

**CONTOURING THE STANCE OF WOMEN IN POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA:
EXPLORING CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN***

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Abstract:

ChimamadaNgoziAdichie is a contemporary African diasporic writer, whose stories are constructed with the Nigerian backdrop. She interweaves theme which are prevalent in the postcolonial context. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie records the horrific experience during the Biafran War or the Nigerian Civil War during the late 1960's, from the female perspective. Women traverse their stereotypical boundaries and utilize the space to excel during the war. This paper attempts to highlight the junctures where women are generalized and where women handle the brutal civil war.

Keywords: Adichie, Biafran war, women, Nigeria

Adichie, in her *Half of a Yellow Sun*, present the reality of women in Nigeria, in a postcolonial scenario. Postcolonialism offers ample space for the oppressed and suppressed during and after the colonial rule. There are some expectations and responsibilities for Nigerian women. These expectations may sometimes come under tradition and sometimes under patriarchy. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, these suggested responsibilities of women start changing during the Biafran war. The central female characters in the novel are OlannaOzobia and KaineneOzobia, daughters of a successful businessman. Adichie uses these two characters to

execute her themes and ideas through the story. Postcolonialism in the Nigerian context talks about double-marginalization. Toyin Falola in his *Writing Nigeria-Biafra War* opines the issues of gender during the Biafran War or the Nigerian Civil War,

...men as childish people who live in the world of dreams is to condemn the male-dominant power derived from tradition and colonialism...the purpose of this contrastive representation of male and female ideological views regarding the war is to depict the shallowness of patriarchal identity and to represent female identity in its depth (473)

Other than culture, another thing that constrains liberation of women is women's dependence on men. Olanna desires to win the complete love of Odenigbo at any cost. She refuses to accept the rich proposals suggested by her parents. Though she does not like be bait for her father's business deals, she loves Odenigbo whole heartedly that makes her to deny the marriage proposals. For everything Olanna depends on Odenigbo. She expects Odenigbo to love her, as much as she does. The result of her intense love for him is nothing but the constant betrayal. He does not care about the infidelity done to Olanna. Olanna leaves behind luxurious lifestyle, her parents and Kainene for Odenigbo. She is ready to adapt to any lifestyle that the only condition is the presence of Odenigbo. The first betrayal by Odenigbo, that is, his relationship Amala, is the first blow for Olanna's intense love. Odenigbo tries to justify his side by saying that he is dozed. Again she decides to live with him, but with the traces of his betrayal in her mind. As revenge she justifies her sexual relationship with Richard, Kainene's English boyfriend. Richard, from his first encounter with Olanna, admires her beauty. Mama, a character who is drowned in the tradition, does not accept a woman who is educated and modern. She literally fights to prevent Olanna approaching her son, Odenigbo. She acts as an authentic woman who sightlessly follows the superstitious tradition. She believes in the idea that a woman who is educated does not obey men, she acts superior to him, she does not perform her familial duties properly and finally jack of all she cannot be chaste.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* women become the victim of women. Mama makes Amala to assault Odenigbo sexually, in order to save his son from Olanna. Amala being ignorant, does not have the courage to resist Mama and acts according to the order of Mama. Mama becomes satisfied when she knows that Amala is pregnant. At least Olanna prevents Amala's child from the superstitious society by adopting the child. Amala is muted by the tradition that makes her to lose her identity forever.

These incidents show that Olanna is not matured in the beginning. Her prime weakness is her blind love for Odenigbo. In the name of love, she loses her entire identity. Olanna keenly understands the quality of Odenigbo's love for her only after the death of Mama. Odenigbo gives much importance to his mother and it is evident when he justifies her mother for throwing Olanna out of the house. He loses his romantic charm for Olanna and then there is nothing much to converse with her. He begins to avoid spending time with Olanna. It takes this long time for Olanna to understand about the realities of relationship. Then she understands that there are so many things to worry about other than begging to a man for love.

Olanna without any hesitation adopts the child of Amala, Chiamaka. At this juncture she becomes matured and conscious of the things that are going around in the country. She brings up Chiamaka with utmost care like her own child. Olanna's transformation is completely visible when she is betrayed once again by Odenigbo. Olanna comes to know about his sexual relationship with Alice in the later part of the novel. Olanna does not react in any extremes instead she keeps silent. Olanna even tries to accuse her father for having illegal relationship with a woman. Although being the wife of a Chief Mrs. Ozobia could raise voice against her husband for having illegal affair. When Olanna comes to know that her father keeps a mistress and also buys her a house. Olanna says,

'It's disrespectful that you have a relationship with this woman and that you have bought her a house where my mother's friends live...you don't seem to care that people see you. It's a slap to my mother's face' (218)

Olanna begins to turn her interest to teaching the children and looking after Chiamaka. She shapes the future Biafrans, that is, the children, to be more courageous and with resistance to power. Kainene is a straight forward and courageous girl right from the beginning. Her unattractive physical beauty is the advantage for her, which keeps her out of lustful sight of men. She has some attitudes of men, sometimes her bold attitude may seem like masculine to people. When she says that she has the idea to look after her father's business Chief Okonji listens to Kainene's plans and mentions to Chief Ozobia that Kainene is not his daughter but son. When Olanna wants to ask her father about his extramarital affair, her mother and she waits for Kainene. They feel that Kainene is the right person who would investigate her father boldly. In addition to that, if she finds her father guilty she would definitely warn him in such a way that he would not be dare enough to continue his affair with that woman. It also becomes clear that Kainene is sensitive to undesirable actions, although it may be her father. Olanna says,

...she (Olanna) realized that her mother was right. Kainene was the best person for this. Kainene would know exactly what to say and would not feel awkward ineptness that she did now, Kainene with her sharp edges and bitter tongue and her supreme confidence. (218)

She intends not to maintain a relationship with Richard at first. Richard is the writer English boyfriend of Kainene. When the war breaks out and there are massacres by the Federal government, Kainene thinks that Biafra is deadly in need of support. She decides to come forward and begins her mission by becoming the contractor of stockfish. When she is aware of her boyfriend, Richard and Olanna's infidelity, she behaves mature and keeps herself distant from her sister and Richard. Olanna feels guilt about her ungenerous act and does not have the courage to face her sister. During the time of extreme crisis and violence, both sisters come in contact. They perform some deeds to their nation in whatever level they could afford. Towards the end Kainene is found missing and never returns. The novel ends with Olanna saying,

'I do believe in it'...'Our people say that all reincarnate, don't they?' she said. '*Uwam, uwaozo*. When I come back in my next life, Kainene will be my sister.' She had started to cry softly. (433)

In many places of the novel, Adichie highlights the superstitious dimension in the Nigerian tradition. It is not that Adichie is condemning the traditions of the Nigeria. She intends to portray the negative concepts in the culture that prevents the growth of the society. She attempts to exclude the fissures in the Nigerian tradition and at the same time without affecting the culture. Among the characters that becomes the victims of the tradition and taboos, characters like Olanna and Kainene expel out from those bonds. Although they suspend between the tradition and modern ideas, in the later part they becomes stable in their own ideology. As the novel is set in the background of Civil war, the women characters makes use of this opportunity and involves them in war.

Women characters explore the world when there is a cultural stagnation during the war. They come forward to fight for their nation without minding about the gender. They understand the need and demand of the war and acts accordingly. It is a notable thing that there is a reasonable women's contribution in the Nigerian Civil war. During the time of intense violence and suffering, people do not care about abiding tradition and customs. In that critical situation people of Biafra are emotionally disturbed because of huge physical and material lose. Women come forward to feed their family and neighbours without any expectation. It is clear from this

incident that culture is the one that stops women from liberation. In the name of customs, culture makes women to stay inside the home. In the first part of the novel, Olanna and Kainene, along with the other female characters stand as the representation of women in the Nigerian society. They are not much empowered to take lead in the society. They are not the role model for women in the first part. But soon they travel from the phase of representation to example. They stand one out of the box during the critical situations.

Kainene and Olanna undergo a kind of ‘metamorphosis’ (any complete change in appearance, character, circumstances, etc). At first Olanna tries to satisfy the society. She attempts to adjust with the tradition without giving in the modern ideologies. Unlike Olanna, Kainene from the beginning never intends to satisfy the tradition and the society. She, with her intelligence, becomes the stockfish contractor and feeds huge people in the refugee camp.

From this transformation/metamorphosis, it is clear that gender roles are fluid in nature. It is not the inbuilt criteria for people to act according to the gender roles. Gender roles are the concept created by the society and it can be adjusted in any way for the welfare of the society. It should be a hindrance for the well being of a nation. But in many places of the world, like Africa, still have the gender roles concept, which favours one gender and mutes the other.

Writings like Adichie’s give readers a timely chance to know about the history of the Biafran war. Though she is born after seven years of the Civil war, she collects the entire story with all the pain and emotion from her family members who have been a part of the war. With the fair imagination she has produced a work with a bold voice for the Nigerian women. Women are not new to struggles. The novel in one dimension gives a call for all the Nigerian women to be resistance to the patriarchal, biased and superstitious culture and encourages them to assert their rights and liberation. She also presents a story that shows how women should be determined during struggles. She also insists by saying that women have to set her own parameters in such a way that it should be productive and without damaging the culture.

Apart from the story, the contribution of women during the Nigerian Civil war is immense. Many writers neglect to imprint those important entities about the Nigerian women. Adichie, appears to record this in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In *African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender*, it is mentioned,

Without the women, the Nigerian vandals would have overrun Biafra: without the women, our gallant Biafran soldiers have died of hunger in the war fronts. Without the women, the Biafran Red Cross would have collapsed.

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