

War Does Not Silence Women: Gendered Survival and Narrative Resistance in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) can be read as a deliberate intervention in the reductive historiography. Through its multi-perspective narrative structure and character-driven storytelling, the novel dismantles the dominance of externalised accounts of Biafra and re-centres African voices as the authoritative interpreters of their own past.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, women are put right at the centre of such strict structures. Although the conservative communities and bloody histories of the Nigerian Civil War and the Second World War belong to two different continents and are decades apart; still, the strain and weight of these wars is common having the lesser of choice.

Thus, the paper seeks to highlight the distinct role of female characters in war-torn Africa and their contribution in prudently challenging and in overcoming those trouble times. Focusing mainly on Black Feminism, the papers try to show that Black women, which were earlier shown to be a trope of submissive and hypersexualized identity, could have their own views and stands on various subjects.

Thus, through the character of Olanna and Kainene along with some other minor characters, the black women's tropes have been dismantled.

Keywords: Biafra, Black Feminism, Submissive, Hypersexualized identity and Tropes

Introduction

The *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie projects the tragedy of post-independence Nigerian lives that are shattered, homes that are destroyed, and trust that is lost.

In this respect, Adichie's project aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call in "Decolonising the Mind" (1986) for African writers to reclaim "the means of self-definition" from the colonial archive. While Adichie's work is fictional, its fidelity to the moral and political complexity of the war situates it within a broader tradition of postcolonial counter-historiography.

War never arrives alone. It comes with rules, instructions, and clear ideas about who should fight or who should stay aside, but both the scenes pose the same question: why is the concept of gender being introduced and who does it serve in those catastrophic situations?

The novel opens not with the scenes of battle or famine that would cater to the expectations of an international audience primed to see African conflicts through violence and suffering, but with domestic and intellectual life in post-independence Nigeria. This opening choice is significant as it asserts the existence of a rich socio-cultural fabric before the onset of war, thereby rejecting the historical portrayal of Africa as a place perpetually in crisis.

The main characters of the novels Odenigbo, Olanna, Kainene, and Richard pass through the series of events and crises where their love has been tested and betrayal, desire, and disappointment meet their fate and at the end no one remains faithful. With this infidelity, the novel follows the image of a nation in which order fails because of corruption, distrust, and exhaustion. But the novel has not just preaching. It captures rather

and reverberates Igbo consciousness before, at the time and after the civil war, crafted with metaphor, irony and even humour as the world is burning. Ugwu comes to Nsukka where he is shocked to see the refrigerator, a tap, running water, and civilization whimpering in the kitchen of Odenigbo and Mrs. Ozobia holding her jewellery box as a holy relic. There is laughter, ease and faith all around and then the war comes back, and all that was found out has to be forgotten.

“Master was a little crazy, he had spent too many years reading books overseas, talked to himself in his office, did not always return greetings, and had too much hair. Ugwu's aunty said this in a low voice as they walked on the path. But he is a good man,' she added. And as long as you work well, you will eat well. You will even eat meat every day.” (*Half of a Yellow Sun* 3)

Through the eyes of Olanna, Kainene, and Ugwu, the reader is drawn into a Nigeria alive with political debate, interpersonal tensions, and class negotiation. By foregrounding these dimensions, Adichie makes it clear that the war, when it arrives, interrupts an already vibrant and contested society rather than defining it entirely.

When placed alongside *Americanah*, Adichie's reclamation of history extends beyond the Biafran War to the terrain of racial and migratory experience in the twenty-first century. While *Half of a Yellow Sun* contests the colonial and humanitarian framing of African conflict.

Feminist writing, at its core, has often returned to one task that is to expose the male domination, and imagine the woman's release from it. This impulse has shaped multiple strands of feminism, each carrying the ideological weight of its advocates. For many radical feminists, creative writing becomes a site of response sometimes as a protest and other as a rage against lived oppression. Anger enters the text and history bleeds through sentences and predictably, resistance follows. Anti-feminist critics are quick to point out this excess where contradiction, aesthetic lapses and gender discourse hardens into a battlefield, loud, polarised and exhausting. Yet not all writers are comfortable in this war zone as some choose mediation, moderation, and a quieter and more careful path.

Following the trajectory set by *Anthills of the Savannah* as a response to feminist indictments of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's later fiction appears less invested in outright feminist confrontation. After *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), her novels turn outward and inward at once, toward war, migration, race, class and history's long shadow. Feminism thus does not disappear completely but changes its tone, refracted, satirised, softened and sometimes turned inward. This study examines how feminism is rendered satirically in the novel. It argues that Adichie's narratology reveals a consciousness of mediation, wary of gender absolutism, one that repositions feminist discourse within a wider humanist frame and not as a retreat but as a recalibration. Here, feminism does not shout to be heard. It listens, negotiates and, in doing so, refuses the comfort of easy sides. There is no monolithic idea of an ideal woman in those traumatic situations as some stay within the domestic circle, some go out and some are thrust out, and some make their own choice. This instability is given room in the postmodernist reading of these feminist texts. It refuses neat boxes as gender is not fate nor submission. It is clearly biological and performative, formed by multiple resistance and survival.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna and Kainene are not playing the roles assigned to them. They are learned, financially stable, and emotionally multifaceted. They are not submissive to lovers, to parents, or to tradition. Olanna sees betrayal not as a fault but the helplessness of a woman in the current traumatic scenario. She observes systems, not individuals, and Kainene crosses the racial boundaries without regret.

In this case, choice turns into rebellion. Then there are still other women like Amala, Mama, and rural women who constitute patriarchy in them. They do not challenge, instead they shield it not because they are mean, but because they were conditioned not to do otherwise. Gender appears unstable, shifting, rewritten through action, through refusal, and through repeated performance. Women become visible not because society grants permission, but because they take space.

Postmodern feminism, then, offers no comfort. It offers complexity, contradiction, and strength alongside vulnerability, resistance, and regret. In war-torn worlds, identity is never fixed. It is negotiated painfully and in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, women emerge not as symbols, but as agents refusing erasure, silence, and rewriting gender where it was never meant to change, not neatly, quietly, but effectively. Further, the syntax is constructed through pause and through repetition. The characters of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are not ideal characters; rather, they are men and women who suffer a lot as power lies next to evil.

Although the novel opens with the characters having a prosperous and contented life, in the course of the text, the central characters witnessed the depletion of material wealth and later starvation following after war. In the novel, Olanna is in love with Odenigbo but she is sleeping with Richard. Thus, to get out of trauma, characters start lingering on the self, sex, pleasure, and on secret desire. The great scheme of cultural nationalism becomes loosely held. Women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* get involved in enticement and love, in sex and choice. Olanna is in pursuit of Odenigbo and Kainene is wooing Richard in a cool and decisive manner. This is not passive desire, but it talks, orders, and sometimes it even shocks. Men react and in many cases they trail behind when sex is brought out in the open and sometimes in a crude manner. Auntie Ifeka is not veiling behind euphemism. The language she uses is straightforward, scathing, and near-instructive. The anger of Olana bursts forth in an unrefined and materialistic way and so does the anger of Kainene restrained, acute and soulless.

The novel is unbecoming and unwilling to polish its edges. Further, desire never seems to take a backseat in the novel because even war does not silence desire and trauma heals with bodily comfort and pleasure. Grief is highlighted with caress, bombs drop, famine flourishes, but passion remains. Sex becomes therapy, release, and escape. A kind of means to feel alive when history forces us to die. To Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie this is merely humanity but to her critics, it is extravagance. But she didn't let her women characters be limited only to sexual creatures. Desire is not an annulment of responsibility, but it coexists with it. Thus in the novel, Olana disapproves of the security of political matrimony. Instead, she selects work, work of teaching, watching and keeping an eye on everything.

She survives riots, educates children when at war, and schools are instituted when systems fail. She prepares soap to earn a living and informs the readers that being a heroic survivalist is very down-to-earth. Kainene, on the other hand, runs businesses with cold-blooded indifference. She is a refugee camp operator, a cross-border trader that refuses the comfort of exile. She is not just cautious but a just operator who takes care of the victims, monitors, punishes, and suppresses the ill happenings and evil in the camp.

"Later, Ugwu watched Kainene pushed at Father Marcel's chest with both hands, shouting into his face, shoving him so hard that Ugwu feared the man would fall. 'Amosu! You devil!' Then she turned to Father Jude. 'How could you stay here and let him spread the legs of starving girls? How will you, account for this to your God? You both are leaving now, right now. I will take this to Ojukwu myself if I have to!'" (398)

There are various incidents in the novel where Kainene through her prudence and kind-heartedness stands out brilliantly different from other characters, showing the dept and defiance of the black stereotype

tropes. And at the end of the novel when Kainene got lost and never returned, despair takes men captive, and Olana leads in heroic search of Kainene.

Even the minor characters such as Mrs. Muokelu are important. She feeds families, trains children, imparts skills, and fights against Nigeria herself. Women, here, are not just pictures or characters but are rather constructors, supporters, and pillars, and when time breaks them, they are the ones that support the men and help in survival. In ancient African beliefs, sex is a secret, holy, marital, family, and community sacredness. What previous authors carefully and intentionally hid, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes openly visible. Premarital sex, living together, infidelity, and explicit scenes to readers are not just signs of liberation; rather, they are interpreted as encroachment and Western importations disguised as development. With the silent substitution of native morality with alien decadence, African feminism takes a different stance.

It must negotiate and not oppose men blindly and should neither discard traditional resistance, but with memory intact. Writers like Flora Nwapa and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie insist on balance. Womanhood rooted in culture does not sever recognisably modern African ideas.

This is the tension that remains between freedom and fracture, between speaking the body and guarding the community. Western theory cannot remain the sole lens for African texts because there will always be a danger of imitation without interrogation and this will create narrowness rather than liberation. African literature requires African epistemology drawn from history, philosophy, oral tradition, myths, proverbs, and worldview. Only then can literature heal, restore, and rebuild. Until that happens, feminist polemic of Western origin will continue to clash with value-conscious African criticism and writers like Adichie, however brilliant, will remain at the centre of that unresolved tension.

The argument will circle itself, productive, but unresolved, and writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, however brilliant and necessary, will remain at the centre of that tension. Pulled between worlds, between freedom and inheritance, and between what must be spoken and what still demands careful silence.

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