Nigerian War Literature by Women
From Civil War to Gender War

Gender and war

The enduring wartime picture of ‘man does, woman is’ has depended on the invisibility of women’s participation in the war effort, their unacknowledged, behind-the-lines contributions to the prosecution of war, and their hidden complicity in the construction of fighting forces,” writes Meredeth Turshen in her book on gender and conflict in Africa. Whether they wanted it or not, women have always been involved in wars, actively in many different roles, passively as victims of violence, hunger, and displacement – yet, in the representation of wars they have remained largely ‘invisible’. It was only when women themselves began verbalizing ‘their’ war and started to question the war myths of the gender separation into ‘active men fighting the war’ and ‘passive, non-fighting women at home’ that they became more visible. These myths became obsolete at the

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latest when wars became ‘total’ and ‘postmodern’: civil or liberation wars where home front and war front were more or less identical.²

According to Jean B. Elshtain, the ‘absence’ of women from war literature has also to do with the question of who has the right to war memories, which is to say that although women were present in the war, their experiences were not considered of particular interest or importance, because war was man’s business and the essential roles women played in the war were seen as self-evident.³ If in the past a female author claimed her right to war memories, she broke several taboos, as Margaret Higonnet writes in her study of Victorian and post-Victorian war literature: “First and most important, she articulates knowledge of a ‘line of battle’ presumed to be directly known and lived only by men.” Women were supposed to be silent when men were fighting; furthermore, when women described battles they not only contravened decency and morals by invading the male terrain of war and the male body and its language, they also entered a political terrain forbidden to women. “If she wrote realistically, she could face official censorship for producing demoralizing, unpatriotic texts. [...] a woman who had not been called upon to make parallel sacrifices [...] had no right to criticize the very system that protected her.”⁴

Regarding Arabian war literatures, Miriam Cooke writes that today women are more able to assume their own roles in the “multiple discursive spaces” of wars than they were before World War II. In line with many other feminist academics, Cooke calls the female approach ‘subversive,’” as it represents a ‘counter-discourse’ against the ‘dominant discourse’ and its creation ‘de-centres’ the former:

[Women’s] writings threaten to undermine their cultures’ war myths, yet they are themselves always threatened by the entrenchedness of such archetypes. The disenfranchised, who had submitted to the power of dominant discourse, which tended to distort their experiences, are making their voices heard and their faces seen. They thus expose the mechanisms of power consolidation. Their counter-discourses disrupt the order of the body politic in such a way that they de-center and fragment hegemonic discourse.⁵

⁴ Margaret R. Higonnet, “Not So Quiet in No-Woman’s Land,” in Gendering War Talk, ed. Cooke & Woollacott, 207.