

# Disregarding the role of Gender: Women in the shadow of Biafran War in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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**Abstract-** This present paper reads Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, examining the partaking of women in the Biafran War. It returns to the specific period and call attention to the metamorphosis of women, irrespective of the gender layout. The paper mingles the historical underpinning, taboo and the stance of women, altogether and presents a comprehensive study on *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in this novel, has attempted to put on view a feminist perspective, subsuming the ardent participation of women in war. Extermination of biased framework by woman characters in the novel is overlooked by the current study.

**Index Terms-** Biafran war, gender, women, history

## I. INTRODUCTION

*"Without the women, the Nigerian vandals would have overrun Biafra: without the women, our gallant Biafran soldiers would have died of hunger in the war fronts. Without the women, the Biafran Red Cross would have collapsed (Nwapa, 13)"*

Decisive situation opens the way and grant opportunities for underprivileged. Since the story is set in the background of the Biafran War or Nigerian Civil War, life of the characters in the story hardly remains stable, as they are incessantly exposed to the horrors of war in the later part of the novel irrespective of gender, power and wealth, people struggles to save themselves and their family from the horrors of war.

The women characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* undergo a kind of change by taking up the responsibilities of the Nigerian Civil War, which shatters them from the myths and taboos of the Nigerian society. before the Civil war, women are shrewdly noticed and criticized for their activities if it does not justify their gender expectations. Yet, the circumstances changes once the war breaks out. Regardless, the people of Biafra stands united and together.

To come to accept the violence insisted upon them. The physical and material lose caused by the war and its sufferings have propelled people into deep emotional.

At this critical time of war, the society which gives noticeable importance to custom and tradition fails to keep up those practices and gender performances. The women characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* become state-of-the-art (revolutionary) in their ways. Adichie uses this space to highlight women characters who struggle and try hard to keep their families in the midst of the war. They move forward without any hesitance or fear, to take up responsibilities wherever crucial and guide the society at the time of difficulty.

## II.

## RESEARCH ELABORATIONS

*Chimamda Ngozi* Adichie does not make all the women characters to undergo transformation during the period of war in her novel *Half of the Yellow Sun*. She deliberately excludes some women characters to lie in the same trap of tradition and custom, though women like them contribute to the welfare of the society during the Biafran war. Through these characters Adichie bring forth a deep thought that women can not only be liberated by the education or freedom given to them, but they have to develop courage and learn to liberate their minds from their inner self. Because courage furnish something that education cannot. As Azukie says, ...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 (80)

Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* tries to represent women of different attitudes, stance and characteristic features. She presents Olanna and Kainene as heroic, courageous and the characters who deserve leadership qualities. She portrays the character of Anulika, Arize and Amala as someone who desperately lacks courage to raise their voice against the odds which is put in front of them on the name of tradition and custom. These characters perform the routine, biased gender roles throughout the novel. Adichie uses these characters to reveal the reality of the Nigerian society by the contrastive empowered picture of Olanna and Kainene.

Adichie purposefully uses character like Miss. Adebayo to break the codes of taboo that cripples the liberation of women. This contrast portrayal of women give out as the representation of women in the Nigerian society. Miss Adebayo is presented as a knowledgeable person who participates in the evening discussions at Odenigbo's house.

Here, Adichie records an idea that education can come up with a woman enough courage to speak out her mind.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* the transformation of women character takes place once the Biafran war mark an appearance. The war

makes every people to get disclosed to the realities of war. It makes all the educated and rich people to undergo the lifestyle of a normal Igbo person. In the novel the characters are not completely fictional ones but are historical characters who have originally contributed their efforts to the welfare of Biafra. Adichie records emotional and personal experiences of the people of Biafra who are the real witness of the Biafran war.

In the early part of the novel, that is, before the severe emergence of the Civil war, both male and female characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* seem to have specific gendered roles though they accept the structure or not. Adichie clearly records the gendered transformation that happen in each and every major character after the emergence of the Civil war, which breaks the traditional structure of gender attributes because of the result of unusual political unrest in Nigeria. It is also to be accepted that the Nigerian society has numerous ethnic groups and in all likelihood it leads to various customs, beliefs and practices. Soon after the influence of colonialism some traditions must have reshaped as the result of cultural changes. This idea becomes clear by observing the characters of Olanna and Kainene in the novel.

Both characters in the novel acquire their degree from a foreign university. It is also clear that not all the female characters in the novel receive the advantage of education, for which the financial status of the family matters. But the war provides each character the space to perform their role without any hindrance in the name of tradition and custom. Here, war becomes the major criteria that commutes the entire course of the novel. The people of Biafra are incessantly beaten down for their uprising only because of their demand for separate land.

The destruction, suppression, violence, murders, massacres, starvation and hardship, as the result of the Nigerian Civil war becomes common for all the people of Biafra regardless of the status. The so-called structure, that is, the rich and poor in the Biafran region becomes disappeared. The entire living pattern of people gets changed in these regions.

The situation and condition becomes worse when the basic sources for living are completely stopped for the Biafran region. As it is mentioned earlier by Adichie, the Nigerian Civil war has changed the normal day-to-day life of the people of Biafra. This social change has completely commuted the expectations and lives of the women of Biafra. This chapter aims to bring out how the Biafran war makes some of the female characters to take up responsibilities during the Biafran war and how they break the ordinary gender expectations in the Nigerian society or Igbo community.

The female characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* witness the violence caused by the Nigerian government because of the British influence. A few female characters face the realities of the Nigerian society and fight for the cause. The rest of the female characters become the victims of the war. The major characters in the novel who attract the attention of the readers and also the main focus of the author are Olanna and Kainene. The above view is explained by Toyin Falola and Ezekwem in *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* as,

“...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)”

Olanna understands the solemnity of the Civil war when she travels to Kano to visit her Uncle's family. She encounters the murder of her Uncle's family and during her return she encounters some horrific incidents in train. Therefore, Olanna comes to know about the seriousness of the war and she prepares herself to face the war. Kainene does not get personal experience to understand the trauma of the Civil war until the death of her steward, Ikejide.

Ikejide's death makes Kainene to understand the pain caused by the result of war and then she begins to fight for the welfare of Biafra. He is killed by the soldiers.

“Ikejide kept running...his arms flying around, his head bobbing...A piece of shrapnel, the size of a fist, wheezed past. Ikejide was still running and, in the moment that Richard glanced away and back, Ikejide's head was gone. The body was running...arms flying around, but there was no head. There was only a bloodied neck” (316-317)

After the death of Ikejide Kainene feels the pain of loss though Ikejide not an important character so far in Kainene's life. Kainene, then understands the situation of her sister Olanna and she connects the situation of Olanna with Ikejide. Then, she decides to make peace with her sister, forgetting all the misunderstandings that have happened in their relationship. Some people use war as an opportunity to earn their fortune and make money out of people's demand. Kainene understands the situation and decides to be the dealer of stockfish. She really wants to do the Biafrans some favour which she could. When she meets Olanna during the war, she shares her experience in the refugee camp and tells Olanna about the stockfish dealing. She says to Olanna,

“I was an army contractor, and I had a licence to import stockfish. I'm in Orlu now. I'm in charge of a refugee camp there. Are you silently condemning me for profiteering from the war? Somebody had to import the stockfish, you know. Many contractors were paid and didn't deliver. At least I did” (343)

Kainene also gets a sense of guilt for the time when she does not care about the Biafran war and busy engaging in her personal activities. Ikejide's death unveiled Kainene, the true nature of the Nigerian Civil war. For some days right after Ikejide's death, Kainene dreams about the headless body of Ikejide, running and flying the arms. She unintentionally shares about his death with the carpenter and Olanna. Even, Ikejide's death makes Kainene to compromise with Olanna. Kainene says, “There are some things that are so unforgivable that they make other things easily forgivable” (347)

The violence results from the war are so intense that makes everyone to think about the very meaning of life and propels the emotions of the victims. This tension makes people more humane and to fight back the federal government to save the people. Olanna and

Kainene, leaves behind their identity of a reputed official's daughters and becomes one with the native the Igbo people. Olanna is the first female character to encounter the horrific effects of war during her visit to Kano. She worries about her Uncle Mbaezi's family and proceeds without any assistance. When she reaches Kano, she is shocked to see the dead bodies of her Uncle's family

scattered throughout the yard. Mohammed stops her to get close to the bodies since he knows what would happen if Olanna is seen near the dead bodies.

Mohammed belongs to Hausa community and Olanna, an Igbo, so Mohammed tries to save Olanna from the offender.

The incident that distinctly makes Olanna to understand the trauma of the war is, when she returns from Kano by train. Everywhere there is blood and scattered human flesh. She sees headless bodies and corpses in the yard. Even during the wedding of Olanna and Odenigbo, bombing occurs. Thousands of Igbo's (especially Christian Igbo's) are ferociously killed by the Hausas (an ethnic Muslim community). In the train, Olanna sits next to a woman cuddling a calabash, whose clothes are stained with blood. After sometime, the woman pokes Olanna and then motioned to the calabash as if there is somebody inside it. Olanna is stunned by seeing inside the calabash.

"Come and take a look." She opened the calabash. "Take a look," she said again. Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl's head with the ashy-grey and the plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She started at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed. The woman closed the calabash." (149)

Ikejide's death causes Kainene to discern the importance of love and lose. She believes that there are so many things to worry about rather than the petty relationship issues. She decides to contribute her efforts to the Biafran war, begins it by becoming the dealer of stockfish and Port Harcourt's army contractor, which is basically male's profession. At this point, Kainene breaks the feminine gender expectations and liberates herself. Olanna and Kainene serves for the country, taking risks at different levels. Another important thing Adichie mentions in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is that both Kainene and Olanna does not undergo the biological stage of motherhood, but they stands as the representation of motherhood on the later part of the novel. Olanna adopts the child of Amala and she looks after her like her biological mother and also she contributes her efforts during the Biafran war.

Kainene, on the other hand, becomes the mother of many people who lost their means of living. Amidst all the violence caused by the Federal government, Kainene performs many unchallengeable tasks to save the people of Biafra. Though Olanna acts as the protagonist during the first part of the novel where her physical beauty also has contributed to earn her that stance, Kainene grasps the focus at the later part because of her courageous efforts.

The major effort that shapes the character of Kainene to be a completely different one which demands the attention of the readers is her involvement in the refugee camp. She shifts to Uurlu with Richard accompanying her and sets up a refugee camp. Father Marcel and Father Jude are the two priests who help in the management of the refugee camp. At first the refugee camp is run by the supplies and donations given by the government as the entire basic supplies for the Biafran region is stopped. Kainene does not like to have the benefit offered by the opposite side since it makes the people of Biafra to rely on the government for their living. Therefore, she decides to deny the supplies from the government and plans to create income by the people at refugee camp. For one thing she has to depend on the Agricultural Research Centre, that is, manure.

Starvation is the potential weapon used by the counter coup. Adichie records the picture of how Nigeria weakens the people using starvation. Most of the children die of Kwashiorkor, a disease that affects children due to malnutrition. Elder people yearn to save their children, so that they could be the future of Biafra, as Kainene says, "...how hunger was stealing the memories of the children. She was determined that their minds be kept alert; they were Biafra's future" (389). All the physical and mental strength of the people are sucked completely by starvation. At this situation, all the people including Olanna, the protagonist, longs for food to be provided so that they could save their children dying from malnutrition.

Kainene is aware of the situation of her people that starvation soon going to cripples her nation. Therefore, she decides to grow plants in the yard to save her people dying of starvation. She establishes a farm and grows *akidi* and soya beans, to feed the refugee camp. To create the income she arranges a man from Enugu to teach them hand crafts like basket and lamp making. Moreover she arranges for a doctor from Red Cross to check the patients in the refugee camp. Many refugees are wounded and some are suffering from severe health issues and malnutrition. Though these efforts by Kainene seem simple, it really needs huge courage and ardent passion for her nation. Unlike the first part of the novel where much power is given to male characters like Odenigbo and Richard, the second part of the novel proposes the female power. Adichie explains how a woman can perform both traditional and modern forms.

Due to continuous bombings, Olanna and her family moves from place to place.

Olanna never tries to get help from her parents, as she knows that will definitely find some way to escape from this violence. When Odenigbo and Olanna moves to Abba along with Baby and Ugwu, Olanna's mother, Mrs. Ozobia pays a visit to them. She informs Olanna that her father, Chief Ozobia has received an offer to escape to London and she invites Olanna to come with her. Though Olanna knows that it is a golden offer during the time of intense violence, she ignores her mother's offer. She never wants to leave Odenigbo, Baby or Ugwu. She intends to face the consequences of the war along with her family. Mrs. Ozobia already known what would be her daughter's reaction. As a mother she tries to convince her daughter to save her from the hardship of war.

"Olanna felt pity at the plea of her mother's eyes. Her mother knew she would not run away to England with them, and that Kainene would not either. 'But you and Dad should go, if it make you feel safer. I'll stay with Odenigbo and Baby. We'll be fine'...Olanna paused" (189)

When starvation ruthlessly strikes the Biafrans, many people including many children are died of malnutrition. Odenigbo seems detached from Olanna and Baby. At that time Baby becomes sick of malnutrition. Baby's condition goes worse as days pass by. Olanna, at any means tries to save Baby from dying. Olanna seeks help from Mrs Muokelu and recovers Baby from illness. Olanna learns that she has to make some money in order to survive since Odenigbo's earning is insufficient for the family. On one hand, Kainene takes effort to maintain the refugee camp. Olanna, on the other hand works for the family. Olanna learns soap-making from Mrs Muokelu as it helps her financially to run the family without much difficulty. In spite of her luxurious and noble life she has lived in the past, she genuinely accepts the present reality and learns to live with the flow.

Throughout the novel, Olanna maintains always a slight dependence on Odenigbo. Odenigbo has changed completely during the course of war but, Olanna has not. She longs for his love and affection. At times of difficulty she needs his encouragement. When she informs Odenigbo about soap-making, he does not have hope in Olanna learning soap-making. He feels that she is modern woman and from a rich background that she could not adapt herself to such situations.

“Later, Odenigbo shook his head when she told him about it... She didn’t need to teach you how to make soap. I don’t see you making soap anyway. You think I can’t? She should simply have apologized” (273)

Olanna, against all the discouragements, even the one from whom she has never expected, easily gets adapted to the situation. She leaves behind the traces of her royal living and begins to live a life of an ordinary Igbo woman. She never has the opportunity to enter kitchen during her lifetime until the Biafran war. Even she learns to cook with firewood whereas the availability of gas is quite expensive. In the first part of the novel when Olanna visits Kano, she feels uncomfortable being in the kitchen where huge fumes from firewood make her go mad. But, now she comfortably prepares food using firewood, that is, the traditional lifestyle of an Igbo woman.

Olanna personally perceives the changes that have happened to her. She finds herself living a life which is completely contrast to what she has lived in the past. She senses the new skills which makes her more empowered and self dependent. She finds that her feminine weaknesses have gone out of her and she lives a life without satisfying any traditional gender expectations. She literally drifts away from the traditional norms. Throughout the novel, it is her dependence on Odenigbo cripples her liberation and empowerment. Now, Olanna prevents herself from worrying about Odenigbo. It is clear from the reaction of Olanna when she knows about the sexual intercourse between Odenigbo and Alice. It is the second time Odenigbo betraying Olanna. Her reaction is not the same like Odenigbo’s previous infidelity done with Amala. Olanna maintains her emotional balance rather indulging in anger. She seems strengthened and understands the reality that her life belongs not to Odenigbo but herself.

After getting liberated from all the worldly expectations, Olanna begins to worry about her nation. She wants to save the younger generation. She gathers children in the yard and teach them poems. She tries hard to keep them alert about the things that are happening around them. She says, “...hunger was stealing the memories of the children (389). She makes sure that the young generation is going to fight for the nation in the future. Therefore, Olanna gives her utmost importance in educating the children. She prepares for the classes and deliberately chooses what should be taught to the children. With the assistance of Mrs Muokelu and Ugwu, Olanna teaches the children patriotism along with the usual education.

“We will teach mathematics, English and civics every day,” Olanna said to Ugwu and Mrs Muokelu a day before the classes began. “We have to make sure that when the war is over, they will all fit back easily into regular school. We will teach them to speak perfect English and perfect Igbo, like His Excellency. We will teach them pride in our great nation.” (291)

### III.

### FINDINGS

In spite of many odds and hindrances comes out of the violence, the venue of school keeps on changing. Olanna never give up in educating the children. She takes much effort to change the location of the school to backyards and tree-shades. Odenigbo, now notices the changes that has happened in Olanna. He sees the serious contribution of Olanna for the welfare of the nation. He once shares about Olanna and her efforts to one of his new friends Special Julius. Odenigbo says, “My wife and Ugwu are changing the face of the next generation of Biafrans with their Socratic Pedagogy!” (293).

Then again Kainene, who is portrayed as easy going personality, who gives importance only to herself and egocentric, completely has converted into a woman of sensibility, much humanity and emotional. She not only breaks the chains of traditional gender expectations but also gains matured behavioural patterns. For instance, when a young soldier is accused of stealing, Kainene interrupts the armed soldiers and defends for the young man. She argues to them saying that he has stolen because of hunger and he is not a thief. She brings the young man out of danger by arguing with the soldiers.

Another instance that highlights Kainene’s humanity is when she punishes Father Marcel. Father Marcel is the one who assists Kainene in managing the refugee camp at Urlu. When she finds Father Marcel trades food to the poor girls for sex. He uses the hunger of the poor girls and uses food as a bait to make them sexual victims.

Kainene and Olanna, in the first part of the novel hang between tradition and modernity.

Kainene develops a carefree nature that she does not give in to the expectations of others though she is expected to. She concerns only about her temporary relationships and affairs, at times business. There is no trace in the first part of the novel where Kainene is interested in the affairs of the nation. She enjoys the advantage of a rich girl who father deserves a prominent position in the society.

Olanna, on the other hand, behave neither modern nor traditional because of her dual exposure to the Nigerian and Western culture. She does not enjoy the advantage of her wealth, rather interested in Odenigbo and totally depends on him. She conceives modern ideology but pressurized by the traditional norms that makes her to lose her individuality. The only destination for Olanna in the first part is to gain the love of Odenigbo and have a happy family with him. But in the later part she expels herself from the traditional bonds and takes a huge transformation.

The paper throws a keen observation on the transformation of women characters from one phase to another vividly. It becomes evident that the female characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* undergo a behavioural shift that portrays female empowerment in an expressive way. As the novel is set in the background of Civil war, the women characters makes use of this opportunity and involves them in war. Among the characters that becomes the victim 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.

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