

## The Portrayal of Femininity Traits and Abuses in AdaOkere Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*

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**Abstract:** The trajectory of women in the Nigerian Civil War has been well-represented by female writers in creative literatures, but scholarly works have focused more on the effects of the Civil War rather than the plight of women in defending their femininity. This study investigates the defence and abuse of femininity before and during the Civil War as portrayed by AdaOkere Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*, with a view to identifying the manifestations, violations of femininity and the situational factors underpinning them. The qualitative design is used. The data are purposively selected excerpts from *The Forest Dames*, that focus on the treatment of the theme of femininity. Data are subjected to analysis using a triangulation of Budig's Psychoanalytical feminism, Louise Rosenblatt's Reader Response and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance theory. Findings show that Situational factors that underscore the treatment of femininity are survival instinct, normative identity traits, absence of breadwinner, and heritage and femininity codes. The protection and violation of femininity are evinced by the themes of survival and adaptation (by the victim), commodification of women (by the soldiers), limitation or withdrawal of women's rights (institutional, patriarchal and conditional), circumstantial victimisation and forceful subjection to abuse. The study concludes that there are instances of shameful and institutional violations of women's femininity in war situations that should be called out, criminalised or tagged as heinous. These crimes should be treated as war crimes that should be prosecuted.

**Keywords:** Femininity, Political discourse, Nigerian civil war, Reader response.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Nigerian Civil War has been limited in expression to the factors of inter-tribal conflict that conditioned or ignited the war and the horrendous consequences of the war to the nation. As Adiche, (2014) posits, a story has different sides and should be told from different points of view to escape the dangers of a single story. The implication of this is that no single side of a story should be ignored, and until all sides of a story have been covered, such a story must continue to receive attention. To this end, indigenous and foreign authors and scholars have told the story of the Nigerian Civil War from different perspectives. For instance, Venter, (2015) brands the war as a tribal war, spurred by religious undertones most of which centred on sentiments. In Venter's view, Nigeria is constantly in the watch list for replicable instances of conflicts arising from the 'Christian (and animist) south and the Islamic North'. Oha, (1993) looks at the war as a demonstration of power relations between the two commanders-in-chiefs, Generals Odumegwu Ojukwu and Yakubu Gowon. Language between these actors played a significant role in instigating the war, as it is the single resource for telling the story, using various literary techniques.

Ezeani, (2016) presents the war as a series of 'diplomatic' crises ranging from the marginalisation and minoritisation of the South-west, the neglect and denial of allies to deprivation of the west when it appeared that they have been

impoverished by the war. All the stories told about the war have a rallying point, which is the fact that there were different classes of people victimised by (in) the war, some of which have been underrepresented in scholarship, like the women. It is important to note that history is often unfair to those whose sides of the story have not been told or are underrepresented. Thus, female novelists have taken the task of telling the story of women in the Nigerian Civil. Among the significant works are Chimmanda Adichie's, (2006) *Half of a Yellow Sun*, AdaOkere Agbasimalo's, (2012) *The Forest of Dames*, Elechi Amadi's, (1982) *Sunset in Biafra*, Flora Nwapa's (1975) *Never Again*, Adimora-Ezeigbo's (2019), *Roses and Bullets*, Buchi Emecheta's, (1982) *Destination Biafra*, among others. A review of these texts reiterates various questions that have necessitated this study. Among these questions are what are the trajectories of females represented in the Civil war; how have literary writers deployed literary resources to show the plights of women who were vastly represent as victims of the war; in representing the plights of women, what were the forms of violation against their womanhood or femininity?

In spite of arousing interest from creative female writers, the representation of the femininity of women in the story and texts of the civil war has not been sufficiently engaged in literary appreciation by researchers. Previous studies have

focused perspective issues about female writers of the civil war. Bryce, (1991) studied the discrepancies or contradiction in women's writings of the events of the Nigerian Civil War. The attention is not on the representation of the women in the writings, which this present study focuses on, making it completely at variance. Nkereuwem and Chukwurah, (2021) researched women as the unsung heroes of the Nigerian Civil War, using womanism as a theoretical anchorage. The study analysed certain roles performed by women during the war that were remarkable to put them in memory. However, the study did not mention anything about femininity and how it became a major issue of concern in the civil war, which this study is dedicated to. Ojaruega, (2021) focused on the 'victimhood of female agency in Nigerian Civil War, also considering the large-scale role that women agencies played during the war. The question is, are these group or individual roles, and do these roles amount to the performance of femininity? These are not addressed by Ojaruega (2021), making it different from this study. Other researchers like Ogbazi (2012), Awogu-Maduagwu, and Ummakwe (2018), and Jilani, (2021) focused on the representation of women in various literary works of the Nigerian Civil War. In all these texts, femininity was not addressed. This present study is focused on the theme of femininity and the attempts at suturing it, using the Nigerian Civil War as alibi.

## 2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW: THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR: A SEQUENCE OF CONSEQUENCES

The trajectory of the Civil War is, significantly, one of the rounds of political failures that is attributed to the Nigerian state and one of the unforgettable horror sights that cannot be forgotten. In other words, the immense consequences and suffering that succeeded the war avers to series of flaws in political rhetoric and decisions. Adejumo, (2013) posits that the civil war erupted as a result of a sequence of political flaws, ranging from failure to nib pockets political conflicts, insecurity and tension that formed as a result of the 1965 election to the January, 1966 and July, 1966 successive military coups that sowed the seed of tribal and ethnic suspicion because of sectional assassination of political heavy-weights of the northern and western descents and ultimately the retaliatory actions that led to pogrom and feeling of marginalisation of Nigerians of eastern descent (Ezeanni, 2016). The subsequent exodus of the entire soldiers and

indigenes of Eastern Nigerian set the tone for a general outcry that would spur the feelings of secession that triggered the war.

The most unfortunate thing for the states of the South-east was the fact that they were the battlegrounds of the civil war. Hence, all the tragic consequences were grossly heaved on the lands, their women and children. Venter, (2015) opines that the consequences of the war began from the buildup, claiming massive under-reporting, which trivialised the need to intervene in the plight of the marginalised group by super-powers. Venter, (2015) reports that the buildup to the war alone, which is often reported as the pogrom, gulped the lives of '30,000 people;' venter, (2015) agrees with Forsyth, (2015) that the actual war caused over one million casualties. The dignity of human life is always trivialised in war situation, safety is undermined, and various atrocities are perpetrated in the name of war as represented in literature. For instance, Baxter (2014), in a failed attempt to balance the argument, opines that 'both sides', the Nigerian and Biafran Armies were guilty of perpetrating 'atrocities and abuses', especially against citizens. Again, whether this argument is justified or not, it does not obliterate the fact that the South-east people suffered the most consequences, because it was their lands that were destroyed by the shelling of bombs, it was their women and children that were rapped and starved.

Baxter, (2014) was quick to quote Chief Obafemi Awolowo's, Nigeria's Minister of Finance's, 1969, statement: 'all is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war,' justifying the starvation of innocent children, and male and female civilians, including the aged and vulnerable people. The war was described as an ugly, scrappy, and ill-mannered event that also caused internal displacement, the victims living their lives consistently on the run, from one village to the other, until many of them suffered the invasion. Going by Awolowo's postulation, the issue of starvation can be taken to be a tactic of war, both directly and indirectly. In other words, the reality that children were being subjected to kwashiorkor, among other 'debilitating disease' for lack of severe protein-energy stard the people of the South-east in the face. Children were starved just for the sake of ending the war. There are numerous other consequences reported in literary works, particularly attributed to gender and class. Adiche, (2006) portrays the consequences from the class-feminist perspective, while Agbasimalo, (2014), which this present study employs as data, review

the consequences from both the feminist and womanist perspectives, presenting, extensively how these affected the femininity of women during the war.

## 2.2. Femininity: the Focus of Feminism and Womanism

Femininity has been associated with various meanings, mostly associated with the ‘quality of being feminine or indirectly as qualities associated with the female sex’ (Darity, 2008). It is a way of justifying the act of being female. This is why Aragon, (2004) posits that it refers to the qualities, attributes or mannerisms that are descriptive of women that distinguishes them from men. In other words, it is reputable feeling of being a woman (Aragon, 2004). Some scholars have associated femininity with socialization or culture in the sense that it is not only a personal, but also a collective attribute, feeling, or behaviour. However, scholars like Gaughan, (2006) puts it that femininity involves status qualification. It is the feminine trait that makes access to influence, prestige and power possible for certain women (Gaughan, 2006). The fact that it is measurable implies that it is hegemonic and sometimes the basis for masculine dominion or superiority over women, and forms of anti-femininity behaviours (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013). Corbett, (2018) opines that femininity is a culture system that is cultivated over the years. This means that it is at the centre point, the focal reason of being a woman, which makes it worthy of being defended by feminists and womanists.

Raguz, (1999) suggests that femininity is a form of self-perception, an orientation that sequences to a feeling of self-worth. This means that femininity transcend to identity with regards to self and the female gender as a group. However, Raguz, (1999) three coordinated factors that leads to the performance of femininity; the first is sex role orientation, that is, the perception of their attribute as women, this includes self-rapport or management. The second is sex role preference, which means the quality of action that describes femininity. The third is sex role adoption, which implies the actual performance of behaviour and demonstration of actual attributes that describes or identifies the female gender. The mutual coexistence of these features is what Raguz, (1999) describes as sex-typing. This is a coined expression for stereotyping, which to some extent has negative implications. In other words, femininity is a positive word and cannot be described as a stereotype, rather sex-typing

describes gender peculiarity that applies to femininity.

Feminism is characterised in three dimensions that have uttermost relevance to the pursuance of femininity, as movement, ideology and a theoretical framework (which is used for analysis). As a movement, Delaney, (2005) posits that it is concerned with the pursuance of equality by women, or even men which are concerned about the position of women in society and the need for access to equal opportunities of both genders. As an ideology, Ferree, (2006) opines that it is a system of belief, an idealistic concept of advocating for women’s rights, in some cases involving struggle. As an ideology, feminism involves activism, ‘challenging women’s subordination to men’ and patriarchal acts against women (Ferree, 2006 p 23). As an ideology, feminism advocates for equal right of men and women in terms of decision making, career, among other factors that constitute women’s sex-adoption of femininity (Asnani, 2020). In most third-world African nations, the rights of women are often denied, not respected or even abused. This informs or agitates the feminist, who fights to ensure the restoration of women’s femininity and womanism (Raj & Davidson, 2014).

## 2.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts an interdisciplinary method, adopting a literary and a linguistic theory; and a triangulation approach, coopting Budig’s, (2008) Psychoanalytical Feminism, Louise Rosenblatt’s Reader Response and Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance theory. This section is devoted to the review of both theories beginning from the former, that is feminism, a theory that has become a reference point for underscoring the representations of gender equality, sexism and other forms of discrimination based on gender, incorporating a wide variety of viewpoints and methods, such as intersectional feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, liberal feminism, and in the context of this study psychoanalytical feminism. Aneja, (2019) opines that the theory interrogates sexist assumptions that are held about women, their minds and psychological development. In this case, it underscores gender imbalance and the enforcement of patriarchal or societal norms or structures that are inimical to women, their rights or even privileges. Aneja, (2019) says that it is devoted to the relevance of psychoanalytical effects of certain actions that on women’s lives. Gallop, (1982) argues that the



fundamental basis for psychoanalytical feminism can be traced to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, which generally is used to explain human behaviour in general. Its adaptation to feminism practically relates to the concentration on women, explains the 'instinct, unconscious motivation and self-defense' that women employ to not only expose but also counter irrational impulses.

The rise in popularity and stature of psychoanalysis led to the development of psychoanalytic feminist criticism. The inclination of feminism to accept a conventional, cohesive, rational, and puritanical self, that is, a person purportedly free from the violence of desire can be unsettled by psychoanalysis. In exchange, feminism might challenge psychoanalysis's propensity to perceive and pursue an agenda of unfair societal framework. Both Jacobus, (1982) and Kotze, (2000) propose the dimension of psychobiographical feminism, with the view that there is no dichotomy between the biological and the psychological composition of humans. Especially with women and the trajectory of ill treatment, whatever affects the biological affects the psychological in a semiotic chain (Jacobus, 1982:138). The connection between abuse and the psychological effects of women can be underscored by reader response theory.

A literary theory called reader response theory places a strong emphasis on the reader's interpretation of a text. In line with this approach, a text's meaning is created by the reader and the text together, rather than being fixed or objective. Advocates of Reader Response Theory contend that readers' personal experiences, convictions, and principles influence how they understand a book. Consequently, a given text may be interpreted differently by many readers. In other words, highlighting the significance of the reader's emotive and emotional reaction to a text, reader response theory contends that this reaction is a necessary component of the process of meaning-making. Carlisle, (2000:12) opines that reader-response brings out the creative role of the reader to engage a text in an active and communicative manner. In the view of Rosenblatt (1978), reader-response engages the reader with literary texts, in this case, foregrounding the reader's influence and contribution to the significance of a text (Amer, 2003, p.68). The reading of texts is an engagement, a transaction between the reader and the literature text Garzon and Pena (2015, p.188) posit that in reading a text, the reader enters at a particular point. In other words, response to the

text will be determined by the point of entry. These points of entry are the subject matter and themes, such as the psychological effects that patriarchal and unjust treatment of women bring. In the view of Garzon and Pena (2015, p.188), while interacting with the text, the reader demonstrates some powers to change it, Justman, (2010, p.112) posits that the power is that of co-authorship with respect to constructing meaning their personal literary experience, guided by their thinking process.

Meaning in a text is a negotiation process between the author (speaker) and the readers (hearers). Sperber and Wilson's, (1995) relevance theory is at the interface of speakers' intention and hearers' inference. These two media are within the scope of informativeness and communicativeness. In other words, hearers process meaning by relying on forms of inferential model. In the words of Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 260), "human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance". There is the input model (code), which is the intention of the speaker. This is called ostensible communication. Hearers decode meaning using a presumption of optimal relevance. Interpreting communication can be premised on two factors; the first is ostensive stimulus, which is based on the processing effort of the hearer. In other words, the utterance, that is what is said, must be worth the addressee's processing effort. This is referred to as meaning potential. The second factor underlining ostensive stimulus is compatibility and preference. This is where the theory relates with reader response, where the reader interprets meaning in compatibility to stated theme(s). In relation to this study, the hearer generates meaning from the most preferred inference compatible with the theme (Sperber and Wilson, 1995).

### 3.1 METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative design. The data is purposive, select from Ada Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*. Excerpts from the texts focusing on the situational factors that underscore the theme of femininity in the primary text. The situational factors and the themes are used to code the text to determine the excerpts chosen for analysis. Four situational factors are coded in the portrayal of femininity, namely, absence of breadwinner, survival instinct, heritage and femininity codes and normative identity traits. Five thematic codes are generated. These are survival/adaptation, circumstantial victimisation, commodification, limitation of women's rights and subjection to

femininity abuse. These situational and thematic factors are operationalised bidirectionally in the analysis.

#### 4.1 Absence of Breadwinner

The absence of a breadwinner was a significant consequence of the civil war. Most husbands were killed in the two cycles of the conflict, the 1966 pogrom and the full-scale war between 1967 and 1970. This absence was orchestrated either by death of the breadwinners or abdication of their homes to join the revolutionary army. The author, Agbasimalo presents the absence of a breadwinner as vulnerability, because the transfer of the responsibility of breadwinner to the woman makes her susceptible to abuse of her femininity traits, on the one hand, and her struggle to survive and defend her femininity, on the other hand.

Excerpt

- (i) **Deze's mother did not want to depend on their host for everything.** Before long she had found out **where there was a safe market** she could **buy from and resell...** soon Mama Deze got **a few other interested women to join her** and before she knew it, she had resumed trading in earnest... (ATFD, pg. 54)

Excerpt 1 is an account of the women who had to be on the run from one village to another for survival. This stunted their ability to engage in trade, which is the main preoccupation of women in the South-east. One of the significant ways that women establish their femininity is independence, which becomes transient immediately women lose their husbands like Mama Deze in the text. The burden of responsibility falls on them. Those who cannot cope have to become dependent as represented in the verb, 'defend'. Agbasimalo uses the metaphorical term, 'host' to portray the antithetical notion of having a parasite and a host. The significance here is that the femininity of women in times of war, is lost, when they have to 'depend' on other people for 'everything' as explicated in the data. The survival instinct of women is tested in their ability engage in their trade. The antithesis of buying and selling defines women's resilience in spite of war. On the other hand, it is often difficult to find a market let alone women to trade. The ability of the women to find markets and even trade, shows great instincts of survival and ability to adapt to war. It takes one woman to serve as a vanguard to motivate others as seen in the excerpt. Mama Deze's ability to take risk, as oxymoronic to the constraints of war

serves as 'interest' to other women who are willing to take the same kind of risk, even making it serve as normal activities.

Excerpt

- (ii) **... men were hardly seen on the roads. The women worked hard.** In spite of the **hard labour of the women to sustain the family**, many children still died of starvation, usually after a period of extreme emaciation (ATFD, pg. 43)

The absence of men in villages besieged by war is clearly stated in the first line of excerpt (2). In this case, the author uses litotes, at the same time, a euphemism, 'were hardly seen' to signify the act of abandoning women to take up the responsibilities of men. In order for them to survive, they have to engage in 'hard' work. The researcher uses repetition and synonym at the same time, in 'worked hard' and 'hard labour'. Survival instinct is also represented. The women engage in 'hard labour' in order to survive and be able to feed their family. But they fail in this regard because not only is the task difficult for them, but also, they are constrained by 'starvation' and other problems associated with it like 'extreme emaciation'. The images of hardship, death, suffering, starvation and extreme emaciation are grave consequences of war, but the author paints these images as if they are caused by the absence of their husbands. Similarly, the resilience and survival instinct of women, which enhance the defense of their femininity, are always tested by these factors in the event of war. Agbasimalo employs adverbials and adjectives like 'hardly', 'hard', 'many' and 'extreme' to intensify the conditions, which she has placed in an anticlimax, beginning with the most consequential, which is the death of 'children' to the less consequential, 'emaciation'.

#### 4.2 Circumstantial Victimization

Agbasimalo, in *The Forest Dames* presents women as victims of circumstances. In times of war, women fall victims to some conditions that either defile their femininity or are forced to or condescend to do certain things to survive. These things often lead to grave bidirectional implications on their femininity and long-time survival. In other words, whatever they condescend to do to survive always backfires on them, even though they get some momentary means of survival.

Excerpt

- (iii) **Madam Rosa was a single parent...** she had had **enough of troubles** and **was prepared to take whatever came her way...** soon the enemy forces overran their village and **took them captives...** Pretty Uwadie was taken to the commander of the battalion... while her mother was left in the family compound where another senior officer visited at will... **They opened a restaurant for her** in the compound and stuffed it with exquisite goods... huge supplies of canned drinks, cigarettes, salts, tomato puree, onion, vegetable oil... **her domain became a popular joint where enemy soldiers gathered to have fun...** (TFD pgs. 74,75)
- (iv) People were also saying that **a woman who had parleyed with enemy soldiers** was caught... they say the woman is **sabo... saboteur, That's a huge crime. Poor woman,** only God knows what they'll do to her... **Madam Rosa, the saboteur, had been buried alive...** (TFD pgs. 72,73)

Excerpt (iii) provides a background. It underscores the circumstances around the persona's experience that led to her victimisation which is reported in excerpt (iv). The persona is portrayed to have experienced hardship, as a result of being a single mother. Thus, her choosing to turn her captivity to her advantage, after seeing her daughter married to the 'commander' against her will, can be coded under the theme of survival instinct. In the spirit of survival, she submits herself to the 'enemy' in abuse of her femininity. In another perspective, it can be inferred that she traded her femininity for her survival. Her trajectory is represented in a climax because she went from being a captive to mistress, and from being a mistress to a trader of all kinds of goods, but to enemy soldiers which made her to be victimised by her own people. She is first labelled as a 'saboteur', which explicitly implies associating with the enemy, even if she only did that to survive. In periods of war, every association with the enemy is considered a crime, in this case, it is exaggerated using the adjective, 'huge', First, undermining the fact that she was only trying to survive; second, ignoring the fact that she has already been victimised by losing her and her daughter's femininity in order to survive; and third, using that to justify the harsh consequence meted on her, which is being 'buried alive'.

### 4.3 Commodification of Female Victim

Agbasimalo paints a picture of commodification of women as a regular phenomenon during the civil war. Women were treated like mere commodity to be traded among the soldiers whose main preoccupation was supposed to be fighting a war of armed soldiers. But apparently, according to Agbasimalo, the soldiers at both camps derail from their quest to obtain women and girls as spoils of war to be used as mere objects of pleasure. The worse form of abuse of the femininity of women is commodifying them, implying that they are worthless.

Excerpt

- (v) **Hmm! This one na proper tomato!** I wish say na me get am. But anyhow I go touch small before I hand over.' **A rough soldier** who captured a beautiful girl named Eberé said... (ATFD pg. 100)

**Trans:** This one is really beautiful, I wish she belongs to me. Anyway, I will touch her a bit before I deliver her

- (vi) Sule came **again for another girl...** I wonder what he does with the girls. I think he is mandated to return to camp everyday **with at least one girl for the pleasure of his bosses.** Otherwise, why would he take two girls yesterday and today he is struggling for another one? (TFD pg. 101)

Agbasimalo, in excerpts (v) and (vi), narrates not just the ordeals of young innocent women, who are hunted, captured and delivered as mere commodities to their officers. As clearly represented in the excerpts, the job of 'Sule' is to hunt women, instead of fighting in the war. The metaphor used in the opening sentence in excerpt (v) is bidirectional, representing the beauty and virtue (femininity) of the women, on the one hand, and metaphorizes the commodification of women. In a manner of speaking, a ripe 'tomato' which is red, is used to define rare beauty. This to the woman is a significant part of her femininity. But this is the object of abuse, by the soldier and her superior. The soldier is described as 'rough' in contrast to the 'beauty' attributed to the girls. The reason for taking the girls, and even making it a consistent everyday trade, is clearly stated in both excerpts (v) and (vi), using euphemism. Touching here implies defiling the girls' femininity, so is 'pleasure'. The author also uses rhetorical questions in excerpt (vi), as a euphemistic strategy to make light the effect of the girls' capture.

**Excerpts**

(vii) One of the captured male civilians, who later escaped from the enemy camp, was the only one who had news about Uwadiégwu, Madam Rosa's daughter. He said that Uwadie's **'husband' had been killed in one of the many battles fought and his successor had taken her over...** (ATFD, pg. 81)

Another form of commodification portrayed in the text is metaphorizing them as a possession that is transient, that is transferable from one person to another. This can also be considered as the greatest insult to women's femininity. In the context of excerpt (vii), the persona was taken as a captive and handed to an officer as wife. Agbasimalo encloses 'husband' in inverted comma to portray the fact that it is a non-mutual relationship, without the consent of her parents, and fulfilling all necessary rights that is expected before marrying her. Consequently, she is a captive that served as an object of pleasure as represented in the previous excerpts. Fortunately, or unfortunately, her captor is killed in battle, but instead of releasing her, she is inherited by the succeeding commander. She is treated like a mere property in the settlement that the next commander inherits, rather than freeing her.

**4.4 Limitation of Women's Rights**

Feminists, on normal occasions, fight against the limitation of women's rights. Gaughan (2006) and Bosson and Michniewicz, (2013) advocate for equality of gender roles. The question, however, is does this amount to the protection of women's rights, which has always been at the center of abuse or limitation. In war situations, women and children are always defenseless, and their rights are often abused and abdicated. Agbasimalo portrays several instances where the rights of women were restricted or even abused as a result of consequences of the war on the one hand. The author also unveils the patriarchal tendencies in the South-east that denies women certain rights on the other hand. The denial of these rights is also a constraint placed on the women's ability to defend their femininity.

**Excerpt**

(viii) 'Is it because **I am a stranger here, a refugee**, or because I insinuated that we were naïve?'...Otherwise how could we willingly accept **whatever situation we find ourselves in**, even if it is **completely**

**devoid of equity and fair play...** (ATFD, pg. 68).

(ix) **We have no authority to question what the forefathers have instituted...** there were stories about **women who paid dearly for flouting that law**. There was also the story of a man, on discovering that his wife had eaten the gizzard from the chicken... **fetches his locally made gun and shot at his fleeing wife** (ATFD, pg. 69)

Excerpts (viii) and (ix) aver that the issue of limitation of women's rights is beyond the scope of the civil war. It started before the war, being a condition that is woven into the very existence of the native people. They regarded patriarchal domination and the inequality between men and women as 'law'. This patriarchal 'law' limits the ability of women to want to challenge men's authority or instruction. They are, in their extended family, that is outside their matrimonial home treated as 'strangers' and 'refugees'. They are berated in status, being regarded as 'naïve', and having no sense of ownership or value. Agbasimalo portrays their state to be despicable, hence, having no other option but to condescend to accept whatever situation' that they find themselves, even if it undermines their femininity, which is mostly the case, as represented in the latter part of excerpt (viii) and (ix). Limitation of rights is portrayed by synonyms 'equity' and 'fair play'. This is also represented by, 'no authority.' It is only the women that do not have 'authority' to question patriarchal laws, which Agbasimalo says is regarded as what the 'forefathers' have instituted. One of such acclaimed instituted laws is the fact that women are subservient to men, and there are certain things they cannot do, touch or supposed to have. They could be punished, or even killed as signified in excerpt (ix). The man points a gun at his wife and shoots to kill for merely eating the 'gizzard' of a chicken.

In connection to the war, the rights of women to move around freely without being threatened by the idea that their femininity will be abused. The rules of engagement were not clearly defined in consideration to the rights of women to maintain or protect their femininity.

**Excerpt**

(x) It made them wonder about **the motives behind wars and the mandates soldiers received before going to battle. The**



**mandate received on this particular war**, they assumed, appeared to be silent on **the proper way to handle female civilians** found in the communities. They had heard that the overall mandate was to get the secessionist or dissident side back, by force. **Why females also became the target** was quite confounding to the poor civilians, **who cherished the purity of their young women...** (ATFD, pg. 87)

Women's femininity was a major distraction during the Civil war, as seen in Excerpt (v). At different occasions, Agbasimalo had cause to question the motives of the 'war' and the participants, particularly the soldiers at the enemy camp. Contrast is used in the excerpt to explicate the circumstantial victimisation of the women. The war, according to the fighters, was for the purpose of restoring the 'secessionists' and the synonym, 'dissident' to the federation. Using this parameter to measure the activities of the soldiers and the instances of abduction and defiling of women and girls, excerpt (x) puts it that the purpose of the war may have been defeated on the one hand, while on the forced acquisition of women they are effective. Limitation of women's rights is reflected in euphemism, using the visual imagery of 'silence.' Being silent is also an implicit way of saying that they were free to do whatever they wanted to do to the vulnerable women. In the Nigerian civil war, no definite or stiff policy was enforced to protect the femininity of women; thus, they became easy targets. Agbasimalo portrays in a rhetorical question. Femininity is represented using a metaphor, set up by a relative clause, with a collocating verb and a nominal 'cherished' and 'purity.' Being pure is a great part of the femininity of women, which the soldiers tried hard to tarnish. In Agbasimalo's view and by stated instances in the text, only very few and brave women and girls were able to preserve their femininity in this regard.

#### 4.5 Forceful Subjection to Femininity Abuse

Women and girls during the civil war were subjected to particularly sexual abuse at various instances, whether through force or condescension. They were derogatively used as sex slaves, in the disguise of having them as mates. The fact that the women and girls are taking against their wish, sometimes by coercion is enough proof for the author to aver or substantiate abuse of femininity.

Excerpt

(xi) The invading soldiers indeed came **without respect for females found** within the invaded areas. **They would not kill them: they would rather abduct them and violate their femininity...** (ATFD, pg. 87)

(xii) ...They had **castigated her and called her all sorts of unprintable names**. She pleaded with them, explaining that **she was not in control of her actions**. She tried to make them understand that **the enemy soldiers took over the control of her whole being and that included her senses and reflexes**. No way, the home soldiers seemed to have reasoned. **They coerced her** into telling them everything she needed to know about **her perceived romance with the vandals...** (ATFD, pg. 79)

The treatment of women without 'respect' is both a euphemism and reference to the violation of 'femininity' in excerpt (xi). As established in several instances in the text, the 'invasion' of communities was a major phenomenon in the lingering crises of the civil war. However, according to Agbasimalo in excerpt (xi), the main purpose of 'invading' communities was to take women and girls forcefully, as represented by the verb, 'abduct'. These community women and their daughters were taken against their will, and once taken, they were 'violated' as stated denotatively in the excerpt. The abductors, as seen explicitly in the excerpt, have no interest in killing them; they only killed men because they were of no sexual benefit to them. For the women, they took them to their camps, where they abuse them in terms of sexual servitude or slavery. Excerpt (xii) presents forceful subjugation at two levels, and perpetrated by both ends of the army during the war. The painful thing to the women is that when they are 'violated' by the enemy soldiers, the home soldiers do not regard it as victimisation, rather, they see them as having associated with the enemy. So, they abuse them morally, as marked explicitly in excerpt (xii), castigating them, and calling them all forms of derogatory names. The author uses euphemism, 'unprintable names' to refer to these derogatory 'names,' to mitigate the effect that the true representation of the names will have on readers, feminists and the femininity of women generally. The highest form of femininity abuse is represented also in excerpt (xii), which is the total control of women's 'senses and reflexes.' Agbasimalo opines implicitly that a woman is in



prison and has lost her femininity completely when she is not in 'control' of her senses, which means, she cannot do anything she pleases, neither can she resist inimical actions that are taken against her as represented explicitly by her abuse with the enemy soldiers, and arrest and subsequent execution by the home soldiers.

Excerpt

(xiii) ...**any young female sighted became theirs**, even if under-aged... What **menace** could be **worse than taking girls forcibly away to military camps?** ...the more pressed ones amongst them who could not find the girls, who had all gone into hiding, **took married women away to their camp**. There, they lived with them as **bedmates**... (ATFD, pg. 97)

(xiv) Are you surprised? **That is a young girl. They will do anything to get her type**, even if it means **killing those who try to prevent them** from reaching her... **Basil's wife was taken away** while she was sitting beside her husband... she and her husband thought that being married, the abductors would not go for her... He then adjusted his rifle to remind Basil of its presence and went away with his prey (ATFD, pg. 98).

Agbasimalo, in excerpt (xiii), employs rhetorical question, to elicit the readers' judgement on the forceful abduction and abuse of girls. The enemy soldiers could not get their eyes away from girls, just like it was difficult for the young girls to evade them when sighted. She also uses a metaphor in the form of the adjective, menace, to describe femininity abuse. She uses the adjective 'worse' to mark intensity, and adverb 'forcibly' to explicitly show that the abduction of the women and girls is unwilling. Young girls are the preference, but in the absence of girls, the soldiers condescend to take, as explicitly stated in the passage, using parallelism. The effect of femininity abuse is mitigated in excerpt (xiii) by euphemism, using 'bedmates.' In the real sense, the abducted women and girls are not bedmates, but captives to satisfy the soldiers' sexual demand. In excerpt (xiv), the author represents the desperation on the part of the soldiers to abduct women. This is both implicit and explicit. The fact that they are ready to kill anyone that could oppose them is explicit in the excerpt. The soldier threatens to shoot 'Basil' if he resisted the abduction of his wife. The implicit representation of their

desperation is in the non-particular, indefinite pronoun 'anything.' This means that what they are capable of doing is elusive, including actually killing people who oppose them. They are also not restrained by the presence of the women's husbands, especially as they are defenseless against them.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Agbasimalo in *The Forest Dames* centres on the effects of the Nigerian Civil war on women, mirroring the implications for women's femininity in the general sense. The undermining and abuse of women's femininity is beyond the civil war, it is socio-culturally motivated. Raguz, (1999) and Aneja, (2019) submit that gender roles have always been clearly defined. In most social and cultural environments, especially where there is clear disparity between the weak and strong along gender bias, the women always have their rights limited as portrayed by Agbasimalo. In traditional South-east communities, there were strident limitations to the rights of women. There are things they are restrained from doing, food they were denied eating, and as part of the consequences of the war, many restrictions. Women, during the civil war were defenseless, and their rights were abused and in other instances abdicated. For instance, their movements were restricted, not because of the dangers of the war, but because they will be hunted, abducted and used as sexual slaves, which is an abuse to their femininity. Gaughan's, (2006) notion of hegemony in femininity is challenged by Agbasimalo in the local context, because in the representation in the text, females cannot freely demonstrate their femininity, which was always at the centre of abuse during the war.

The feeling of self-perception and self-worth (Raguz, 1999) that underline the representation of femininity is berated in the events of war. Women in war situations face circumstantial victimisation. They become a side attraction to soldiers, who abandon their duty to begin to chase objects of pleasure. The worth of women is berated as they are turned into mere objects of pleasure. They are abducted and abused by the soldiers fighting the war. Women captured are not only objectified, but also passed as possessions to successors. Agbasimalo portrays that it was difficult for women to maintain their femininity when they are captured and objectified.

Survival and adaptation are important during wars. According to Agbasimalo, they are affected by

situational factors such as the absence of a breadwinner. Delaney, (2005) argues that equality is one of the factors that enhances the femininity of women. Equity in this regard is in terms of privileges, but in the local sense, equity signifies the ability of women to support the home. War has enormous consequences on women outside victimisation and sexual abuse, one of which is taking their husbands from them. Agbasimalo portrays severally the loss of men during the Nigerian civil wars; those captured and killed by the so-called invaders and those who went to join the army to fight for their native lands. However, the absence of their breadwinner triggered the women's struggle for survival. The good thing is that it revealed the survival instinct of the women during wars as represented in the text. In the process, they showed their normative identity trait in trade, hospitality and affection, but Agbasimalo attributes it as the motivating factor for all forms of femininity abuses. In certain instances, they are forcefully taken, while in other instances, they condescend or surrender to abuse either because of certain benefits, or because they have no choice.

Agbasimalo, in *The Forest Dames*, concludes that the femininity of women must be preserved in times of war. There are rules of engagement that protect women and children from victimisation during insurrections and wars, but the observance of these rules has always been questionable. When these rules are not observed, there is no accountability. There is no record of anyone who was tried, convicted and even punished or even acquainted for crimes against the femininity of women during the Nigerian Civil war or any other conflict related events such as terrorism. Consistently, even in contemporary times in Nigeria, women and young girls are abducted and their femininity is violated without consequences. The text implicitly advocates for consequences for the abuse of femininity during wars, insurrection and terrorism. The motives of fighters in wars must be clearly defined to exclude the abuse of women.

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