

# Disapproval of the Patriarchal Structures: A Critical Study of Ngozi Adichie's 'Half of a Yellow Sun'

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**Abstract**—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Half of a Yellow Sun' acquaints the reader with the story of the Nigerian-Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War that took place between 1967 and 1970; it recaptures the pain and violence experienced by the blacks, especially the women, during this civil war. The novel primarily dramatizes the black women's fortitude to survive in the face of violence, sexual assault, senseless brutality and continuous peril to their life and property. Adichie projects the never-ending endurance and struggle of the women characters to keep their families' hope and faith intact even when the country is going through a miserable time due to the civil war. She further discusses the extent of women's efforts to defeat marginalization in a sexist and patriarchal society. This piece of work paints women as progressive and steadfast. And those women who aren't projected as resolute are shown in the negative light. The present paper attempts to analyze the novel as a representation of the subjugation of women on one hand, while on the other hand, it highlights the unjust ruling of patriarchy which is directly responsible for the present discrimination of women. It can be rightly said that Adichie through 'Half of a Yellow Sun', has succeeded to create awareness among people regarding the destructive impact of patriarchal norms. The aim of this paper is the present the paper as a destructive blow to the hegemonic set up where a woman is constantly subjected to mental and physical anguish.

"Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him she possesses physical and mental and moral powers...like him she is subject to all the vicissitudes of life; like him she has to pay the penalty for disobeying nature's laws... like him she enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognized as his equal!"  
-Ernestine L. Rose

Women's role to the evolution of human civilization has never been fully appreciated or recognized in the history of mankind. Women have always been assigned to play a subservient role to men. Their secondary status is the result of the patriarchal set-up prevalent across the globe. Instead of being considered as individuals, they are thought of as bodies

as explained by Simone de Beauvoir in her famous piece of work, *The Second Sex* in 1949. She states, "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine" (Beauvoir 267) Several women writers have been writing about the atrocities faces by women all over the world in the name of culture and traditions and Ngozi Adichie is one such Nigerian writer who highlights the plight of the female sex in her novels.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, born in 1977, is regarded as one of the might voices of the Post-Colonial literature. She has written a wide range of literary work which includes her novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013); the short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009); and the book-length essay, *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014). The present paper is predominantly based on Adichie's second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* which acquaints the reader with the story of the Biafran War. It talks about the pain and humiliating experience of the Igbo community during this war period. It further depicts the abuse and victimization of women and their struggle to overcome the subjugation and marginalization. They face various discords like rape, genital mutilation, pregnancy, marriage, etc, which hinders their individual growth. They can be seen struggling continuously for their mere survival.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* sketches the victimization of women not only in their homes but also in the society through the unsettling degradation at the hands of the enemy. The viciousness of the Biafran War has transformed their lives as they are treated not as humans but as object. Being considered as weak targets, they are raped by the white colonizers and the Biafrans. Even innocent looking men like Ugwu are shown to be a part of the gang that rapes young girls. The rape scene of the bartender is explicitly described by the novelist to reveal

the bitter reality of the violence that was practiced against women during the war period.

On the floor, the girl was still. Ugwu pulled his trousers down, surprised at the swiftness of his erection. She was dry and tense when he entered her. He did not look at her face, or at the man pinning her down, or anything at all as he moved quickly and felt his own climax, the rush of fluids to the tips of himself: a self-loathing release. He zipped up his trousers while some soldiers clapped. Finally, he looked at the girl. She stared back at him with a calm hate. (365)

Women are sexually exploited by the so called men in power and then left on their own to rot. They are impregnated, and many of them suffer due to sexually transmitted diseases. The two white journalists who come to Biafra along with Richard also refer to the Biafran women as sexual objects. One of the two journalists says, "Hear there's a lot of free sex here. But the girls have some kind of sexually transmitted disease? The Bonny Disease? You guys have to be careful so you don't take anything back home"(233). The irony lies in the fact that the Biafran leaders and army men who are supposed to protect their people, become responsible for sabotaging the integrity of women by forcing them to have sex with them. For example, Colonel Ojukwu rapped married women after falsely charging their husband for being saboteurs and sending them to prison. Eberechi, Ugwu's lover also becomes a victim of the lust of one such evil man as she was offered as gift to the Colonel for the posting of her brother. She talks about the unpleasant experience and says to Ugwu, "He did it quickly and then told me to lie on top of him. He fell asleep and I wanted to move away and he woke up and told me to stay there. I could not sleep so the whole night I looked at the saliva coming down the dise of his mouth...He helped us. He put my brother in essential services in the army.(335 )

Even the religious leaders like Father Marcel take advantage of the poverty of the minority community. He uses young helpless girls to fulfill his sexual desires. The people who are believed to endorse righteousness and moral values propagate abuse and exploitation of the weaker sections of the society. Instead of stopping people to spread vehemence, they themselves indulge in acts of rape and violence. Thus, both sex and religion become metaphors of oppression and subjugation of women in the novel.

Apart from sex and religion, women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are projected as victims of starvation as well. Starvation during war is a common sight which has been painted by Adichie and women bear its burden to the utmost level because they are responsible for feeding the family. The shocking narrative of the long queues of women in the refugee camp, their fighting over a piece of dried food, pushing each other in order to save food for their families reveal the burden they bear as mothers and wives.

Infidelity is another challenge that the women in the novel face. Mrs Ozobia has been portrayed as a victim of her

husband's infidelity. The humiliation and psychological trauma that a woman experiences due to her husband's unfaithfulness in marriage has been captured by Adichie. The following conversation between Mrs Ozobia and her daughter, Olanna reflects how helpless and dejected Mrs Ozobia feels because of her husband's infidelity.

Her mother held a glass of tonic water in one hand and a handkerchief in the other. She was crying. She was telling Olanna about her father's mistress.

"He has bought her a house in Ikeja," her Mother said, "My friend lives on the same street."

... "Have you talked to him?" Olanna asked.

"What am I to say to him? *Gwa ya gini?*" ... There is nothing I can say to him. I just wanted to let you know what is happening so that they will not say I did not tell somebody." (217)

The inability to confront the husband on the part of Mrs Ozobia shows her fear and her inferior position in their marriage. It can also be said, that Mrs Ozobia's confiding to a woman brings in message of the novelist that it is the unity amongst women that will help them to emancipate from the manacles of patriarchy. Through this episode, Adichie also examines the rarely discussed issue of concubinage in her novel. She discredits that class of the women who unconsciously degrade other women by cohabiting with their husbands and therefore helping men to carry on with the subjugation of women. The Yoruba woman has been depicted as one such woman character that through her affair with Chief Ozobia not just humiliates herself but also makes Mrs Ozobia suffer.

Although Adichie projects the unjust and inhuman subjugation of women, she glorifies their determination to not just survive but also to break the shackles of oppression. She projects women as progressive beings who do not easily give up to the conflicts. The novelist enlists a series of incidents where women characters try to liberate themselves and show resilience. In order to win the favor of the minister named Chief Okinji, Kainene's parents persuade her to become his mistress but Kainene refuses to follow her parent's order. Being a self assertive woman, she uses her intellect to become a businesswoman. Her foremost priority is her work. Adichie writes:

Richard was bewildered by Kainene's busy life. Seeing her in Lagos, in brief meetings at the hotel, he had not realized that hers was a life that ran fully and would run fully even if he was not in it. It was strangely disturbing to think that he was not the only occupant of her world, but stranger still was how her routines were already in place, after only a few weeks in Port Harcourt. Her work came first; she was determined to make her father's factories grow, to do better than he had done. (77-78)

Even her twin sister, Olanna does not succumb to her parents' persuasions to stay in Lagos and to work for the minister and announces "I've decided to go to Nsukka. I'll be leaving in two weeks" (31). She also rejects the marriage proposal of the rich boys and maintains her relationship with Odenigbo.

Education has been depicted as a strong tool to bring freedom and independence of women. It was known to be a field of male dominion in post-colonial Nigeria and the older women in the novel are against the education of girls. Odenigbo's mother, referring to Olanna says:

...And on top of it, her parents sent her to university. Why? Too much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that. It gives a woman a big head and she will start to insult her husband. What kind of wife will that be?"... "These girls that go to university follow men around until their bodies are useless. Nobody knows if she can have children. Do you know? Does anyone know?" (206)

Both Kainene and Olanna are well educated girls and education plays a major role in making them assertive and independent. They refuse to be treated like objects of trade and they do not blindly follow the age old traditions of their society. Education helps them in their journey towards empowerment. The power of education in bringing change in the society is projected by Adichie as she draws parallels between those characters who are educated and those who are not. Unlike the uneducated or less educated women in the novel like Mrs Ozobia, Nnakwanze, Arize, Amala, etc, the well educated lot that includes Kainene, Olanna and Aunt Ifeka, succeed in overcoming unjust patriarchal tyranny.

Adichie has suggested an unconventional definition to the institution of motherhood in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. When Amala rejects her newly born child, Olanna adopts her and raises her as her own. Aunt Ifeka nursed the twin sisters, Olanna and Kainena when they were infants. Therefore, adoption has been painted as a progressive way of motherhood. Adichie suggests a world where women are not burdened by the duty of motherhood. Kainene is infact satisfied in her relationship without the existence of a child. Thus, Motherhood should no longer exist as an enclosure to suffocate women. Ifeoma, Olanna and Kainene are the three characters that reflect how the perceptions regarding motherhood should be modified. Adichie strongly

recommends all women to strive hard for to take charge of their own lives without being controlled by anyone else.

Sisterhood acts as a strong weapon to revolt against sexism and patriarchy. Although Olanna and Kainene take different paths in life, they are drifted back to each other during the time of crisis. The effect of war and starvation are overcome by them through their bond. Kainene in order to help her sister, invites Olanna and her family to Orlu. Another female bond exists between Olanna and Mrs Muokelu. Mrs Muokelu offers egg powder to Olanna when her baby falls ill due to starvation. Edna Whaler, another woman in the novel, advises Olanna to stop pretending that everything is fine between Olanna and Odenigbo. She encourages her to take help and counseling from a priest. Thus, Adichie discusses several episodes in the novel to publicize the idea of sisterhood and solidarity among women as tools to rise above exploitation.

Therefore, it can be rightly said about Adichie that she through *Half a Yellow Sun* has tried to reject the notions of the society that hinders the development of women and further encourages women, especially the African women who are 'doubly jeopardized' to dismantle their identity as submissive and compliant beings. Through her resolute and assertive female characters in the novels, she challenges the hegemonic and patriarchal structures.

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