environment are connected to socio-political factors, especially the throes of patriarchy sustained by the fossilised institutionalisation of patriarchal dominance. Indeed, the Nigerian Civil War was caused by socio- political factors that heat up the polity in 1966 and spiralled into a full blown war in 1967. The war turned out to be a template for various forms of social and environmental injustice. Even the excesses of soldiers and influential people during the war were sustained by patriarchal structures that had set the frame for social balances and injustice. Finally, the work portrays male characters that suffer as much as the female characters, foregrounding the concept of universality of victimhood during the war and contradicting gendered conceptualizations that polarise the clamour for environmental and social justice.

Reviews

Theory

Ecofeminism, whether categorised as an approach or discourse in feminist or eco-critical theory, or as an independent theory, is enunciated on the logic of domination which includes oppression on the basis of race, class or sexual orientation. It captures female and environmental exploitation fostered by a male dominated social system noting that patriarchal systems sanction activities that expose women as well as the environment to acts of exploitation and violence. The focus of ecofeminism in literature is the representation of women and the environment in literary texts. Ecofeminism uses the avenue of literature to raise consciousness about the condition of women and the environment. Some of the promoters of this movement include Caroline Merchant, Val Plumwood, Karen Waren and Vandana Shiva. There are several schools of thought in ecofeminism. According to Ling (2014), some of them are cultural ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism, social ecofeminism and socialist ecofeminism. Plumwood's perspective to social

ecofeminism has been appropriated in this study because its ideological positions appeal to the African context in view of the socio-political and cultural troposphere that fosters forms of oppression by patriarchy or private ownership. In an attempt to justify a sociological approach to ecofeminism, Plumwood (1993) explains that "overcoming the dualistic dynamic requires both continuity and difference; this means acknowledging the other as neither alien to and discontinuous from self nor assimilated to or an extension of self" (p. 6). She deconstructs dualisms like human/nature, male/female and reason/nature as ideological formations, within patriarchal structures, which have conditioned perpetrators of social and environmental injustice to act the way they do. Indeed, Plumwood's conception of ecofeminism is relevant to scholars for the assessment of lopsided gender notions in the Nigerian Civil War narrative because of the proposition to challenge dominant conceptions of the human, nature and human culture. Theorists like Karen Warren, Carol Adams, Shamara Shantu-Riley and Paula Gunn Allen align with Plumwood and suggest that forms of human and environmental abuse can be averted if ideologies that promote inequity are challenged. Wilks (2008) captures the views of these theorists who noted that nature includes humans and humans cannot master nature (p. 38). For Plumwood, ecofeminism is an integrative project that should recognise women as fully human and fully part of human culture as men. Consequently, contemporary ecofeminism should reject ideological constructions that portray women as 'earth mothers' or 'outside of culture' but see both men and women as part of nature and culture (p. 36). Hence, the way forward is to form a united affront against forms of injustice by challenging and unlearning some ideologies which have become patriarchal tools for social conditioning. Ecofeminism is appropriated in the evaluation of the study text because its basic ideologies underscore the nexus between gender and patriarchy in the conflict discourse.

Concepts

Many scholars have argued that binary oppositions or dualisms instituted by patriarchal institutions are responsible for the mental conditioning that has sustained forms of social and environmental injustice especially within the conflict context. Some scholars have called for a perpetrator's narrative which will empower the voice of the man who has been tagged the 'enemy' instead of the forces that conditioned him to act. Chinweizu (1990) affirms the influence of patriarchal dualisms in the conflict spectrum when he suggests that there is a category of men known as the masculinists who accept men as the biologically more dispensable sex which explains why societies train men for high-risk occupations like hunting and war while shielding the women in order to maximise a society's reproductive capacity (p. 126).

Basically, the construction of gender roles, especially in military formations, is directly connected to the patriarchal foundation of dualism. Burke (not dated) and many other scholars flaw the trend of gender bias in military formations on the grounds that it is a veritable tool for the oppression of women. Considering the imbalance in the composition of the military in the Biafran and Nigerian sides during the Nigerian Civil War, there are worrisome evidences that women were probably deemed unable to face the vagaries of the battle front, hence the selection of more males as combatants and most females as nurses, spies, cooks and bed mates. Describing the role of patriarchy in assigning gender roles, Burke explains as follows:

> One of the ideological manifestations of patriarchy is the imposition of rigid conceptions of gender roles. These are used to justify discrimination against women and as these beliefs continue from generation to generation, this situation continues. Gender categories are social relationships, values, behaviours and attributes culturally associated with the male and female biological sexes respectively. (p. 5)

Burke's opinion above is in consonance with Chinweizu's thesis where the latter argued that societal structures bestow high-risk responsibilities on men on the premise that men are the stronger sex. Khalil (2018) suggests that ecofeminism is a perspective that draws attention to the existence of dualism which is characterised by a hierarchy that elevates men and devalues women. According to

Khalil, "Dualism forms the key basis for what ecofeminists see as the connection where a certain element is regarded with higher importance over another and attempts to reverse the hierarchy" (p. 4).

From the foregoing, it is clear that patriarchal institutions have established dualistic and hierarchical structures which sustain forms of environmental and social injustice. Consequently, there is the victim who tells a story from one perspective and a perpetrator who tells the story from another perspective. But Umanah (2019) argues against a perpetrator's narrative on the grounds that an oppressor has no story to tell and that even if they do, their stories will have no relevance. According to her:

> Creating a space for perpetrators to tell their stories is of no benefit to the victims or their families. All it will do is to make an already bad situation worse. It could be likened to thrusting a dagger into an old wound. Also it is bias to give perpetrators of crime against humanity the opportunity to have their voices heard when their victims remain unheard. (p. 641)

Umanah explains that a perpetrator's narrative will only upset the sensibilities of the victims. A victim is anyone who experiences some kind of physical or psychological injury, suffers loss of property or the life of a loved one or encounters some kind of misfortune emanating from one event or chain of events. Victims usually feel helpless and hopeless; they lose trust completely and suffer depreciation in self-esteem. Bar-Tal et al (2009) suggest that a number of factors characterise victimhood. They aver as follows:

> There are many kinds of situations that can bring a person as an individual or as a member of a collective to have a sense of being a victim. It seems that victimhood describes some lasting psychological state of mind that involves beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behavioural tendencies. This results on the one hand from direct and indirect experience of victimisation, and on the other hand from its maintenance in the personal repertoire. In other words, it is a state where the experienced harm and long-standing consequences become elements in the victim's personality. (p. 231)

What stands out in Bar-Tal et al's submission above is the fact that traumatic conditions and defeatist mental dispositions characterise victimhood. In most cases, a number of conditions are usually evident in situations of victimhood. According to Bar-Tal et al, there must be evidence of harm, the victim will not be responsible for the occurrence of the harmful act, it will be a clear case of injustice and the victim would deserve sympathy (p. 232).

Literature

Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* has been appraised by a few writers and critics. Onwugbufor and Omagu (2016), in a gendered exploration of the novel, admit the role of patriarchy in sustaining the platform that enables the variants of injustice against females. They note as follows:

> In the Nigerian Civil war experiences from which Agbasimalo draws largely, she is of the opinion that female characters are exposed to a common enemy of hunger, displacement, exploitation, death and destruction; and totalling this common currency contribute inadvertently to the complementarities of winning a war even as patriarchy hung on their necks impudently. (p. 149)

They add that women are at the receiving end in the novel adding that the novel recreates the resilience of Biafran women – a set of unarmed women who are exposed to the molestation of combating forces on the two sides. This molestation, they further explain, is mainly driven by power–drunk soldiers who see sexual relations with defenceless women as a proof of strength and vigour:

> The soldiers as men and vandals occupy a double position of the oppressor and protector and use this duality to further clamp on the rights of the women. These rapes and defilements take centre stage in Agbasimalo's rendition. Many of the ladies are forced to indulge in sex though unwillingly. (p. 151)

According to them, Agbasimalo's work portrays the experiences of females who remain resilient despite

the daunting pressures from randy soldiers and power-drunk agents of patriarchy. They argue that Agbasimalo's approach vests attributes like solidarity, strength, determination and courage to women in contradistinction with many other submissions that have portrayed women as completely weak and unable to put up an iota of resistance. They equally submit that the female characters in the novel are repositioned as "strong human persons, not as weak, ineffective, subservient, reliant and unproductive nonentity as captured by male and female authors while recreating the experiences of the civil war" (p. 157).

Kadiri, Uzoma and Ekwueme (2018) note that Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* has not received significant literary attention despite the fact that the novelist is a prolific writer. They claim that "it appeared as if there was some sort of alienation and conspiracy; a contemporary female writer like Agbasimalo who has three literary works to her credit has scarcely been given any serious linguistic attention" (p. 2). They argue that other new generation writers like Adichie, Darko and Agary among others have been widely criticised but Agbasimalo's works have been overtly ignored over the years. True to their assertion, it is difficult to find significant critiques on the novel. Applying Leach and Short's framework for linguistic and stylistic categories, Kadiri, Uzoma and Ekwueme examined Agbasimalo's deployment of linguistic tools as a style index for the manipulation of her plot and themes. Having examined the novelist's use of registers, collocation, parts of speech, pidginised words/expressions, code-mixing and code-switching, use of inverted sentences and other variables in the development of her story, they conclude that "just like other celebrated African female writers, Agbasimalo has demonstrated that she could creatively use language in her text, *The Forest Dames,* to pass across the message of hostility of war and its effects on women and children" (p. 10).

Despite the visible dearth of scholarship on Agbasimalo's novel, her recreation of the experiences of ordinary people during the Nigerian Civil War is unique. The uniqueness of her narrative stems from her themes, style and characterisation. The novelist illustrates the universality of ugly experiences in conflict situations by presenting humans [male, female and children] and non-human components of the biotic community that bore the brunt of the Nigerian Civil War. Many of the scenarios captured in the novel highlight the flaws in the 'female-victim, male-perpetrator' dualisms that have impeded the realisation of environmental and social justice.

The Representation of Dualisms and Victimhood in Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*

The Forest Dames is a nerve-breaking story about the devastating consequences of war on humanity, especially women and children. The story revolves around four young girls: Deze, Gonma, Sofuru and Lele, who struggle for survival in the midst of predatory randy soldiers driven by intoxicating sexual desires. Adopting an episodic plot structure, the novelist takes on a number of issues ranging from the scope of devastation during the pogrom leading to the war, the role of older women in protecting their younger ones during the war, to the post-war processes of rehabilitation. Most interestingly, unlike many other female writers, Agbasimalo, by capturing the abuse of the environment and male characters, in addition to the female in the novel represents the universality of victimhood in violent scenarios. Generally, the novel highlights the ills of war as some sort of poisonous venom which spreads beyond gender boundaries.

In the preface to her novel, Agbasimalo unveils a gliding theme - the agonising fate of young women during the Nigerian Civil War. In a section of a poem entitled 'Lamentation' the novelist notes as follows:

> They stripped us and savoured our nakedness
> Went in and out of our women
> Like needlework (ll. 1-3)

The scenario above refers to the rape of young girls by soldiers during the Nigerian Civil War. The situation becomes so bad that young girls have to vacate their homes to hide in the wild forests irrespective of the risk of encountering the animal predators of the forests. The victimisation becomes so piercing that the girls' mental disposition is that there is really no difference between their fate with

wild animals and an encounter with fierce-looking randy soldiers. Describing the plight of the forest dames - Gonma, Deze, Sofuru and Lele-, the novel notes as follows:

> The brooding darkness simmered with the sound of the wild. The dames had learnt to live with the sound. They had resigned themselves to the belief that both life and death were in the hands of their maker. Besides, at the rate people were dying, one thanked the Almighty if one saw the next day. (p. 20)

The girls endure harsh weather conditions and look forward to the visits of their mothers. Those torturous adventures by the women become the only respite for the young girls. The women navigate thick forests, hiding from soldiers and defying the fear of meeting wild animals, in order to get to their daughters.

In *The Forest Dames,* there were also references to Northern youths, men and soldiers who perpetuated despicable acts like cutting off women's breasts and genitals and kicking them around, extortion, abduction and rape of young girls and married women. The gross irresponsibility and rascality of the soldiers are captured as follows:

> The soldiers usually went into the communities in a lorry as from ten in the morning and roamed about until evening looking for females to prey on, dispossessing traders of farm produce and chatting with some native male acquaintances, some of whom disclosed the girls' hideouts (p. 163)

The first question that comes to mind is why the soldiers have to abandon their primary duties to explore sexual gratification. Will the situation be exactly the same if a reasonable number of the senior army officers were females? It is worthy of note that the significant ranks in military formations are manned by men till date because the patterns of that institution were structured that way and the stakeholders have let them remain. Armed with rifles and with certain notions about the interconnection between masculinity and fearlessness, many soldiers find their ways into communities where they molest and rape vulnerable young girls and women. Agbasimalo here illustrates the power of mental conditioning, which is the thrust of patriarchy, and suggests that dualistic ideological formations have been entrenched through socio-cultural institutions leading to forms of abuse, dehumanization and trepidation. To a large extent, the roles of men, especially military men, during wars have been responsible for the perpetrator tag that has trailed the male gender.

In Agbasimalo's *Forest Dames,* there are more illustrations that implicate the socio-political ideological formations in the spate of abuse during the war. For instance, Pa Zurike's funeral illustrates the level of insensitivity to the fauna. According to the narrator, as part of obeisance rights to a dead man, the cultural structure accords the right of trepidation to first sons who will be dog-bearers and will be expected to twist and maltreat the selected dog to the cheer of on lookers. Describing how Pa Zurike's son carried out this task, the novelist notes as follows:

> He lifted the dog from his shoulders and held it with his left arm under the armpit, still swerving as if under a spell. Then he got the animal hanging downwards, his hands clutching its limbs in such a manner that his left hand held the forelimbs and his right the hind limbs. Then, suddenly, he brought the four limbs together and, his feet astride, swung the dog sideways a couple of times, lifted it up and threw it vehemently to the ground. The animal landed on its head and whimpered horridly. (p. 110)

In this instance of injustice to the fauna, the man [Pa Zurike's son] had been brought up to accept two ideological positions. First, he is the first son and is honoured with the right of trepidation. Next, the role of a dog-bearer and the act of trepidation are non-negotiable since they are embedded in the burial culture and value system of his immediate society. Often, men, even women, act on the strength of faith in the sanctity of socio-cultural structures [or the fear of possible dire consequences of disobedience to such structures] and become agents of social and environmental injustice. Thus, recent studies, including the present study, are implicating the patriarchal agencies that have sponsored the fundamental ideologies behind forms of injustice. Naturally, placing the oppressor label on any gender

will shift focus to the labelled group as the real enemy of justice. The general outlook of ecocriticism in the past decade has pointed to the fact that unity of purpose, and not a polarized clamour for justice, among sexes, can facilitate the attainment of environmental sustainability and an egalitarian society.

Agbasimalo's novel also makes a lucid presentation of the parallels between the fate of men and women in the conflict spectrum by portraying the universality of war-time victimhood. The novel portrays the plight of men to be as pathetic as that of women and children. For instance, Okedu is exploited, abducted by soldiers and taken to the military camp; he narrowly escapes. Joseph, who is not so lucky, is beaten to death when he tries to stop uniformed men from forcibly taking his bicycle (p. 23). There are many other instances of human and environmental exploitation as well as mistreatment of vulnerable victims [irrespective of gender] during the war. There is the example of Obed who looks on as his wife is taken away leaving him with the arduous task of single parenting (p. 22). Basil suffers a similar fate. As his wife is taken away, the soldier intimidates Basil with a rifle and leaves him speechless (p. 161). Obed and Basil are left with the psychological scar of watching armed soldiers go away with their wives. The soldiers, in forcibly taking away the women, and perhaps forcing themselves on them, not only victimised the females but also victimised their husbands and children – an indication of universal victimhood during wars. Furthermore, describing the attack on Mama Gozi's household, Bulus notes that "Mama Gozi and her husband, including their five children, were all killed in their home after midnight" (p. 37). Other incidents of killing and abuse captured in the novel show that the pangs of war do not spare anyone. The novel further reveals as follows:

> The bodies of some of those killed at night had been dragged out and left on the road for people to see. They were bodies of men, women, youths and children, perhaps with a common identity. They were all from the East. (p. 40)

The forms of social and environmental injustice recorded in the novel affect male and female, young and old, showing that pain was a common string during the Nigerian Civil war. Furthermore, men like Bika, Buno, Diala among others relive their ugly experiences to show that they are affected, by the war, as much as the girls, women and older people.

The novel highlighted two categories of men – the conditioned men and the liberated men. The conditioned men are the agents of exploitation that supervise and execute the despicable acts against women, children and the environment captured in the novel. But the liberated men are the male characters that exhibit positive traits and evidence the fact that there are men who have not yielded to the forms of conditioning that facilitate exploitation. For instance, Deze's father defied gender notions that support forms of abuse and chooses to run his home on the template of equity and fairness. Describing Deze's parents, the narrator noted as follows:

> In faithful partnership, they built a modest, close-knit family where peace, warmth, unity and harmony formed the bedrock – to the envy of some. They were not affluent but never lacked for anything. They made sure that all their children were educated irrespective of gender and they catered for all the children equally. (p. 33)

In contrast with malevolent male characters like Leon, Sule, etc, Deze's father is an agent of social change in the novel. His ordeals showed that he is as much a war victim as his wife and children. Bulus, a Northern youth who stands out from the rest, is another example of male characters with positive dispositions in the novel. He is described as a very compassionate man who, although he is not endangered by birth, was not savage and not in support of the selective killing that was taking place (pp. 37-38). Bulus not only encourages Mama Deze to leave the North, but also undertakes to sell off the remaining wares and keep the proceeds intact. By pivoting Bulus as a character who does not let the patriarchal institutions of conditioning define his behaviour, Agbasimalo demonstrates that the problem may not be the men but a system that alters their orientations, dispositions and conduct in the society.

Reuben and Jonas are also portrayed as liberated men who valued and partnered with their wives as they navigated the painful path of the Nigerian civil war. Reuben and his wife collaborate to support Lazzie, their sick son, to the surprise of many (p. 91) while Jonas supports his wife, Nkasi, as they try to save the life of their sick daughter (p. 92). These men are portrayed as pillars of support that do not commodify their wives, but consider them as partners in family affairs. Again, Colonel Azuatalam's intervention during the harassment of female civilians going for the distant market venture shows that, even within the military, there are men who stand for fairness and social justice. Addressing the young soldier that tries to molest Mama Deze and her colleagues, the Colonel intones angrily: "you abandon your duty-post to waylay struggling women? You take their food items, their sweat, hmm?" Fuming still, he adds: "this is how you spoil the name of the army" (p. 71). The fact that Colonel Azuatalam restores the food items that were forcibly taken from the distant market women proves that while socially conditioned men can be agents of exploitation, liberated men can also be agents of social change; hence, the real problem is not the agent, but the underlying social system. From the foregoing, the novel has clearly shown that the clamour for moral consideration in the interface between men, women, children and the environment may not be realised if the radar is placed on men instead of the patriarchal system behind their actions.

Perhaps Agbasimalo's most vivid demonstration of the universality of wartime pain in the novel is captured in Dora's rhetorical questions. When Dora, Deze and Mama Hannah sight a young girl being led away by armed uniformed men, Dora insinuates that both men and women have tasted from the bitter cup of the injustice associated with the war. According to her, "is it not abominable that the same enemies who kill our men also capture and caress our women? Is it our lot that they should violate the lives of one group and the rights of another?" (p. 160). Dora reveals, in those questions, that the victimisation during the Nigerian Civil War was universal. Later, Buno explains that men are not exempted from the frustrations that come from military activities. Describing one of the air raids he witnessed, he explains that "everyone took off in a race to nowhere. Men and women screamed as they ran; children cried out; dogs galloped, barking, chickens ran a bit, flew a bit and scurried back" (p. 201). The instances above can be seen from two perspectives. First, it is the novelist's way of illustrating the universal vulnerability of living things in the environment during the Nigerian Civil War. Again, it is the novelist's way of highlighting the far reaching effects of orientations on the psyche of individuals. Many of the soldiers that victimised people during the war were conditioned by patriarchal conceptions of manhood. For some of the men who connived with soldiers, a good way to prove their bravery was to suppress emotions and reveal the hideouts of their mothers and their sisters. Perhaps, if the soldiers and men were armed with the right concept of manhood, [a view of the man as a moral agent that should live and coexist in fairness to others] there would be nothing to prove and many ills would have been averted during the Nigerian Civil War.

Conclusion

Although their submissions have been relatively ignored, female writers have made significant contributions to Nigerian Civil War literature. They have portrayed experiences during the war like rape, environmental despoliation and other forms of abuse as environmental and social injustice. But in presenting these issues, many female writers and scholars seem to present war-time victimhood as exclusive to females. But Agbasimalo's *Forest Dames* stands out as a unique portrayal of the universality of suffering and pain during the Nigerian Civil War; hence the novel redefines the basis for the engagement of oppression or perpetration of injustice during the Nigerian Civil War. The study has shown that the institutional frames that groom men and use them as agents of oppression are responsible for the oppressor tag on men and are the real limitations to environmental and social justice. Consequently, forms of injustices against men, women, children and the environment during wars have subsisted because of misconceptions and misdirected efforts. While many female writers, without considering the universality of wartime suffering, have singled out women as victims and

men as oppressors, the structures that have fuelled the injustices subsist. The study therefore concludes that only a bold and united affront against patriarchy can end forms of injustice against men, women and the environment during wars. Hence, a sure way to attain an egalitarian society will be to restructure the ideological leanings of all socio-political formations in order to instil the tenets of justice and moral considerations in conflict situations.

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