

# Gendered Dimensions and Coping Strategies in War Situations in Ada Okere Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*

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## Background

War and armed conflicts remain a major challenge in Africa despite varied global interventions in contemporary times. According to Patricia Danzi, Regional Director for Africa for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in an article 'Conflict is still Africa's biggest challenge in 2020', "Africa is struggling to cope with existing situations that strain already limited attention and resources". More so, Mark Gersovitz and Kriger Norma (2013) define a civil war as a politically organized, large-scale, sustained, physically violent conflict that occurs within a country principally among large important groups of its inhabitants or citizens over the monopoly of physical resources within the state. **Civil war** is a fierce clash between a state and one or more coordinated non-state participants in the state's territory.

War and conflict are social phenomena which remain subjects of discourse since they are still ravaging several countries, especially in Africa. Literary works have been written to give a vivid portrayal of the events that happen in the course of war and how detrimental war is to the existence of mankind. Additionally, Idowu Williams (1999) maintains that the continuous conflicts in Nigeria are political in nature and they are the result of the absence of democracy; a federal structure that encourages ethnic loyalty at the expense of national consciousness and unity as well as uneven distribution of power

control that results in the oppression of other ethnic groups in Nigeria. War has profound effect on everyone - men and women, children (boys and girls) as well as the elderly. Nevertheless, although war affects everyone negatively, the specificities and peculiarities of the experiences of men and women are unique based on their gender. Besides the causes and effects of war, which have been foregrounded in literatures, it is important to examine the gendered dimensions in war narratives and the coping strategies that war victims employ to survive the ordeal. This study explores the differences in the experiences of male and female characters as well as the coping strategies of war victims in AdaOkere's *The Forest Dames*.



### **Synopsis of *The Forest Dames* by Ada Okere Agbasimalo**

It appears that *The Forest Dames* is an autobiographical fiction to some extent as AdaOkere Agbasimalo reveals in an interview on September 21, 2012 that she was a young girl when the Nigerian civil war started. Her parents did their very best to save her life and honour, hiding her away with three other girls in the forest where they defied hunger, deprivation and violence.

The story commences with the visit of the mothers in the forest during the civil war. This is a form of episodic plot structure and the action goes back in time to the pre-civil war era, when the three major tribes in Nigeria lived peacefully. The first two chapters are set in the forest during the civil war, while the next chapter explores the pre-civil war setting in Kaduna (where Ada Okere grew up) and gradually moves on to the civil war era. Happenings of the civil war era permeates the prose which ends with another account of the post-civil war era.

Adaeze the protagonist of the novel, like Ada Okere, is of the Igbo origin but was born in Northern part of Nigeria – Kaduna. She completes her primary education in the north and her father preferred that she has her secondary education in the East in order to be accustomed to the culture and tradition of Eastern Nigeria. The massacre in North drives her parents and siblings back to the East as the secession of Eastern Nigeria from Nigeria results in the Nigerian Civil War. The Nigerian soldiers in a bid to prevent the secession of the Igbos from Nigeria and the formation of the Biafra Republic warred against the people in the East, making them run for their lives and seek safety. The quest for safety leads Adeaze and her friends into the forest as proposed by their parents. With myriad of gory experiences and stories from their mothers on the state of the war, the dames endure the wild and hostile forest till the end of the war. The post war horrors equally await the dames as one of them eventually gets captured and was impregnated by one of the soldiers, only to be rejected by the soldier's family who claim that she is not fit to be their son's first wife. Another of the dames becomes a victim of the brutal economic recession as she had little to fend for her family. Adeaze is fortunate to make her final secondary school leaving certificate examination despite being out of school for thirty months. She is given scholarship into the University of Nigeria where she battles with the deteriorated infrastructure and inadequate manpower worsened by the war conditions before she graduates. The story concludes with the National Youth Service Corps experience of Adeaze, who had to stand against sexual advances of a member of senior staff in the university.

### **Gendered Dimensions in *The Forest Dames***

Men and women are affected by war in specific ways based on their gender. . While men are typically victims of physical abuse, women and girls are generally victims of sexual abuse as depicted in *The Forest Dames*. Several instances of sexual abuse pervade the novel. During the war, the novel portrays Ogechi, a nursing mother as she is ordered to stop eating and follow

the soldiers. Deze's mother recounts the story to the dames in the forest thus:

...Trembling, she picked up her baby and got up to go with them but was rebuked and asked to leave the baby there. Ogbechi left her baby in obedience. As she is led away, her five-month-old baby who was still on breast milk, cried as if she knew what was going on. Her husband looked on, speechless. (Ada Okere 22).

Ogechi's experience is representative of the ordeal of the woman in a war situation. She is captured to become a sexual object of pleasure for the soldiers, leaving her family behind. Her husband and children are not exempted from the negative impact of war as they (including the five months old baby) are deprived of a regular life. Conversely many men, especially non-military men are specifically prone to physical abuse. An instance of physical abuse is portrayed as Joseph, an elderly man tries to stop the uniformed intruders from taking his bicycle from him, Deze's mother recounts that after they beat the man to death, they still took his bicycle away.

Additionally, Buno's experience of the pogrom gives a vivid imagery of the gendered dimension. Buno – Deze's father has sent his family to the east at this moment, by wanted to get his leave of absence document signed from the Civil Service before he joins his family in the east. One night:

He heard shouting and wailing from the house next to his. When he heard the orders that were issued, he froze. 'Kill them, kill the bastards.' 'Yes, thrust the dagger into that one's belly, yes scatter it.' 'Hey, young girl, this way, undress quickly!' (Ade Okere 41).

This further buttresses the fact that when men are brutally murdered and physically assaulted, women are sexually abused and exploited. This is evident as the girl is asked to undress and subjected to rape, probably before she is eventually killed. Another gendered dimension in war experiences as portrayed in *The Forest Dames* is the kind of servitude that characters are subjected to depending on their gender. An instance is that of Okedu a fisherman who is abducted by the uniformed men as recounted by Deze's mother when she goes to visit the dames in the forest:

You all know Okedu, the fisherman? They stopped him as he strolled into his compound from the village stream and told him he must go with them. Okedu called out to one of his children and tried to hand over a hooked fish to him but was not allowed to do so. They abducted the fish as well. Okedu found himself in their military camp. ... A few days later, when he was asked to go

with the other captives to the stream to fetch water for chores at the camp, Okedu saw an opportunity to escape. He dived into the Otamiri river and swam back home, being familiar with the tributaries. (Ada Okere – 23).

The above indicates that civilian men are forced into servitude and made to undertake menial jobs by the uniformed men.

Another instance of gendered outcome of war is seen in Madam Roza who opts to stay behind with the enemies as she and her daughter are not accepted in their community as no one knows the father of her daughter. Perchance, due to the non-acceptance, she decides not to evacuate her village. The narrator recounts that:

After they had scared the people away with gunfire, air bombs and mortal shelling the enemy forces moved into Deze's village and took the duo captive. Being women, they were not given the same treatment as the male captives. Most male captives were killed instantly but Madam Roza and her daughter were kept for pleasure. To those two, the vandal soldiers could not be enemies any longer. Both groups had found in each other mutual companionship, strong enough to destroy, for the time being, the concept of enmity. Pretty Uwadie was taken to the commander of the battalion at the camp while her mother was left in the family compound, where another senior officer visited at will and, sometimes, took the risk of spending the night. They opened a restaurant for her in the compound and stuffed it with scarce good. (128 -129).

It is obvious that Madam Roza is left with no option but to become a commercial sex worker. Death would be her lot if she refuses the opportunity. Uwadie her daughter is similarly taken into forced sex work for the soldiers. The officers decide to stock Madam Roza's shop with scarce commodities in order to enjoy themselves before they proceed to sexual pleasure with her. When Madam Roza is eventually caught by the Biafrian soldiers, tears flow from her eyes freely before she is killed.

Besides, after the war, abducted women returned, some with babies, others with pregnancy and few are taken by the soldiers as wives. The situation results in psychological stress for one of the victims. For instance, Ojiugo is bitter about the circumstance. She does not know the surname to give her child. She is more fortunate than some ladies who are gang raped and do not know the father of their babies as well as those who gave birth, but the babies taken from them and they are sent to the east. In Ojiugo's case, she has her baby as well as her regrets. She feels the boy would be stigmatized if given the name of a northerner. Ojiugo reiterates that violation is worse than death. She

does not feel comfortable giving her son the name of a northerner. She is able to resolve on a name and thereafter commits suicide by hanging herself because she could not bear the stigma of unwanted post war babies.

Furthermore, an additional gendered dimension portrayed in *The Forest Dames* is the reversal of traditional gender roles as women became the breadwinners of the families. The men had either been killed, enlisted in the army or left jobless. Buno - Deze's father, who is a civil servant before the war, is jobless during the war. The following excerpt depicts his condition:

Buno found the displacement awkward. He woke up every morning not knowing how to start the day. Sometimes, he played with his children and told them stories. At other times, he chatted with his wife and other relations. He often took a stroll, meditating, greeting people and counting trees. Most of the time, he closed his eyes and relived the ceiling experience in Kaduna. (59 – 60).

Due to the war conditions, many men, like Buno become idle. Rather than the providers they were before the onset of war, they become dependent on their wives who may be lucky and resourceful enough to help the family survive. Even the University professor is rendered jobless as a result of the war. Buno's role is taken over by Dora who engages in the informal market to provide for the family. She buys from a remote market and sells in the nearby market. At the end of the war, when Buno receives the news that all individuals would exchange all their Biafran currency to twenty naira, he hurries to tell his wife, who has become the breadwinner of the family as he had no money. After being informed, Dora queries Buno and Kwenga to ascertain if indeed the whole lot of money she had accumulated from trading would only amount to twenty bucks of the old currency. The duo of Buno and Kwenga answered the affirmative.

The effects of war as portrayed in *The Forest Dames* are quite myriad. So far the analysis has revealed that characters in the text are victims of forced conscription, forced labour, sexual exploitation, deprivation from basic social amenities, displacement, among others. The specific experiences are gender related. Just like the experiences of war, the effects of war have gendered aspects in some cases. For instance, boys were forcefully enlisted into the Biafran Army. This is seen when Deze recounts the story of Jidefor and Kelechi who are friends. The adventurous duo opted to go to the market on a market day in order to see the girls that would accompany their mothers to the market and perhaps talk to them and commence a relationship later.

Unfortunately:

A truck sped up to them raising dust, causing Kelechi to brake and drop one leg on the ground. Jide came off the bicycle, couching. As some men jumped off the truck and rushed towards them, Kelechi hands off the bicycle and dived into the nearby bush, running, jumping and hopping out of site. Jideofor was hound into the truck. The bicycle was not left behind. No one worried much about the abduction. 'May the enemy's bullet never find him!' They prayed. (64–65).

Young men were definitely not safe enough to pursue a normal life. Many were conscripted into the army.

Another effect of war on the victims is psychological fear. This is depicted in the portrayal of Kelechi who escapes being forcefully enlisted in the war. The narrator affirms that Kelechi never dared to be on the road again, not even at night. Additional instance of psychological distress is the experienced by Liliana's family. Liliana is hit by the bomb when she journeys back from the faraway market that she goes to with her friends in order to cater for her family. Her goods are given to her family but the news of her death adversely affected her daughter – Gonma as well as her entire family. Deze recounts that:

Gonma felt shattered at the loss of her most cherished companion, confidant and supporter. Her mother meant everything to her and now her everything was gone forever. The fresh blow strengthen her to resolve to succeed in life. She pulled her brother and sister to her and one by one, wiped their tears and assured them that, as long as she did not receive the 'death parcel' herself, she would give the last drop of the sweat in her to see that they did not suffer. Meanwhile, her mother's friend and neighbours were always around to console them while her father, Justin, had his friends around, commiserating with him and helping him drown his sorrow in palm wine. The demise of his dutiful wife no doubt caused him much pain. (80).

From the aforementioned, the fact that Gonma a fifteen-year-old has to assume the role of a mother shows how much distress she goes through. Additionally, when Gonma is sent to the forest with three other girls to keep her safe from the soldiers that sexually assaulted teachers in the village, she becomes a shadow of herself since the death of her mother.

Ever since that distant market saga, Gonma had become taciturn. She just looked on and listened, not exactly contributing, a lot going through her mind. She felt handicapped and remained mostly silent. (24).

This conveys the fact that Gonma goes through psychological distress in the cause of the war as a result of her mother's death. That she merely looked on during conversations suggests that she is disinterested in life and would perhaps prefer to be left alone to mourn her loss. This connotes psychological stress placed on her due to the death of her invaluable mother who dies as she does her best to fend for her family. However Gonma's resolve to support and defend her younger siblings is evidence of courage, bravery and resourcefulness of women that help them survive the ordeals of war. Her father's reaction, taking to palm wine, is less advantageous.

Another negative impact of the war is the halt of the educational sector as schools are converted to refugee camps. Deze has just gained admission into the secondary school when the war started. Students are dismissed and their education halted. Nevertheless, the novel demonstrates the indomitable spirit of the girls. Deze prays that the civil war should stop as she is confined to the forest with three other girls and all she has to enhance her education are old books that she has studied over and over again. When one of the forest dames – Sofuru wonders aloud when the war would stop, Lele another of the young girls replies that no storm last forever. Deze lamented:

It had better stop. This is very distressing. I want to go back to school. I've finished reading all the books I have here. I've gone through them more than twice. What is all this, eh? What crime did we commit to deserve this predicament? (24).

Although the formal education sector was affected, the young girls, especially Deze, continued to learn by reading the available books on their own. Little wonder she is able to further her education after the war even though the environment was not conducive to learning. During the post-civil war era, the students consider themselves fortunate to have 'stones and makeshift chairs' to sit on. Cordelia tells Deze that her cousin's school is littered with human skulls. Moreover, students' population dwindled after the war. Staff equally changed hands as the missionary expatriates vacated Eastern Nigeria during the war and did not return after the war. The situation is described thus:

The student population was scanty but the teachers worked hard on the few, guiding them through, albeit with difficulty. Miss Hubbard, the missionary principal before the war, had left. An indigenous principal took over and, with material, recorded some achievements. The first results were not quite good. The final year students sat for the same School Certificate Examinations with the others from the other parts of the country where schooling had not been



interrupted. (266).

Similarly, Deze recounts that:

The only university in the East – and the first indigenous university in the country – reopened. The university with the insignia! The university town of Nsukka was a major warfront with many casualties. Efforts had been made to clear the mess. Shattered windows, broken doors, blown-off roofs and bullet-ridden walls were being painstakingly repaired as students survivors began to find their way back. At the tertiary level the population was equally scanty. Quite a number had died at the battle front. Some of the female students had also died through the air raid, mortal bombs or shock. A number had been abducted. ...Returning to campus after thirty months of war was quite challenging. All students had zeal and determination. ...no good libraries, no good laboratories, no good offices or hostel, but with zeal and determination, they settled down to scratch out an education. Several non-Eastern students did not return. (Ada Okere 267-268).

More so, the devastation in the educational sector is portrayed in the cause of the conversation between Cordelia and Deze. Cordelia asks:

Who removed all the beds, lockers and other belongings? Where are my books? I regret not coming back to pick my property. I was procrastinating. Did you come back to pick your belongings? (264).

Deze replies:

Yes, I did, but what use is it now? I eventually lost everything. We returned from our place of refuge to find that our house had been razed by fire. Sure the house did not set itself ablaze. (264).

From the depictions, war does affect everyone in different ways. Gender is a marker of what specific ways wars can affect individuals. Men, women and children therefore develop various coping strategies to survive in a war situation. Some of these coping strategies will be considered next

### **Coping Strategies adopted in *The Forest Dames***

Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioural and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events. Two general coping strategies have been distinguished: problem-solving strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies. Problem-solving strategies are efforts to do something active to alleviate stressful circumstances, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies involve efforts to

regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events. Research indicates that people use both types of strategies to combat most stressful events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The predominance of one type of strategy over another is determined, in part, by personal style (e.g., some people cope more actively than others) and also by the type of stressful event; for example, people typically employ problem-focused coping strategies to deal with potential controllable problems such as work-related problems and family-related problems, whereas stressors perceived as less controllable, such as certain kinds of physical health problems, prompt more emotion-focused coping strategies.

In the novel both problem-solving strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies are employed by the characters to survive the ordeals of the war. One of the problem-solving strategies employed by characters in *The Forest Damesis* migration. When Deze's father is fortunate to escape the gruesome murder in the hands of the northerners who killed his neighbours and broke into his house, he hid in the ceiling and adopts migration to solve the problem. The narrator affirms:

By 6.00a.m. that same day Deze's father was on the train heading east, carrying only a small bag. It did not matter to him that he was leaving so much behind. He sat in the corner, still shivering from his earlier ordeal. The train spilled over with people looking harassed and frightened. Some looked lost, staring blankly into space. After what seemed like an eternity, the train's horn blew solemnly and the train began to jerk slowly forward, steadily increasing its speed. Another somber horn and the train stabilized its speed. They were on their way home. They had escaped from the killing in the city and were now trying to tame their fear (265).

AdaOkere – 43

With the massacre of the Easterners in Northern Nigeria, signaling the commencement of the civil war, many Easterners took to migration to the East leaving their jobs and possession in the North due to the threat to their lives.

Migration was not a strategy without challenges. After migration, getting a place to move to in time of the Nigerian Civil war is quite an arduous task. When the Nigerian Army started conquering some of the Eastern communities, Deze's mother and her entire community had to move from one refugee camp to another. The refugee camp that they were accommodated at Okolochi was under threat as they could hear the gun shot and sound of war

clearer from time to time. Sequel to this:

Through the bush path they reached a neighbouring community in Naze called Umuezuo. To their utter amazement, the villagers had put a barrier to prevent them from entering. When their pleas fell on deaf ears, Deze's mother stepped forward and told them that her paternal home in Naze was next to theirs but one of the men called her aside and told her that the villagers had met and agreed on 'no refugees', and that they could not break the rule. The displaced Nekede people remembered how kind-hearted the Okolochi and Emeke Obibi people had been and considered it sheer injustice to them to be compared with Umuezuo. They wondered if that was wickedness or part of the confusion caused by the war. It was only a matter of time before the mortar bombs found them and they too had to hurriedly seek refuge elsewhere.

Dismayed, they turned back and walked on. (Ada Okere 204 -205).

Migration was continuous as even places characters migrated to and refugee camps where they found themselves were under continuous threat. Another coping strategy which was adopted mostly by women in *The Forest Dames* is setting up guerilla markets. Women travel to distant areas in search of commodities and sold for profit upon return to their own community. Deze's mother explored this:

Within two hours, Deze's mother and her group were done with buying. On their way home, they looked out for smaller markets where they resold the items purchased from the distant market, targeting some profit and consciously reserving some of the food for the family's needs. Any remainder was sold to the people within their community. (70 – 71).

The resourcefulness of women, their organizational skills and the success of guerilla markets as a coping strategy are similarly demonstrated when (Dora) Deze's mother is a refugee at Pa Zurike's compound in Okolochi. According to the narrator:

Inasmuch as they were refugees, Dora did not want to depend on their hosts for everything. Before long, she had found out where there was a safe market she could buy from and resell. She got a few other interested women to join her and before she knew it, she had resumed trade in earnest. This way she fed her children well and still had a little money for emergencies. (90-100).

Women's ingenuity, hardworking nature and resilience were indispensable qualities for survival in times of emergencies such as war. Another coping strategy evident in the novel is support for opposing armed group. This

strategy is quite precarious for individuals who adopt the method as they are tagged saboteurs and may be killed if caught by the rival group. An instance in the novel is Rosa who was buried alive for her choice of escaping death by becoming a sexual worker for the enemy soldiers. Rosa is accused of collaborating with the enemies and buried alive.

Finally, trickery is a common coping strategy employed in the novel. The people outwitted the soldiers a couple of times in order not to be victims. An instance is seen just immediately after the war. Deze returns only to discover that she is being trailed.

Ten minutes later, and as if she had been trailed, an enemy soldier walked in casually with a gun and stood in front of her. 'Get up and follow me,' he barked. Deze was too tired to get up. She was thinking to herself, 'I thought the war was over; what does this intruder want?' 'You no hear me? I say get up,' he insisted, reaching for her wrist. Unknown to Deze, one of the children who saw what was going on had gone to tell Katty's mother, Aunt Joy, that a vandal had come to take Deze. Aunt Joy quickly brought back Katty in her arms and promptly dropped her in Deze's arms. 'Here's your baby, attend to her, she's been crying. Who are you leaving her for?' Aunt Joy 'raked' at Deze in the local dialect. Deze grabbed Katty and began to pretend to want to breastfeed her. It was amazing. Deze barely had developed breast and it was hard to understand why the vandals badly wanted her. In this case, she still had soot on her face and the rags were still hanging on her body. She tried to raise the upper part of the rags so as to 'breastfeed her baby'. The soldier hissed, disgusted and walked away. (233-234).

Aunt Joy created an impression that Deze is the mother of Katty as the soldier wants to abduct her after the war. Despite being a young girl with barely developed breast and clothed in rags, the soldier wants to have her and has grabbed her by the wrist before Aunt Joy's timely intervention of tossing Katty to her lap and speaking to her in the dialect. Deze also was clever enough to quickly play the role of a nursing mother on the spur of the moment. The trick fortunately saved her another long nightmare. The problem – solving strategies employed by both men and women differ as the peculiarities of the challenges during war are somewhat gender related.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of gendered dimensions and coping strategies in *The Forest Dames* by AdaOkere Agbasimalo demonstrates vividly the divergences in

experiences of men and women during a civil war. This depiction of the differing war experiences of male and female characters reveal that women and girls are more susceptible to sexual abuse, rape, unwanted pregnancies, suicide, among other miseries, while men are prone to physical abuse, death and forced conscription. The effects of war also reversed traditional gender roles as more women became breadwinners since their husbands were forcefully conscripted, made jobless or killed. In taking up the role of breadwinners and in the innovative coping strategies employed by the characters during the war, women demonstrate commendable resourcefulness, ingenuity and resilience.

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