

## X-RAYING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

Ifeyinwa Asuzu & Chika Ogonwa

Department of Languages,  
Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi- Uku,

### Abstract

The study examines the role of women in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The aim of the study is to show how Adichie recreated the female character, whom male writers as Chinua Achebe, Festus Iyayi, Zulu Sofola and others in same like have portrayed as weak, insignificant and subordinate human in African patriarchal society. Furthermore, the study shows through Adichie's female characters, mainly Kainene and Olanna, the role of women during the Biafra war and its wider implication on the society. The study is a content analysis procedure which uses instances from the novel as source for data. While the study anchors on Feminism, data for the study were analysed using the Womanist ideological perspective. The study shows that Adichie mask through her female heroine, Kainene to portray women as strong, bold, individualistic and fearless human beings who are capable of taking and took responsibilities in the society. The study shows also, that role can be used to place significance on human irrespective of gender.

**Key words:** Recreate, Feminism, Significant, Weak, Subordinate, Womanist

### Introduction

Generally, roles are assigned in most African societies according to gender. In assigning these roles, women are usually given demeaning roles as cooks, prostitutes, nannies, petty traders, housewives, farm mates among others. She becomes a slave of some sort as she combines all of these demeaning roles. Quina in Morolake observes that African woman emerged as victims of African male and traditional customs and practices which colonization played a minor role if any. Quina notes that "The African woman of the rural area is portrayed as little more than a slave, who goes about her task with silent acceptance. She has no past or no future given the inherent backwardness of her society...she never speaks for herself but is always spoken about (25)".

This degrading valuation is reflected in works of male writers as: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Anthill of Savannah*, Festus Iyayi's *Hero*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the God's*, Eddie Iroh's *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* and *Divided We Stand*. In these works, women are portrayed as 'weak', insignificant beings, not capable of playing significant roles in the society. This becomes a challenge for the African woman, especially the female writers who are confronted with the need to negotiate her identity through literature. This paper examines women in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow*

*Sun*. Also, it examines Adichie as an agent of female recreation. The aim is to show how Adichie created the woman in order to achieve a balance in the society. The study is a textual analysis procedure which uses instances from the novel as it data. The study adopts African Feminism (Womanist perspective) as its theoretical consideration. Hence, the approach for the study will be from the angle of female contributory role in crisis situation.

### Methodology

The study is a content analysis procedure, which uses incidences from Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as its data. The choice of the novel is as a result of the fact that women were given robust personality and attention which helps to illustrate the aim of the study.

### Theoretical Framework

Several approaches have been used to explore the oppression of woman of African descent: from "African Feminism" to "Femalism" to "Womanism" to "Gynandarism", each seeking to encapsulate and define the African female thought. The study adopts African Feminism (Womanist perspective) as its Theoretical Framework. Morolake notes "African feminism links racial, societal, caste and all gender form of repression to construct a more all-encompassing classification of feminism through which women are considered supremely as individuals, rather than sexual objects" (17). Womanism on other

hand is a version in African feminism. Womanism is the idea and voice of African female scholars; Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Mary Modupe Kolawole in their separate well written volumes have dwelt extensively on the womanist ideology in African female writing. Considering the interpretation of the concept taken from Modupe Kolawole's study in *womanism and African Consciousness*, "To Africans, womanism is the totality of feminist self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural way". (24). Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, expresses her conviction thus:

To the womanist therefore, the vital unity of a people evolving a philosophy of life acceptable to both men and women is a better approach to the wo/man palava than a debilitating and devastating political struggle for women liberation, independence and equality against men to prove a point. (121)

In same vein, Nwajiaku underlines, "Womanism underscores Africanness. She identifies the peculiarities of the African female experience and African world view which to her is largely family oriented. Consequently, when several radical feminists insist on the dissolution of patriarchal structure and all its symbols, 'the African female opts for a more pragmatic and dialogic approach to issues therein. (107.). 'Womanism' presents an idea African woman, with so much strength and powers that compliments the man to make the society a better place.

The choice of the theory for the present study is because it helps to achieve the study aim, as the female characters in the novel assert their individuality without competition with the male but rather involve the male in their struggle to better their living in the harsh and precarious condition of war.

### **Review of Related Scholarship**

A good number of scholarly works have been done on war discourse and on Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* but none have studied it from the womanist point of view. The review of related literature below will reveal this.

Ibrahim carried out a study entitled "The socio-

feminist realism of Chimamanda Adichie's half of a yellow sun and purple hibiscus". The research investigates the Socio-Feminist Realism of the novels of Chimamanda Adichie. The selected texts for analysis are *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*. The paper attempts an interrogation of Nigerian socio-cultural environment and issues in her fictional world especially in the analysis of domestic, national and gender problems. The study focus on the cradle way Adichie handles the problem facing the girl-child at the domestic level within her family as she grows up. Adichie builds in salient socio-cultural and religion themes within the notion of Feminist Realism. Using the sociological feminist approach, this work aims at the contents of Adichie's selected works and accentuates these areas of thematic concern in its detailed analysis to reveal through characterization, gender issues at the socio-cultural background in Africa. The research is an extra diversion and contribution to the existing literature where feminist ideologies are studied but yet to be given much domestic and socio-cultural attention. The author also interrogates the issue of family unity and female vulnerability in crises situations, using the Nigerian civil war as chart table. In both novels, female vulnerability in the face of emergent unhealthy social realities is succinctly interrogated. This differs from the present study. The present study focuses only on *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Asuzu examines Adichie's voice with a focus on Adichie's story telling prowess in the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The aim is to ascertain how a female voice represents the 1967/1970 Civil war. The study is a textual analysis procedure which is based on the theoretical framework of African feminism. Findings from the study show that the female has a bold, fearless and objective voice, without which the story of the Civil war would not have been well told. Also, the study reveals Adichie as a strong woman whose voice complemented the male voice for a holistic realization of the story complemented that of the men for a holistic realization of the Nigeria Civil War story. This study though on feminism and Adichie deviates from the present study. The present study focuses on assigning significant role to recreate the female gender.

Morve Roshan K. carried out a study entitled “Representation of History in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This study deals with the conflict of Nigerian Biafra as represented in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The study attempts to address the following four questions: first, what are the causes-effects of Biafran/Nigerian Civil war? Second, why were Nigerians suffering during the wartime? Third, how does the representation of Nigerian history enable understanding of the post-colonial issues? And finally, what is the role of conflict in Nigerian history? In order to understand this conflict, the study addresses the detailed analysis of war conflict, ethnic conflict, class conflict, military conflict and eco-political conflict. The post-colonial approach becomes one of the ways of engaging the theoretical understanding of the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In sum up, the novel is located with the issues of marginality, history and conflict, which interrogates through post-colonial theoretical formations and the six-phase structure of war novels.

Uzoezie studies Achebe’s *Beware Soul Brother* to show the reaction of a Poet to the Nigeria civil war. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the author examines how Achebe as a poet reacts to the human tragedy presented by the Nigeria Civil war. He also shows how Achebe uses that tragedy of history to comment on the nature and condition of man in the universe. The paper contends that the artist as a ‘seer’ and a man gifted with an extraordinary heightened sensibility can hardly remain aloof in a crisis situation, since he is also a member of the society. Findings from the study reveals that for Achebe, life is a cycle full of risks and uncertainty, noting that the only certainty existing is the tragedy of that life which man is responsible for, at least partially. According to the author, the tragedy results from the inherent vitiated nature of man and that corrupt nature which leads him consciously or unconsciously to actions which provoke suffering for himself and others. The study concludes that after a war, life is bleak but not hopeless. Achebe teaches man to make meaning out of life. Uzoezie’s study is on war; it however, deviates so much from the present study.

*Azuike* in a study examines the extent of women’s struggles to overcome marginalization in a sexist and patriarchal society. The study argues that peace will continue to elude the home and at the world level if strong measures are not taken to tackle the violation and the continuous subordination of women. Love, war, conflict and the persistent inequality between men and women are among the dominant themes in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The study uses the feminist theory as its theoretical consideration. The study reveals that women’s impassioned struggles to free themselves from the shackles of male brutality and dominance are most alluring and extremely powerful. Adichie remarkably dramatizes the struggle in her works. Through her main characters, Adichie reveals how the physical, psychological and mental abuse of women can have negative effects on their well-being. The liberation of women from all strictures against their peaceful co-existence alongside men deserves the support of all humanity. This study concludes, therefore, that every African woman must face up to the realities of her sexist culture and assert her rights. This, the study noted is undoubtedly a demanding choice fraught with its own dangers but a woman needs to burst the system and set up her own parameters within the society or risk being treated as a doormat for life. In this study, the approach against female marginalization is rather rude and harsh.

#### **The Novel *Half of a Yellow Sun***

The novel tells the story of Olanna and her twin sister, Kainene. These two daughters of a wealthy affluent family who have undergone a quality education abroad with shining prospects and dreams came back to Nigerian and had their dreams *raped* by the crisis of war, precisely the civil war of 1960s. Olanna and her family resided in Lagos, the heart of Nigeria, where most politicians and successful businessmen lived. She and her twin sister, Kainene attended the high-profile parties and dinners organized by their parents, who introduced her to rich businessmen, expecting her to get one of them for a husband. However, she declined her parents’ efforts and stuck to her lecturer lover, Odenigbo, with whom she moved in Nsukka, to work at Nsukka University as a lecturer in the Department of

Sociology. Olanna's happiness did not last long either, for Odenigbo's mother called her 'a witch', and declined to endorse Olanna's union with Odenigbo base on her childlessness. She not only insulted Olanna, but also brought a girl from the village to replace Olanna as Odenigbo's wife. Odenigbo consoled Olanna, and tried to make her understand that his mother was a village woman: "Nkem, my mother's entire life is in Abba. Do you know what a small bush village that is? Of course, she will feel threatened by an educated woman living with her son. Of course, you have to be a witch. That is the only way she can understand it.

### **Adichie's Women and Role**

Adichie portrays women as playing positive role in the struggle for survival and societal improvement amidst the hunger and starvation caused by the civil war. This is exemplified through the character of Kainene. Below are some of the significant roles assigned to women in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

#### **The woman as an Entrepreneur/Initiator**

Adichie presents Kainene, her heroine, a strong-willed character with a large heart who took it upon herself to ensure that people in the refugee camp are catered for. She works out her shock ensuring that she caters for herself and lover, Richard. She saves lives she could by providing food stuffs and other relief material for refugees in the camp, irrespective of the stiff demands made on her in various respects. Kainene's passion and dedication to work the author underlines, "There was a manic vibrancy about her, about the way she left for the refugee camp each day about the exhaustion that she wondered why he was not frightened by how little they had (Adichie, 268). Kainene, a humanitarian Biafran, encouraged the IDP's at the camp to believe in themselves and work hard towards self-improvement and actualization. She urged them to be positive and look forward to better things:

[...] we can start a farm at the camp: we will grow our own protein, soya bean and akidi.[...] There's a man from Enugu who has a fantastic talent for making baskets and lamps. I'll have him teach others. We can create income here. We can create a

difference. And I will ask the Red Cross to send us a doctor every week.  
(318)

Here, Adichie advanced womanist ideology. Ogunyemi (1996) underlines "...genuinely democratic, her ideology is integrative rather than singularly adversarial..." (5) Kainene's approach to the issue of hunger and starvation, in an unfavourable and severe war situation, underscores an underlying intent of hard work and personal improvement in a most positive, complementary and pragmatic manner. She takes to cognizance the importance of the complementary roles of men. Hence, in the later part of her suggestion, she advocates for the cooperating of men 'There's a man from Enugu who has a fantastic talent for making baskets and lamps'.

#### **The woman as a bread Winner/ 'mother of the nation'**

During the war, the duty of feeding the family was left for the women who would line up at refugee camps, shoving and pushing to secure food for their husbands and children at home, despite being flogged by the militia who tried to create order within the '...swift scrambling rush of the crowd' (Adichie,316). Kandiyoti states that: Women bear the burden of being 'mothers of the nation' (a duty that gets ideologically defined to suit official priorities), as well as being those who produce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the culture and who are privileged signifiers of national difference. The demands of the 'nation' may thus appear just as constraining as the tyranny of more primordial loyalties to lineage, tribe or kin, the difference being that such demands are enforced by the state and its legal administrative apparatus rather than by individual patriarchs' (1993, 377). The nation, Biafra in this case, demanded that the woman stayed at home to feed and take care of the children, and to go get food for the family from the refugee camps while the men went to war to liberate Biafra from the Nigerian soldiers.

Again, during the war, women were hardworking and brave. They never entertained laziness either from fellow women or even men. Adanna's mother, for instance had the habit of begging other women for food whenever they

cooked in their shared kitchen, but Mama Oji discouraged the other women from helping her because of her laziness: ““Stop giving her your food!” Mama Oji screamed. “This is what she does with every new tenant. She should go and farm cassava and feed her family and stop disturbing people!”(Adichie,411). Mama Orji’s comment buttresses the African woman as strong, independent entrepreneurs who actively provides for the family.

Adichie also describes the conscription of able-bodied boys and men by the Biafran soldiers. Ugwu, Odenigbo’s houseboy, was among the young men who were conscripted, taken to the training camp for rigorous training in preparation for impending attacks. Odenigbo, after the death of his mother, felt the need to join the army, but Olanna was skeptical about it, for she feared for his death. The men who deserted the army, however, were not tolerated by the women who struggled to feed them. Mama Oji kept taunting her husband for running away from the army, called him a “castrated sheep”: “You castrated sheep! You call yourself a man, and yet you deserted the army! Just open that dirty mouth one more time, and I will go and call the soldiers and show them where you have been hiding!”(Adichie, 2006: 411).

Again, when Chiamaka, Olanna’s adopted child suffered from Kwashiorkor and lack of appetite, it was Olanna’s duty as a mother to go to the relief food center and scramble her way to the front to get some egg-yolk for her (Adichie, 2006: 337). On one occasion, a group of Biafran soldiers snatched a tin of corned beef from Olanna on her way home from the relief center and she cried, for she considered the tin as food for her family back home, only for soldiers, who should have sympathized with her, to snatch it (Adichie, 2006: 342). Mrs. Muokelu, Olanna and many other women crowded the relief centers, and when they were informed of the hijacking of Lorries carrying the relief foods, they became so desperate and disturbed, for their families back home were waiting and relying upon their arrival with some food to eat. Some mothers sold local goods like pepper and salt, with children tied on their backs. They had to be on alert so that when vandals attacked, they would run for their lives and that of

their children on their backs. During these times, they cried with their children (Adichie, 2006: 363). As the Biafran women slept on bamboo beds, some of the floors, washed peeled cassava tubers in filthy water (because it was what was available) with babies having wrinkled faces on their backs, nursing their infant babies on drooping breasts (Adichie, 2006: 363), their families were their priorities as the society dictated.

### **The Woman as a Home Builder**

Women are strong willed individuals who are capable of marrying the man they love. This, contrasts female violation to marriage as depicted in Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the gods*. Olanna through optimism and determination ended up marrying/living with her lover husband, Odenigbo. When her father offers her to wealthy businessmen in exchange for business deals, her mother blindly supports her husband, and even attempts to convince Olanna to sleep with these men to gain favors for her father, Olanna refused to give in. Rather, she preferred Odenigbo, her lecturer suitor. Even when Odenigbo’s mother disliked her because of her barrenness, blaming it on her level of education for she had a Masters from the United Kingdom. She kept faith in a happy matrimony with Odenigbo, the man she loves. Mama preferred that Odenigbo married an unschooled woman or one who only had basic education so that she could always take her place as second to Odenigbo.

Olanna through love and patient conquered mama and married Odenigbo. Here, Adichie celebrate the liberated woman in Olanna. Despite all the efforts of Odenigbo’s mother to separate him and Olanna, the two remained inseparable until an intruder, a village girl called Amala, was brought into the scene. Mama used black magic to make Odenigbo impregnate Amala, a situation that forced Olanna to leave Odenigbo’s house for her own. However, her aunt, Ifeka encouraged her to take charge of her life, because her life belonged to her alone, not a man (Adichie, 283). She ended up sleeping with another man (Richard) to get even with Odenigbo, an act through which she discovered her self-worth. (This act though is not a womanistic idea). When she finally forgave and reconciled with Odenigbo, their love intensified, quite the reverse of what was

expected.

In this regard, we concur with Plaias' observation that 'her betrayal in exchange, comes therefore as a leveling act that fills her "with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace"... Moreover, Olanna excused Odenigbo's betrayal and transforms it into the basis for increased intimacy instead of disruption, reversing therefore the patriarchy's dynamic instead of considering herself the victim of Odenigbo's unfaithfulness. She stood firm as an African woman. She accepted the prevailing situation, got back on her feet, forgave Odenigbo and when Amala's baby was born, she decided to take care of her, despite warnings from Mama. Olanna doubled her efforts to save her relationship with Odenigbo. Mama, on seeing Olanna's kindness as a mother to Odenigbo's child, changed her attitude towards Olanna and accepted her as a daughter in law, before she got killed during a raid in her village. Olanna and Odenigbo finally got married, and went back to their previous house in Nsukka, at the end of the war. Olanna acquired her Identity as Odenigbo's wife amidst the war, just like Nigeria recaptured Biafra through war and plenty of bloodshed, as part of its territory and continued to live as one country.

Kainene went to Lagos to look for food during the war but did not return at the end of the novel. As Olanna, Ugwu, Richard, Odenigbo and Baby Chiamaka started their lives afresh at the end of the civil war, Olanna was grateful for having spent happy moments with her twin sister, Kainene before she left. Olanna lived with the hope that her sister would soon join them in the peaceful Nigeria after the three year long war, and that the Nigerian woman would finally be embraced as a strong and productive member of the society.

### **Womanism and Adichie**

Adichie in her efforts of fighting for the freedom of the African Woman in postcolonial patriarchal Africa, incorporated the support of the males towards this course. She gives a passionate sexual experience between Olanna and her lover, Odenigbo. Whenever Olanna was distressed, she always found her comfort through a sexual

encounter with Odenigbo. When Odenigbo's mother died during the Biafra war, he resorted to drinking to relieve himself of stress hence could not have sex with Olanna under those circumstances, which left Olanna downhearted for she needed his comfort to endure the difficult times of the war: 'She kissed his neck, his ear, in the way that always made him pull her close on the nights that Ugwu slept out on the veranda. But he shrugged her hand off and said, "I'm tired, nkem." She had never heard him say that before. He smelled of old sweat, and she felt a sudden piercing longing for that Old Spice left behind in Nsukka' (Adichie, 417). When Olanna's legs went numb after she saw the mutilated body of her pregnant cousin Arinze, Odenigbo was by her side, giving her the hope of a better future, he had sex with her whenever she wanted: "'Touch me.'" She knew he didn't want to, that he touched her breasts because he would do whatever she wanted, whatever would make her better' (Adichie, 201). Later, Olanna regained her strength and could walk again. These two instances clearly show the huge impact Odenigbo had on Olanna's wellbeing. This is a call to the members of the Nigerian society, and patriarchal Africa at large to rescue the African woman from subordination.

### **Conclusion**

From the above instances, one observes that Adichie assigned functional roles to her female characters, which made them significant in the society. Also, Adichie mask through her female heroine, Kainene to portrays women as strong, bold, individualistic and fearless human beings who are capable of taking responsibilities in the society. Hence, giving women significant roles and men resorting to treating women as their counterparts, and not as second class citizens, both in the domestic and formal set up will make for a more balanced African society. The already mentally colonized women should also decolonize their mindsets, and support the twenty first century African woman in her struggle to gain freedom because a free African woman is commensurate with a more productive African society, for she will perfectly fill the gap currently experienced in African.

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