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Civil War and the Question of Gender Roles in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Ms. K. Gayathri Menon

Researcher, Department of Studies in English, Kannur University, Thrissur,
Kerala, India.

Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a novel which is set during and after the Biafran War, throws light on different issues that the Nigerian society faced between 1967 and 1970. War has done much damage to the people in the past and its after effects reverberates in the contemporary era too. This study includes an analysis of the society expected gender roles and their portrayal in the novel. War usually shatters the existing system leading to a chaotic environment in almost all the strata of society. It attempts to investigate how far the author has dealt with the various challenges that the Nigerian women faced during the time of war. Olanna, one of the main characters of the novel, is selected by the author as the representative of Nigerian womanhood. The ordeal through which Olanna and the other characters pass through exhibits certain gender issues which are relevant in the present scenario of the world.

Keywords

Civil War; Biafra War; Gender Roles; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

War inexorably generates sharp moral clashes for all who are mired in the labyrinth of it, as most people are nurtured by the society with some principles that are promptly conked out in a war zone. For Scurfield, “such moral principles, which may never have to be given much thought at home, are suddenly and violently confronted, grossly violated by the realities of war” (25). The traumatic visage of war is not only limited to the war front, but is also swift in its movement devouring the physical and mental forte of the society. The normality of individual and collective psyche is interrupted by war and the most susceptible to it are “ordinary people who cannot bear their memories of what happened- the traumatized” (Hunt 2). War can create new paranoia, damage the existing status quo and can aggravate already existing problems by drilling fissures in the life. Thus war induces various psychosocial impacts on individual memory in relation to the ways in which society, culture, and history defines it. Hunt elaborates these psychosocial problems as the direct consequence of war by quoting, “How can you come to terms with killing people, the loss of a child, or being raped multiple times, or remembering that you have killed civilians, or that you have had to permanently leave your home and family” (2).

Gender issues are common nowadays and it forms the foundation of the structural inequality pestering almost all the countries. Scott’s argument is that “although the power and role of women vary across countries, women are universally unequal in both the economic and political spheres” is redolent of this existence.

Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* has taken pains to render space in sculpturing women characters, their expansion with the story line, and how they faced war that bumped into their life. Women, in *Half of a Yellow Sun* have always

been engrossed in the war, actively in different roles and passively as victims of violence, hunger or displacement. The text grills on the myths of gender separation that are seen in both war as well as in the home front, and here one can witness a reversal of these gendered roles and relations, while facing the trauma of war. The multiple roles that they play in their battle for survival divulge the arbitrariness of such gender positioning and women's capability to perform them, which the author declares as

the Biafran women who showed remarkable bravery in keeping families together. I think the reason that the ordinary person's story is more engaging is that it is in those lives that we see the real effects of war – the indignity of starvation, the struggle to hold on to their humanity (Wale Adebani)

Adichie's novel has women, from all social classes, such as aged mothers who consider their village and tradition as the ultimate world, wealthy traders, hawkers, female lecturers, quiet housewives, chatty neighbors and they all seem to be determined and struggling a great deal in order to survive. Some, like Olanna and Kainene, confront the stereotyped canons by living together with their boyfriends, and there are some others, who completely capsize gendered roles and separations, as it is obvious from the figure of Mrs. Muokelu, who might "have been better off being born a man" (270). People like Aunty Ifeka, although uneducated, give prudent messages of life, and it is she who taught Olanna to stand on her feet and fight by saying "Do you not have your own flat and your own job? ... You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me? Your life belongs to you and you alone" (203). Olanna's betrayal in exchange, comes therefore as a leveling act that fills her "with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace" (236), where Aunty Ifeka and Edna are the two very different but strong women, who give Olanna pragmatic advice pushing her towards self-awareness, as Aunty Ifeka makes Olanna acknowledge that

“Your life belongs to you and you alone” (230), and Edna questions her “Why isn’t what you are enough” (236)?

In the novel one is able to witness those gender roles that the society assigns to male and female getting upside down within the backdrop of the Biafran war. The once fiery and self-assured Odenigbo, who is never frightened to voice his estimation in front of the authorities, succumbs to drinking. One of the incidents that portray his aggressive attitude can be seen when the ticket seller at the university theatre encouraged a white man to come forward illegally by crossing over the queue, enraging Odenigbo to burst out and say “you miserable ignoramus! You see a white person and he looks better than your own people? You must apologize to everybody in this queue! Right now!” (29). The loss of ideals and hope paralyze and throw him into a situation where he is unable to intellectualize the horrors happening around, compelling to seek the support of Olanna and Ugwu. On the other Olanna, who seems to be a soft hearted female, turns out to be a brave individual who strives hard in order to take care of the family as well as fights for the development of the society. The massacres of the north, the death of the dear ones, continuous evacuations, war atrocities, and lack of food moulded her into a strong woman, contradictory to Odenigbo who bewailed of his past and future anxieties, pushing himself into the mud of fate. Olanna’s attention throughout the war is to feed her family and her quest for food can be viewed parallel to a number of other women in the contemporary world who dons the garb of the bread winner of the family. The author details her frequent visits to the relief center, struggling to get food for survival, as

She folded her arms, then let them lie by her sides, and folded them again. She was close to the front when she noticed that the powder being scooped into bags and bowls was not yellow but white. Not egg yolk but cornmeal. The egg- yolk queue was the next one. Olanna hurried over to join it, but the woman who was dishing out the yolk stood up and said, ‘Egg yolk is finished! *O gwula*. (268- 69)

The certitude that Olanna parades in her decision to adopt Odenigbo's illegal child, in order to satisfy her motherly thirst can be considered as the positive upshot of Odenigbo's betrayal, luring herself to dedicate the rest of her life for the baby. Along with enduring the pressures imposed by the war and Odenigbo's betrayal, she nurtured her motherly instinct and made it a shield against the gender expectations to fight for what makes her happy. According to the Object Relation theorists, the formation of self in a relational matrix, "the embeddedness of the child with others is the overriding feature of early development, and the need for attachment, connection, integration with others is the pre-eminent motivational thrust of the human organism throughout life" (Greenberg 221). Dynamic relationships especially between mother and child will provide both safety and independent recognition, making it possible for the child to create a symbolically positive external and internal environment. Olanna's recurrent worries about baby "when baby choked and started to cry, Olanna, too, fought tears and her greatest fear was that baby would die. It was there, the festering fear, underlying everything she thought and did" (267), also reflects how she meaningfully engages herself in the multitasking process.

The jeopardy that lurks behind the war and the possibility of an uncertain future sparked off a shunt in the people's precedence and next to the need for food, there emerged a tendency to secure their lineage. They gave the premium place to male children in Igboland – "to have a baby boy first" (119) – as it is powered by the need to guarantee one's survival through children. But the author has introduced a girl child as the illegal daughter of Odenigbo and has shown through the character of Olanna how important a girl child is to the family and to the society. The only reason for Odenigbo's mother's rejection of the baby is the fact that it is a girl child and she needs a boy only. But Olanna not only protected the baby, but she accepted it as her own and at times she was proud of her baby. On the other hand, Mama Adanna, who killed Bingo, the dog with its head full of sores and "cooked soup with meat" (342) for her children, the

woman who washed peeled cassava tubers in a pan of filthy water that smelled of “dirty toilet and rancid steamed beans and boiled eggs gone bad” (289), and the worried mother of the pregnant young girl in the refugee camp slapping her daughter in her rage asking her who is behind her pregnancy are some pictures depicting the predicament of mothers during the time of war.

After reaching home from Kano, witnessing the riot, Olanna crumples at the front door, and that very same night she told Odenigbo about the horrible sights she witnessed there. She told him about the vaguely familiar clothes on the headless bodies in the yard and the still twitchy fingers on Uncle Mbaezi’s hand. But the response from Odenigbo is always, “Shush, *nkem*. You’ll be fine.’ He spoke too softly to her. His voice sounded so silly, so unlike him” (156). This shows his attitude towards her. For him she was just a doll with whom he can show off his heroism. But her audacity in facing the challenges made him awe struck at many instances.

One of the foremost pairs of the novel is the twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene, daughters of Nigeria’s newly emerging corrupt elite couple, who rebel against their parents’ values. Adichie has undoubtedly chosen the figure of twins to point a finger at the change of ideals that had happened in the modern Nigeria, where twins were looked down upon as an abomination, and Adichie says, “I have beautiful twin nieces who are 15 who live in Lagos. If they had been born 100 years ago, they would have been taken away and killed because it was our culture, the Ibo/Igbo culture to kill twins” (“We should all be Feminists”), but now the society is struggling to escape from the hold of disgraces and bad omens that existed in the pre-colonial times.

Although already an adult and an accomplished woman who seems to know how she wants her life to be at the beginning of the story, Olanna has to come to terms with herself and had passed through an extensive progression of self-recognition and awareness, as a result of the traumatic events that occurred in her life. The fact that she is so much celebrated for her beauty seems to isolate

her, ending up herself being an object, whom Odenigbo calls “a distracting Aphrodite” (27), Miss Adebayo sees her as “illogically pretty” (50), and Okeoma defines her as a “water mermaid” (50). Olanna herself corroborates her status as a valuable object of consumption when she says “My sister and I are meat. We are here so that suitable bachelors will make the kill” (61).

Olanna rises above and learns to survive and her determination is obvious in the way she overcomes her fear of warplanes. “Caution had become, to her, feeble and faithless. Her steps were sturdy and she looked up often at the clear sky to search for bomber jets, because she would stop and hurl stones and words up at them” (286). Even among other strong women, like Mrs. Muokelu and Mama Oji, who were able to improvise physical and emotional stunts in order to survive, Olanna stands out because she has realized that survival is not all about the satisfaction of physical needs alone but also about the power to reconcile the trauma of contradictions that exist all around her. Olanna manages thus to work through her debilitating contrary situations and starts searching to make a change and help the community in which she lives. After the primary school is turned into a refugee camp, Olanna starts teaching Mathematics, English, Civics as well as ideals of the Biafran cause and through this Adichie has shown that it is possible for a woman to attain and maintain personal autonomy even in the midst of traumatic events and memories. When after encountering the mutilated body of her pregnant cousin, Olanna’s legs became numb. Odenigbo sat by her side and had sex with her whenever she needed, instilling in her the hope for a better future. “‘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” (201). This reflects the need for shattering gender roles by taking up the role as counterparts for the betterment of the existence.

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