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Women's Struggles and Independence in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus and Half of a Yellow Sun* (Pp. 79-91)

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Abstract

*This study examines the extent of women's struggles to overcome marginalisation in a sexist and patriarchal society. Our texts of study have affirmed that peace will continue to elude us in the home front 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**. Adichie, however, projects womanhood in a positive light. She upholds female potentialities which the patriarchal structure has repressed. She also makes role models out of her female protagonists. Women's impassioned struggles to free themselves from the shackles of male brutality and dominance are what hold us spellbound to Adichie's most alluring and extremely powerful novels. Adichie remarkably dramatizes in her works, women's determination to survive in the face of violence, sexual assault, extreme starvation, senseless brutality and ceaseless threats to their lives and property. 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 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.*

Introduction

Every human being has a right to freedom. If this freedom is, however, circumscribed or denied, there is every tendency for one to revolt. And if one revolts, one takes a strong or violent action against one's offenders. In *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, women relentlessly struggle to achieve the much desired freedom from the clutches of tradition, from socio-political and economic disempowerment of women as well as from male oppression. In the Nigerian society which Adichie's novels realistically portray, more and more women are banding together in order to put an end to many years of deep rooted oppression and senseless subjugation of women. Today, Nigerian women are perceived as articulate, forthright, fearless and well respected people. We easily remember the Nigerian women who have contributed immensely to the positive transformation of the Nigerian society and have won fame and recognition (as a result of their political prowess) and have taken their positions, alongside the men, as co-participants in nation building. We truly cannot help but sing their praises! Indeed, the list of such Nigerian achievers will be incomplete without the inclusion of the indefatigable Dora Akunyili, the enigmatic Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the amiable Ndi Okereke-Onyiuke, the charismatic Oby Ezekwesili – just to name a few. The aforementioned women have all excelled in various domains which, hitherto, have been the exclusive preserve of men!

Feminism, among its numerous goals, helps women to relentlessly struggle to lift themselves from their subordinate state and to carve out new roles and identities for themselves. Akachi Ezeigbo, for instance, maintains that feminism is simply the awareness that women are subjugated and their determination to correct their subjugation (24). In Chimamanda Adichie's novels, women are the primary catalysts for reform. However, their exploitation and deliberate oppression, as revealed in *Purple Hibiscus* and in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, have become obstacles to their progress.

Female assertion has continued to be a compelling trend in modern (African Feminist) literatures as observed by Helen Chukwuma. She further states that female assertion is an ideological focus which sets out to correct the traditional image of women as 'indeterminate human beings who are heavily dependent, gullible, voiceless and stuck in the background of patrimony which marked most African societies' (Chukwuma:131). Adichie's works wholly indict the patriarchal oppression of women and also encourage

women to assert themselves irrespective of cultural norms and archaic traditions which have denied them their human rights and have largely promoted their subordination.

Painful Past

Historically, women are not new to the history of struggles in Nigeria. Well documented in Nigerian history are the enigmatic amazons who fought tirelessly, alongside the men, in the 1950's and 1960's for Nigeria's independence. Mrs Margaret Ekpo, Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Lady Yinka Abayomi, Hajiya Sawaba Gambo and Chief Mrs Janet Mokelu were among the fearless women who struggled relentlessly to re-shape the Nigerian history. Western colonisation, unfortunately, had very little or no respect for women. For instance, when missionaries established the formal educational system in Africa, they did so by infusing some patriarchal ideologies into the educational system, one of which was the belief that boys, rather than girls would benefit more from the school system. For years, women's history became that of docility and sheer domesticity. Consequently, young girls were to stay at home to practise and perfect their domestic skills which included how to behave as appropriate Christian housewives who knew how to sew, cook and maintain proper hygiene. The boys, on the other hand, were taught how to read and write. This ushered in the first gender gap between boys and girls that has apparently persisted over the years, particularly in Africa.

In Nigeria, the story of the woman is basically that of a second-class citizen as Buchi Emecheta reminds us in her novel of the same title. In the rest of the world (in America for instance), Blacks' experiences during slavery days were ugly and very painful experiences which are vividly documented in autobiographies, slaves' narratives, famous novels and poetry books. These documentations collectively affirm the values of freedom and the terrors of oppression and of racism. Bitter memories of colonisation in Africa also include, according to (Eko, 1991), the Mau Mau uprisings of Kenya and the bloody massacres of Zulu warriors by the Boers in South Africa among others. Even where wars were not fought, Eko further states that 'Africans developed a master-servant colonial mentality and a self-denigrating inferiority complex' that has persisted in their psyche. Memories of inferiority and pain abound in Negritude fictions of Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti and in East African writings of Meja Mwangi, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In South African fiction, we cannot but flinch at the excruciatingly

painful experiences of fellow blacks in the works of Dennis Brutus, Bessie Head, Oswald Mtshali, Alex La Guma, Arthur Nortje and many others.

Textual Analysis

Gender bias supports and reinforces the notion that women are weaklings who can be treated violently. Adichie, in her novels, identifies and confronts various sources of oppression. For instance, Beatrice and Olanna in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* have, respectively, found out in stupefaction, that women are more abused and more reviled in the sanctuary of their own home and by the people they love most. And so, in the face of polygamy, marital incompatibility and extremely harsh patriarchal laws and conditions which can leave women totally devastated and even debilitated for life, the protagonists of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, have taken charge of their lives by taking decisions which may leave the readers absolutely breathless!

Adichie's novels are populated by psychopaths, rapists, religious fanatics and ruthless rulers; all of whom terrorise women. She, therefore, uses her novels as instruments of self discovery and of healing for the abused women in Nigeria who may have undergone some traumatic experiences in their marriages. In *Purple Hibiscus*, we meet Eugene Achike, 'a ticking time bomb' who regularly explodes on his poor family, crushing anyone in his path. His wife, Beatrice, leads a life of servitude. His children, Kambili and Jaja, live in perpetual fear of him. Eugene is so power drunk that he sickens every member of his household. He is, in addition, a control freak who rules his family with 'clenched fists.' Let us see, for example, how he unleashes his anger on Kambili, his only daughter, for daring to visit Papa Nnukwu (who incidentally is Eugene's father; hence her grandfather) without his consent:

He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, like soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo and... I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of painting....Kicking. Kicking. Kicking.... More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet (210-11).

Eugene is a tyrant who rules his home with draconian measures. Living under him is itself a big struggle fraught with the dangers of 'losing vital body parts'. Members of his household are petrified of him that 'laughter never rings out in the home.' The children are equally dumbfounded by their father's hardheartedness. They go through each day extremely careful not to agitate him; for fear of the dire consequences their actions might attract. Let us, again, witness how his son, Jaja, is treated by Eugene on account of missing two questions on his catechism test and therefore 'was not named the best in his First Holy Communion Class' (145):

[Eugene] took him upstairs and locked the door. Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with his right, and Papa drove him to St. Agnes Hospital.... Later, Jaja told me that Papa had avoided his right hand because it is the hand he writes with (145).

During the incident re-enacted above, Eugene (fondly called Papa by the children) had cut off his son's finger, thereby deforming the little boy's left hand. Jaja was only ten years old at the time! As for Beatrice, his wife of many years, Eugene's brutal beatings and sexual abuse have caused her to abort her pregnancy on a number of occasions; leaving her body constantly sapped of energy. This is how Beatrice recounts her experiences to Auntie Ifeoma, her sister-in-law, who lives in Nsukka:

I got back from the hospital today. The doctor told me to rest but I took Eugene's money and asked Kevin to take me to the Park. I hired a taxi and came here... You know that small table where we keep the family Bible? [Eugene] broke it on my belly. My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes [Hospital]. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save [the pregnancy]... (248).

This last physical and psychological abuse of Beatrice by her husband causes her to take drastic actions which lead to Eugene's ineluctable end. It is rather sad because Eugene is not an ideal Christian husband – neither is he a good example of what a father should be. He is, instead, a sick, demented man who is caught between the archaic African culture which permits wife battery and the true Christian doctrine which does not. The tragedy of theology in Africa today is that cultural garbs have beclouded true scriptural beliefs and

practices (Gwamna: 43) which, in turn, tend to favour men in all things. As a result, Gwamna further observes that the African heritage of subordinating women has been implanted in Christian tradition in Africa (40). Mercy Oduyoye (a renowned feminist theologian from Ghana) also condemns the brutal experience of women, especially in Christian homes like Eugene's. She tells us that:

The church's deafening silence in the face of indescribable cruelty to the girl-child...is...an indication that the whole church has yet to wake up to its calling. The global challenge of the church's solidarity with women is particularly acute in Africa. It is up to women to demonstrate why the status quo is contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ (500).

Ironically, Jesus Christ was friendly and tolerant to women. He loved women and worked with them. He never coaxed, intimidated, subordinated or patronised women- because like men, God His father, made women in His own image (Gen. 1:27) and saw them as children of God. Jesus did not treat women as cheap goods to be commercialised; neither did He treat women as wood to be battered and be broken by men. Eugene eventually pays dearly for the constant abuse of his family in the guise of leading them on the paths of righteousness. Beatrice takes Eugene's life at the end of the novel, **Purple Hibiscus** and avows to the children that:

They did an autopsy... They found the poison in your father's body.... I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor (290).

Beatrice's decision to end her husband's life calls to mind the actions of abused women in most Radical African- Feminist Texts. In Nawal El Sadaawi's **Woman at Point Zero**, for instance, we recall how Firdaus, the helpless victim of male oppression eventually murders the pimp who regularly exploits her sexually as well as financially. For this singular act, Firdaus is destroyed by the very society which allows and even condones the sexual abuse of women. True, she has committed the crime of murder, even though she does it in self defence. However, men in Firdaus's society beat

and rape women, torture and victimise them daily yet nothing is done to such men. It is worthy of note that Firdaus loses her life:

Because women who refuse to be men's slaves, who do not passively let themselves to be discriminated against, oppressed and cheated by men, represent a danger for men (Arndt:159).

Bessie Head's Dikeledi and Kebonye also present us with a similar story in ***The Collector of Treasures***. Both characters are responsible for cutting off the genitals of their abusers who, incidentally, are their husbands. Kebonye particularly gives the following reason for castrating her husband:

Our men do not think we need tenderness and care... My husband used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, (sic) due to this treatment (89).

The authors of Radical, African-Feminist Texts, where men are murdered by women are quick to implore readers to examine the circumstances surrounding the murder. Often, the women in question are caught in extremely de-humanising situations where they constantly undergo the most barbaric treatment in the hands of men. Therefore, Radical, African-Feminist Texts tend to argue that men inevitably and in principle:

Discriminate against, oppress and mistreat women. The men characters are 'by nature,' or because of their socialization, hopelessly sexist and usually deeply immoral.... A further fundamental characteristic of these texts is their use of tragedy and violence. In radical African-Feminist Texts, the women characters suffer physical and psychological violence at the hands of men. In most texts, the woman protagonist finally kills a man, who represents the violation of women's rights... (Arndt : 85).

Thus, the killing of male abusers in Radical African – Feminist Texts like ***The Collector of Treasures*** and ***Purple Hibiscus***, in our view, connotes the putting an end to men's abnormal acts of cruelty and torture of women. It also suggests that societal reformation can only be feasible if such men are

done away with. By this we mean that a woman could get a divorce or a separation from the man in question. It doesn't, however, mean that the physical killing or the annihilation of men must be done in order to achieve the desired transformation. So, when Beatrice kills Eugene by making him to ingest rat poison in small doses, she does so in order to free herself from years of battery and abuse. She also kills him in order to liberate herself from years of physical torture and psychological enslavement. Many readers will, no doubt, view this action as an unconventional way of seeking freedom from oppression. Absolutely true! But the fact remains that the African woman can only progress in life if she totally extricates herself from the stifling background of patriarchy. No woman can call herself a doormat in Nigeria today unless she chooses to be one. While portraying, therefore, the various abuses suffered by women in the Nigerian society, Adichie also celebrates the enduring spirit, the resilience and the sheer determination of such women to break through into freedom.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, presents yet another type of struggle from which the female characters seek their freedom. Just as in *Purple Hibiscus*, the atmosphere in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is very suffocating and downright destructive. In situations of war (i.e the novel documents the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967-1970), women and children are the most vulnerable group. They usually suffer severe hardship. Adichie's second novel, therefore, documents the multiple struggles of women to free themselves from sexual abuse, exploitation, corruption, humiliation, civilian attacks, mass evacuation, depression, hunger, disease and death. Amongst the aforementioned conditions, sexual violence against women remains the most traumatic and the most shameful of women's experiences.

On a general note, the Nigeria-Biafra war 'was a horrific and traumatic experience whose shock waves were felt throughout the Nigerian federation' (Johnson: 149). Let us see the kind of torture which teenage girls, for instance, have to undergo at the hands of soldiers and civilian recruits. In the following extract, a young bar girl is gang-raped by a group of soldiers who overpower her and force her to have sex with them. For sure, such an experience will be ingrained in the girl's memory for life:

The bar girl was lying on her back on the floor, her wrapper bunched up at her waist, her shoulder held down by a soldier, her legs wide, wide ajar. She was sobbing, 'please, please, biko...' Between her legs, High-Tech was moving. His thrusts

were jerky, his small buttocks darker coloured than his legs. The soldiers were cheering... [Next] Ugwu pulled his trousers down, surprised at the swiftness of his erection. He entered her. He did not look at her face, or at the man pinning her down...he moved quickly and felt his own climax.... 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).

As things degenerate during the Nigeria-Biafra war, human beings in turn, become more animalistic – unleashing mayhem on the lives of fellow humans. The abuse of more and more women also rages out of control. The raping of women by soldiers is usually perceived ‘as a sign of victory’ in war situations and remains a sort of ‘unwritten law’ which many women pay dearly for – even with their lives (Isidoro: 142). Women are sadly the main target of those who use terror as a tactic of war. And rape has always been a gruesome pattern of violence against women. The incident witnessed above calls to mind Darfuri women’s experiences in the hands of Janjaweed militia who routinely invade Southern Sudan in order to kill the men and rape their women. Adichie’s vivid allusion to this event brings fresh tears to our eyes as we, in turn, remember the Rwandan Genocide of fourteen years ago and how indifferent the Western world was to the brutal killings of innocent people in Africa.

However, copious illustrations have shown in *Purple Hibiscus* and in *Half of a Yellow Sun* how the igbo women of Eastern Nigeria have held on steadfastly to the values that they deem important and have made agonising situations, especially during the Biafran war, to be bearable. In *Purple Hibiscus*, for instance, Auntie Ifeoma paints in our mind, a picture of an extremely intelligent, self-sacrificing widow who also, is a staunch defender of her honour and her family. Auntie Ifeoma has so much in common with the twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. All the three women have experienced significant amounts of suffering, yet they exhibit great perseverance in overcoming their difficulties.

Auntie Ifeoma, for one, undergoes severe emotional and psychological torture which a widow (in many African cultures) is subjected to as soon as her husband is dead. Some of the practices are known to adversely affect or to undermine the health and the general well-being of the widow. Auntie Ifeoma

is reviled by her husband's family. This is because she is allegedly guilty of 'killing her husband' and of, also, looting his money. The unbearable African culture holds a woman responsible if her husband dies prematurely or if he dies before she does. Such a woman is usually branded a witch and is severely dealt with in accordance with African tradition and customs. Heaven help such woman if she has no male child! Her in-laws are liable to 'fleece' her of any property she has to her name and further make life for her and her children a living hell. And woe-betide such a woman if she is altogether illiterate! Auntie Ifeoma faces a similar ordeal when her husband dies. Her resilience, however, helps her to overcome the accusations and the maltreatment she receives from her in-laws. This is how she puts it:

The people in his Umunna said he left money somewhere and I have been hiding it. Last Christmas, one of the women from their compound even told me I had killed him. I wanted to stuff sand in her mouth. Then I thought that I should sit her down, eh, and explain that you do not orchestrate a car accident in which a trailer rams into your husband's car, but again, why waste my time? They all have brains of guinea fowls (74)

Similarly in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna experiences very strong opposition from her mother-in-law in her relationship with Odenigbo, the erudite University Professor. Odenigbo's elderly mother, popularly called Mama, abhors Olanna for being well educated, polished and highly independent. In her estimation, 'educated women' are abnormal women who have received 'too much schooling which ruins a woman' (97-8).

Ironically, Adichie celebrates the new breed of African women who are highly educated, freethinking, resilient and independent. It is the high level of education of the female protagonists of Adichie's works which acts as their bulwark against the retrogressive cultural patterns that exacerbate the subjugation of women. It is worthy of note that Adichie's heroines (Olanna, Kainene and Auntie Ifeoma) are second degree holders from prestigious Universities. With their sound education and high levels of reasoning, they are able to deal with the irresponsibility of the men in their lives, in addition to coping with the calamitous happenings around them. The women are strong and dynamic individuals who would allow nothing or no one to deter them from achieving their set goals. Some may think it unruly behaviour but one of the women believes that 'an adulterous man deserves an adulterous

wife.' Rather than wallow in dejection and in self pity, especially after the discovery of her husband's infidelity, Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, seduces and sleeps with Richard, the enigmatic Englishman who is enraptured with Kainene, her twin sister. Olanna enjoys the sexual escapade and so does Richard. Indeed, what man can resist a woman whom others describe as 'illogically pretty... a water mermaid?' (49). Olanna does not regret the sexual satisfaction which she derives from sleeping with the white Richard. An authorial voice tells us that:

It made her feel like she was throwing shackles off her wrists, extracting pins from her skin, freeing herself... Afterwards, she felt filled with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace (234).

What Olanna actually feels here is equivalent to the 'freedom to be... and to do' (16) which Adichie describes in *Purple Hibiscus*. It is a kind of freedom which satisfies and relaxes and rejuvenates one and sets one free from one's anxieties. At the time Olanna experiences this sexual encounter with Richard, she has been struggling with the mental and the psychological problems only a traumatic marriage can inflict upon one. With this new - found freedom comes the assertive spirit which has, hitherto, been hidden in Olanna and which most of Adichie's female protagonists have exhibited in her novels. Aunt Ifeoma displays it when she questions the rotten University system (especially in Africa) where nothing works. Massive corruption and mal-administration are the bane of most African Universities. And both lecturers and their students continue to pay for the atrocities committed by the people who are in authority and who are trusted to protect their interests. For instance, salaries are not paid to staff members as and when due. Little wonder, therefore, that students are made to pay for ill-prepared 'hand-outs' which leave them more confused and dis-satisfied with their educational pursuit...

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna and Kainene's assertiveness speaks volumes of their fearlessness. The young women are seemingly different in their countenance and in their temperament but their loyalty to the Biafran cause is unquestionable. They both exude a supreme confidence in themselves and are not perturbed by what lies ahead for them in future. The denouement of the novel is, however, catastrophic. Kainene leaves her twin sister 'one morning in order to go to "afia attack" to trade across enemy lines'. Sadly, she never returns. Olanna is, naturally, devastated. *Half of a*

Yellow Sun ends on this tragic note, leaving Olanna heartbroken and constantly lamenting how 'days pass, then seconds pass and everything remains the same without Kainene around' (407). On the whole, one may wonder why Kainene's life is ended so abruptly. Of what significance is this ending to the story? More often than not, the real messages conveyed in most Radical African-Feminist texts are couched in deep ironies which allow the reader(s) to engage in manifold interpretations of such texts.

However, Olanna's traumatic journey through the Nigeria-Biafra War is symbolic of the state of Biafra itself: deeply ravished, abandoned, violated and volatile and in need of healing. Like the amazon that she is, Olanna strives even harder to deal with her loss. Interestingly, she does not buckle under pressure, neither does she give in to 'mourning' her sister's loss. Of all Adichie's character portraiture, she emerges as the true role model for African women. She also emerges as a true heroine of feminism. Her image as the beautiful, intelligent, self-willed, resilient and quintessential mother; the nurturer and above all, the truly independent woman that she is, will remain ingrained on many readers' memory. Adichie shows through Olanna that every woman must create her own individuality and, at the same time, be confident with the person she is.

Conclusion

Women still live in societies which support or enforce female oppression. In addition, the marital institution also continues to be nothing less than slavish and tormenting for women. From the preceding discussion, the core solution for societal transformation is change. Adichie's texts are very clear on this. There is need for the transformation of deep-seated, stereotyped and long-held attitudes which tend to hinder progress in the lives of African women. In other words, it is imperative to address all oppressive structures and situations in our societies in order to encourage and to sustain lasting peace in our homes and in the world at large. The biblical story of creation reiterates that men and women are made in the image of God! Therefore, wouldn't the most peaceful solution be for both genders to co-exist peacefully without one subordinating the other?

This study concludes, firstly, that the most significant contribution of (African) female writers is in their creation of dynamic and educated protagonists who are given very strong voices with which to assert themselves in sexist societies rather than being helpless victims of male

chauvinism. Secondly, the study concludes that African women must possess the initiative, the wherewithal, the will power and the educational empowerment with which to make a difference to their lives.

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