

Elechi Amadi, **Estrangement** (London, Heinemann, 1986)  
244 pp.

In the chaos of a brutal civil war, Alekiri is separated from her husband Ibekwe, and she later finds herself at the mercy of a soldier who demands sex at gunpoint. She is rescued by Major Sule Dansuku, and a relationship develops between the two which leads to the birth of a child. When the war ends, Ibekwe shows up, and the drama begins. Alekiri seeks her husband's forgiveness, but to no avail. Instead Ibekwe remarries, only to discover that his new wife, Ibia, cannot give him a child; whereupon he takes a second wife. Soon, however, Ibekwe's inability to allocate equal "cooking arrangements" to his two wives results in his loss of Ibia, who promptly marries an Italian contractor. At this point Ibekwe's thoughts turn back to Alekiri. Believing that money might help him recover her, he tries to make it the quickest way by engaging in illegal transactions with seamen at Port Harcourt; he is joined in the venture by the cynically corrupt and unscrupulous schemer Chief Kwaki-Thomas. One day the two are attacked by an armed gang, who rob them of all the money they have. When we last see him, the financially ruined Ibekwe is lying on a hospital bed pleading with Alekiri to forgive and return to him.

Meanwhile a bloodless **coup d'etat** takes place, followed by an abortive one a year later. (The events here remind one of the bloodless **coup** which swept General Gowon from power in 1975, and the abortive **coup** of February 13, 1976, in which General Murtala Muhammed was killed.) Major Dansuku is arrested after the abortive **coup** but is released soon afterwards. At the close of the novel Alekiri decides to marry Major Dansuku, even though she is certain he will marry four wives, put her in purdah, and "sit on her belly and unleash painful jabs to her in moments of insane hatred".

In 1973 Elechi Amadi published **Sunset in Biafra**, a factual chronicle of his experiences during the Biafran War. **Estrangement** is a follow-up to that, although he has published other works in the interim. Amadi works close to his material; he clearly has sympathy for most of his characters, who

have been scarred by the war. The major characters are presented with a measure of psychological depth. Ibekwe is an unfortunate victim of circumstance who also happens to be too immature to cope with his situation; he is entitled to the reader's sympathy, not simply because no man would like to lose a wife the way he does, but because we sense that his irascibility and insecurity are partly traceable to his unhappy background. Like Mugo in Ngugi's **A Grain of Wheat**, Ibekwe had set out to make a success out of his life, in his case as a trader, to make up for a low education and a fatherless childhood. Then the war comes and takes everything away from him. Alekiri has, in spite of her weaknesses, more strength of character than Ibekwe. She is clearly torn between her need for a husband and her desire to pursue a career and succeed independently. Her determination in the face of hardships is admirable although she also benefits from the support of friends and relatives. A most remarkable character in the story is Binpe Adekurun, the businesswoman who seems to combine feminist radicalism with business pragmatism. It is a pity that we are merely told about her in an anecdote. The least likeable character has to be Chief Kwaki-Thomas, "M.Sc., Ph.D, Executive Engineer". He will be familiar to readers acquainted with Armah's Koomson and Brempong, Achebe's Chief Nanga, or Munonye's Eduardo Boga, well-dressed gentlemen who embody and glorify corruption. Kwaki-Thomas is popularly known as K.T. and, interestingly, in one African country I know K.T. stands for **katangale**, which roughly translates as "shady deals". K.T.'s office is air-conditioned and so is his Mercedes-Benz. He refuses to go and inspect a building project (he would rather stay in the office and make money anyway) because the road is too rough for his limousine, and the air-conditioned Land-Rover he ordered from overseas has not yet arrived.

Amadi's style is lucid and without ornament. I found the narrative pace in the first half of the book rather sluggish, and it takes some time before the characters emerge and become interesting. Much of the dialogue (and there is a lot of it!) in the first half of the novel is without substance and could have been summarized. However, from the tenth chapter to the end, the story gathers momentum and the events take on an intensity that makes this final section of the novel particularly readable.

Like all other wars the Biafran War has been the subject of many literary productions. Amadi's **Estrangement** is only one of the latest, and there are probably more still to come, although the war ended sixteen years ago. That should not surprise us. Wars cause disruption (social, economic and psychological as well as political) and produce intense experiences that can show us all something about love, resilience, hatred and frustration. By dramatizing these emotions the artist may help us become aware of the contradictions and tensions that make up the human condition.

Ken Lipenga