

## RETHINKING FEMINIST EPISTEME IN ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*: AN AGENDA FOR SOCIAL RE-ENGINEERING

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### Abstract

The implantation of Western ideals into the critical consciousness of non-Western society has continued unabated. It has almost become a *fait accompli* for developing society to imbibe, albeit uncritically, the ideals of advanced nations. Western rhetoric has positioned itself as the 'grand norm' to which others must adhere to and view with awe! This is done with disdain towards others cultural peculiarities. Ironically, 'westernised' non-Western writers have assumed the unenviable role of articulating Euro-American canon that is antithetical to their own cultural rebirth! This paper, therefore, avers the limitations of feminist literary theory to advance development for Nigerian society. It denounces its contextual relevance for a value-conscious nation.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) tells the story of wanton destruction of lives and properties that are evident in the crisis-ridden post-independent Nigeria. Characters like Odenigbo, Olanna, Kainene and Richard are entangled in the game of love, betrayal, intrigue, corruption and blackmail. The fact that none is faithful to the end underscores the futility of order in a nation bedeviled with distrust and banality. It also foregrounds the inability of man to exert a corrective influence on a deranged society. Without taken a judgemental stance, it, however, re-echoes Igbo sentiment before, during and after Nigerian civil war.

Besides the themes of love, betrayal, corruption, war and destruction, Adichie's craft consciousness is espoused in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Rather than merely betraying socio-political rhetoric, the text combines the use of literary devices like metaphor, imagery, symbolism, humour and narrative dexterity to drive home its socio-political point. Its title is a metaphor of Biafra shrouded in pain, devastation and hope for prosperity. With the Biafran flag as the symbol, Olanna takes the pain to imbibe this tutorial in her young pupils during the war. The serious nature of this historical novel does not becloud Adichie's sense of humour. Ugwu is bewildered at the cozy atmosphere of Nsukka campus compared to the rural setting of his village. He marvels at seeing a refrigerator and a tap in Odenigbo's kitchen. Again the reader cannot but laugh at Mrs Ozobia's 'craze' for jewelries to the point of carrying her highly-cherished jewelries box all about. As if this is not enough, Pastor Ambrose stays in the house to 'pray' fervently to God to destroy Gowon. He would have done better if he joined the army like other men. Besides, the narrative is heavily influenced by Igbo universe and tradition. This perhaps influences her choice of simple and accessible diction. Her 'nativisation' of the English language is blended with elements of Igbo folk-tales, riddles and proverbs. According to Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010:319), this overt acknowledgement of traditional sensibilities makes an eloquent statement on Adichie's sense of absolute "conformity with tradition" of her people. Thus, despite her early exposure to Western culture, her affinity with Igbo root is undeniable.

Adichie's characters are quintessentially human in their actions and inactions. They are 'equipped' with both virtues and vices as obtain in normal human beings. They are imbued with strengths and weaknesses which further accentuate both flatness and roundness as the narration unfolds. Olanna's dispassionate love for Odenigbo does not prevent her from sleeping with Richard, her sister's lover! Besides, all these characters enjoy opulence before the war but suffer greatly during and after it. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010:323) submit that Adichie's characters are both flat and round because they are human hence open to human follies because she

*does not compromise the fact that they have to be true blueprints and reflections of real life figures. This is why she presents them as human beings, in their strengths and flaws, in their modesty and excesses, in their joys and sorrows, in their triumphs and defeats, in their aspirations and regrets. This is why her characters though credible, are not perfect. Half of a Yellow Sun presents us with characters whose essential humanity often control.*

Therefore, even if Adichie's characters do not come to mind as people who are above board in their attitudinal nuances, yet critics appreciate their all-round 'genuineness' as mortal. Their humanity is never in doubt.

### **Paradigm Shift in Nigerian Writings**

The post military era in Nigeria has given rise to new crop of writers whose thematic engagements have shifted from serious socio-cultural themes of cultural nationalism during colonial rule and disillusionment at independent. Since the advent of civil rule, new Nigerian writers are quick to dispense with literature imbued with serious political messages. The high hope associated with civil rule unequivocally influences their thematic thrusts which now centre on individuality, promiscuity, sex, women and wine. Since their works are meant for audience who care no hoot about cultural revitalisation, they flood the literary arena with themes which negate the core African values cherished by their predecessors. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009:106-112) adduce reasons for this development to include dearth of serious issues worthy of concerted socio-political appraisal in the society. In their opinion, recent writers "appear more interested in getting the audience to appreciate them for what they are artists, and not as social crusaders", thus, they become "a little bit more indifferent, a little bit more conscious of artistic restraint, a little bit less angry and a little bit more detached from his/her subject matter". While Gogura (2000:107) asserts that the mood of the era encourages thematic shift from socio-political commentaries to pessimism, Osofisan and Nnolim agree that new writers have taken a different route thematically. They link the shift in thematic thrust to the advent of civil rule and the aspiration associated with the demise of military regime. Osofisan argues that the earlier generation of Nigerian writers dare not depict sexual scene in the open because sex is meant to be shrouded in the secrecy it demands. Instead of tenaciously holding on to the tradition held sacrosanct by earlier writers, he submits that contemporary writers have jettisoned the need for cultural nationalism and have embraced the 'bug' of westernisation:

*Up at least till the turn of the new millennium, you will observe, the exploration of romantic love or of sex as theme was remarkably rare in the output of writers. Virtually no literary work dared venture, except in the deflected language of metaphor and refringent echo, into the contentious area of carnal experience...But nowadays, when we look at our new crop of writers....and note their seemingly unbridled surrender to the goddess of Eros, the question inevitably rises to confront us-has our present literature walked away then from that original purpose? (Osofisan, 2009:39-42).*

On his part, Nnolim posits that these writers are misguided elements that prefer the satisfaction of the body to the purity of the soul. He categorises them as belonging to "the fleshy school of writers". While identifying writers Onwordi, Dibia, Abani, Okedirán, Adichie, Unigwe and others as 'eminent' representatives of contemporary Nigerian writings, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010:174-175) concur that they have imbibed the tradition given impetus by the liberty enjoyed by their Western counterparts. Unarguably the place of Adichie is conspicuous amongst the "fleshy school of writers". The publication of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie has announced her arrival as a leading advocate of the tradition described above.

### **Adichie's Feminist Ideology in Half of a Yellow Sun**

Adichie's female characters always dictate the pace in sexual acts. Apart from their abilities to go for, and get, men who catch their fancy, they always take the lead in the coital act. When Olanna seeks to win Odenigbo's heart after the event at the theatre in Ibadan, she demands and gets his attention effortlessly. She has been swept off her feet by Odenigbo's sense of order. The same can be said of Kainene when she meets Richard at a cocktail party. She tells Richard that she is available for any 'prospective' bachelor:

*Have you ever been to the market in Balogun? They display slabs of meat on tables, and you are supposed to grope and feel and then decide which you want. My sister and I are meat. We are here so that suitable bachelors will make the kill* (59).

Even in bed, both ladies always have their ways over men. While Olanna 'directs' sex over Odenigbo and Richard, Kainene 'acts' the man over Richard. Thus in Adichie's creative hands, men are object to be exploited to satisfy women sexual urge. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010:221) are of the opinion that Adichie's female characters are not to be relegated to the background in the act of sexual intercourse. They depict her female characters as "strong, proactive and confidently assertive when it comes to the sexual act proper". They argue that her Western orientation and exposure have provided impetus for her literary outlook.

In order to realistically drive home their liberation from sexual exploitation, Adichie's female characters discuss sex with impunity. They are active discussants in sex-related matter and not passive onlookers. Besides their penchant to initiate sex, they are vulgar in their assertive claims on sex. Olanna is distraught at Odenigbo for sleeping with Amala while she is away. When she expresses her displeasure, Aunt Ifeka goes vulgar, submitting that Odenigbo has only acted typical of men. He "has inserted his penis in the first hole he could find when you were away" (226). In the same vein, the deprivation of war does not prevent Adichie's female characters from expressing their 'humanity'. In a discussion between Alice and Olanna, men's sexual prowess is described with impunity. Similarly, Olanna and Kainene are not left out in direct reference to sex and sexual organs. Both of them have just discovered the infidelity of their spouses. When Odenigbo tries to blame his mother for his 'sin', Olanna is not impressed. She wonders if "your mother pull out your penis and insert it into Amala as well!" (241). Also Kainene's vulgarity knows not bound when she discovers her sister's escapade with Richard. She is of the opinion that "the good one shouldn't fuck her sister's lover" (254). Chimamanda Adichie has never hidden her penchant to say it as it is.

As if the unrestraint sexual urge of Adichie's characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is not enough, the coital act is described with impunity and without a modicum of decency. This justifies Uko's (2006:93) postulation that contemporary women writers in Africa are all out to depict African women as equally "free to love and express love" like their male counterparts, thus "essentially surmount all sexist depictions and picturesque portrayals". One of such occasion is between Odenigbo and Olanna:

*His tone was gently teasing. But his hands were not gentle. They were unbuttoning her blouse, freeing her breast from a bra cup...After Ugwu served drinks, Olanna watched Odenigbo raised his glass to his lips and all she could think of was how those lips had fastened around her nipple only minutes ago. She surreptitiously moved so that her inner arm brushed against her breast and closed her eyes at the needles of delicious pain* (49-50).

Another occasion is more graphically described:

*'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. She caressed his neck, buried her fingers in his dense hair, and when he slid into her, she thought about Arize's pregnant belly, how easily it must have broken, skin stretched that taut* (160).

Even the deprivation in wartime does not prevent Odenigbo and Olanna's sexual escapades from blossoming. The emotional trauma at the sudden disappearance of Ugwu and the news of Okeoma's death can only be assuaged with the therapeutic dosage of passionate sex:

*She did not let go of his arm until Dr Nwala stumbled back into the rain, until they climbed silently onto their mattress on the floor. When he slid into her, she thought how different he felt, lighter and narrower, on top of her. He was still, so still she thrashed around and pulled at his hips. But he did not move. Then he began to thrust and her pleasure multiplied, sharpened on stone so that each tiny spark became a pleasure all its own* (392).

On another occasion, they decide to go unconventional, preferring the 'dog style' manner:

*Her lips were still against his and her words suddenly took on a different meaning and she moved back and pulled her dress over her head in one fluid gestures. She unbuckled his trousers. She did not let him take them off. She turned her back and leaned on the wall and guided him into her, excited by his surprise, by his firm hands on her hips* (282).

Also, Olanna's 'minutes of madness' with Richard is presented in a vivid manner:

*She took her dress off. He was on top of her and the carpet pricked her naked back and she felt his mouth limply enclose her nipple...Everything changed when he was inside her. She raised her hips, moving with him, matching his thrusts, and it was as if she was throwing shackles off her wrists, extracting pins from her skins, freeing herself with the loud, loud cries that burst out of her mouth* (234).

Also, Ugwu and Chinyere secretly meet in Ugwu's room to have a 'quickie'. Adichie feels no qualm describing the "hasty" thrusts in the dark" in details:

*The light was off, and in the thin stream that came from the security bulb outside he saw the cone-shaped rise of her breasts as she pulled her blouse off, untied the wrapper around her waist, and lay on her back...She was silent at first and then, hips thrashing, her hands tight around his back, she called out the same thing she said every time* (127).

Other instances of 'indecent' depiction of sex and sexuality abound in the text. In a conversation between Alice and Olanna on men's infidelity, they describe the sexual prowess of their men with a finger and a clenched fist respectively. The worst case scenario is Ugwu's participation in the gang-raping of a hapless bar maid!

Having embraced sex as an instrument to tell the story of Nigerian civil war, Adichie's female characters are depicted as either sex-maniac or sex-starved. To achieve emotional purgation, Olanna lures Richard to have sex with her! In the same vein, Chinyere regularly visits Ugwu's room to have a 'quickie' behind close door while Amala sneaks into Odenigbo's room for a bout of sex when the latter is drunk. Evidence has it that when Kainene desires Richard, she invites him to her apartment in her father's hotel. Most of her female characters do the unusual by luring, cajoling or thrusting themselves at men in a manner unheard of in African society.

A self-opinionated lady who preferred to be suspended from school than to apologise to her teacher over a controversial argument on *pax Britannica*, Olanna refuses to be used as sex-bait by her parents who want her to marry Chief Okonji, the finance minister, to further their business interest! To demonstrate her resolve, she rejects a lucrative job-offer from the minister and chooses a teaching appointment at the department of sociology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She had earlier shone marriage proposals from both Igwe Okagbue and Chief Okaro's families. She attends the meeting of the Igbo Union in Kano when she pays a visit to Uncle Mbaezi's household. She actually beholds the killing of these relatives as well as fellow Igbo before the riot that precedes the civil war. She barely manages to escape through the skin of her teeth and endures the tortuous journey back home. During the war, she contributes immensely to the upbringing of Igbo children whom she teaches at Akakuma Primary School, together with Ugwu and Mrs. Muokelu. She later establishes her own primary school for the same purpose. Although an air raid by the 'vandals' disrupts her wedding, she remains undauntedly committed to self-determination for the Igbo. She devises survivalist strategy, like soap making, to make end meet. Her strong-willed disposition comes to the fore when she leads the search-party for Kainene after the war. This is commendable, especially when men like Odenigbo and Richard have lost all hopes. When Odenigbo and Richard betray emotion over the death of mama and inability to trace Kainene respectively, she is ever-ready to console both men. Her resolve to adopt and care for 'Baby' is a good commentary on her love for Odenigbo.

The personality of Kainene makes a strong statement on the virtue Adichie bestows on her female characters. In a typical Igbo fashion, Kainene is a determined business-minded character. She is saddled with the enviable task of managing her father's vast business concern in Port Harcourt. She discharges this duty meritoriously and becomes the cynosure of all eyes. This quality endears her to people hence Richard sees no qualm in denouncing Susan for her. Although she repeatedly casts aspersion on the ill-preparedness of Biafra for war against Nigeria, she plays her part, during the war. After the fall of Port Harcourt, she relocates to Orlu and establishes a refugee camp to care for the displaced and homeless. Although she benefits in terms of contract from the war, she comes to mind as a determined Igbo woman whose commitment to the cause of Biafra is never in doubt. She refuses to 'escape' to London with her parents and resolve to thrive in war-torn Biafra. Her trade along enemy zone is a testimony to her determination to make her mark during the war. She never returns.

Another strong-willed woman is Mrs Muokelu. A barely literate woman, she joins hand with Olanna and Ugwu to train Biafran children during the war. She trains and feeds her large family and assists displaced persons to get food at the relief centre. Her commitment knows no bound as she never touches anything from Nigeria. To guide against starvation and deprivation occasioned by the civil war, she trains Olanna the art of soap-making which can be sold for survival. She is even ready to go for *afia attack* if occasion demands. Irrespective of class and status, other women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* enjoy considerable influence on the affairs of men. Despite Odenigbo's displeasure, his mother almost forces him to marry Amala, a village girl who eventually has a child for him. Similarly, one of the reasons why Olanna rejects Muhammed for Odenigbo is the unfair treatment earlier meted to her by his mother.

### **A Critique of Adichie's Feminist Episteme in *Half of a Yellow Sun***

No discerning African mind would find Adichie's depiction of sex in *Half of a Yellow Sun* funny. The descriptions of various sexual activities run contrary to the tradition pioneered by Achebe and other earlier Nigerian writers. Sex is a taboo and should be done with the curtain drawn. It is nothing but an absurdity of unimaginable consequence to give a vivid account of sexual scenes in traditional Nigerian literature. In traditional African society, sex is never contemplated except after marriage which is traditionally contracted between families. Ironically, none of Odenigbo, Olanna, Amala, Kainene, Richard, Ugwu and Chinyere is married. Olanna prefers to live in Odenigbo's house even against her parents dictate. She sees no big deal sleeping with Richard too because, in her view,

sex is for emotional purgation. Whenever Odenigbo suggests marriage to her, she is quick to turn down the offer, preferring to just live with him. The stigmatization that goes with the birth of a child outside wedlock means nothing to her hence, she desires a child. Even the not-so-attractive Kainene is averse to marriage yet sleeps with both Richard and Madu. Furthermore, Ugwu enjoys sex while it lasts with Chinyere despite their age and social status. Such adventure is only permitted in Western culture where Adichie spends an impressionable part of her life. It is frowned at in traditional African environment. Societal aversion to this cohabitation is shown in Arize's conversation with Olanna. She attributes Olanna's 'unAfrican' disposition to too much education. Adichie's brand of western libertarian feminism is at variance with African tradition.

Although Adichie's disparate experiences have, no doubt, significantly widened her horizon and influenced her perspective on wide range of issues, sex inclusive, the untoward consequence of wholesale importation of Western ideals hook, line and sinker into African consciousness is a justifiable worry. In fact, value-conscious culture advocates are quick to denounce Western perspective which they consider inimical to African cultural rebirth. Even if a liberal mind can excuse her on account of her close affinity with Western values, her flippant and unrestrained treatment of 'traditionally forbidden' themes would never escape fiery criticisms from cultural nationalists, particularly older generation of Nigerian writers. Thus, Adichie needs to be reminded that some themes are better left in the domain of queer theorists in the West. Africans have nothing worthwhile to aspire to in them. Perhaps, she needs to be warned of the negative implication of exposing the youth to premarital sex. The danger embedded in such act may be devastating in this age of sexually transmitted disease (STD) and the dreaded human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Also, one is tempted to conclude that unrestrained exposure to sex in the West has led to the advent of gay marriage, homosexuality, lesbianism, and others which are clearly at variance with African highly-cherished values. Of recent, Nigerian parliament has outlawed gay marriage, homosexuality and lesbianism with the recent passage of Same-Sex Prohibition Bill by the senate. Despite Western entreaties and threat, the passage of the bill is greeted with commendation by Nigerians from all walks of life.

Although Adichie consistently maintains that sex is explored only to elicit the humanity of her characters, the fact remains that premarital sex, graphic illustration of sexual acts and marital infidelity are frowned at in traditional African society. Even if we agree with Flora Nwapa (2007:532) that "a woman is also flesh and blood. She has a heart and soul and she is capable of human feelings", yet we aver that sex should not be promoted into a situation where it becomes an all-comer affair, particularly with unmarried women going out of their ways to seek sexual satisfactions from men *a la* Olanna, Kainene and Chinyere. No wonder Nwapa is quick to relegate feminist politics to the background and agree that the panacea for cultural reawakening can be achieved in "indigenous traditions such as democracy, tolerance, sharing and mutual's support". Ogunjipe-Leslie's (2007:549) idea of feminism is more accommodating to African cultural rebirth. Amongst other roles, she asserts that feminism does not promote oppositional rhetoric to men, is not out to echo Western sentiments, and is not averse to African cultural heritage. It is only a gender-friendly ideological signpost to promote 'womanhood' and prevent exploitation.

Unarguably, Nigerian society is in dire need of development and social rejuvenation. In such climate, all hands should be on deck to salvage what remains of her cultural pride. Literature is expected to play a leading role in this task geared towards the much-desired panacea for cultural rebirth. It is therefore unthinkable for Nigerian writers to engage in polemic which further denigrate her aspiration. Thus, Adichie's feminist philosophy would obviously lead her into collision course with value-conscious, development-seeking African critics.

### **Conclusion**

It is tragic to note that some postcolonial African scholars are comfortable with the implantation of Western critical polemic into African consciousness! They, therefore, continue to pay lip service to the need to denounce Africa's overdependence on Western canon. They erroneously believe that 'alien' standard can provide the requisite critical template to investigate African society! In fact, majority of them imbibed European worldview uncritically as the 'gospel' truth. Even if it is indisputable that the West provides the launch-pad for prose writing, over-reliance on Western canon has the tendency to encumber African history and thought system from given rise to indigenous African theory devoid of Western sentiment. Thus, as a counter theoretical discourse, value-conscious African scholars are committed to outright renunciation of Western theoretical standpoint. An African-centred alternative, in line with Afrocentric philosophical tradition, is thus required. Since only an African theory can articulate a credible interpretation of African texts, feminist philosophical assumption should never be permitted further in-road into African literary discourse. Once this is achieved, it becomes a matter of time before Nigerian novelists begin to churn out works which promote African values, moral uprightness, heroic deeds, patriotism, dignity of labour, and selfless service to mankind.

### **Recommendation**

The quest for an African theory for literary interpretation should lead African scholars in the direction of African culture and tradition. Although colonial 'intrusion' has encouraged diverse cultural experiences in Africa, her "relative cultural homogeneity" has positioned her as a reliable repertoire of African worldview. Besides, the fact that indigenous African societies are peopled by "culturally diverse" groups of people, who are heterogeneous in languages, economies, customs, myths and legends, does not becloud the awareness of "common denominators in the core African values" which are ensclosed in African worldview. This worldview is encapsulated in the traditional African system of thought and it is 'distilled' from Africa's philosophy, history, religion, oral tradition, myth, legend, folktales, riddles, proverbs and cosmogony. A thorough and consistent investigation of the basic assumptions of her worldview would reveal a reliable African epistemology which researchers can advance in the quest for an African-specific theory for global consumption vis-a-vis the reconstruction of knowledge. A fuller understanding of African epistemology would evidently show the contradiction in equating it with Western standpoint.

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