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RADICAL AND RESOLUTE WOMEN OF NIGERIA IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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"Gender roles have been described as society's shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex" (Eagly 644). Thus, gender roles mainly depict the attributes ascribed to a group of people by individuals. In most cases the roles of each gender is generalized by the society and they are simply inaccurate. Regardless of a person's desire, thoughts and ability the roles are stereotyped. Worldwide gender stereotype has gained more attention as the outcome of it has had a devastating effect on the basic rights of women. In literary studies the word gender refers to how individuals define themselves and how they are often evaluated by others. Hence, gender studies focus on how one gender dominates the other and how individuals strive to construct an identity for themselves.

African feminist literature like many other literatures by women acts as a platform to counter and challenge discourses on gender discrimination. These writers voice the realities on women's needs, oppression and empowerment. They strive to create new options free of any kind of domination and boldly fight oppressive structures based on gender discrimination.

This paper presents Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's endeavor to reconstruct gender roles in Nigerian society during the Biafra War of 1967 to 1970. The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) focuses on the struggles of the Igbo people of the southern eastern provinces of Nigeria. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by retelling the story of the Biafra war with women as a focal point, presents empowered female characters. The contribution of women like Olanna and Kainene in the novel challenge the gender roles common in most conflict situations. These women are radical in thinking and resolute in action. Adichie reinvents the experiences of these women's positive contributions and also their sacrifice. They transcend the traditional stereotypical roles. Adichie's women are forced to become active participants in the Biafra war, yet they are genuine in exhibiting their desire to win the war. The most notable point here is that the desires of these women to protect the families and their roles in domestic life acts as a stimulus to push them to the war front.

The novel highlights the negative impacts of the war on Nigerian women. Women were subjected to various forms of violence like abduction, military raids and eventually rape. Takiwan Manuh states " Violence is one very important discriminatory practice and unequal relations women in Africa face " (n.pg). The story is the story of Olanna and her sister Kainene. These two women return to Nigeria after their education abroad. They return with hopes and dreams for a bright future, but only for their dreams to shatter. Olanna and Kainene daughters of a very affluent, Chief Ozobias suffer dreadful situations in the name of war. Adichie places Olanna at the forefront where every action takes place around her. With characters like Olanna, the novel celebrates "bold and successful full bodied women with no restraints". (Ogwude , 48).

Though women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are presented as the victims of violence during the Nigerian civil war, some of them emerge as victors at the end. A look into the horrendous situation of these women during the war will provide a better scope to understand the depth of the victimisation they had to undergo before showing signs of resistance.

To begin with, issues like motherhood and childlessness are made quite inconsequential. Olanna is presented as a victim of betrayal when her lover Odenigbo cheats on her and has an affair with Amala, she in turn detects the real victim in Amala. Amala as the writer says “did not have a voice” (256). Olanna’s choice of adopting a female child is contrary to the Nigerian expectations. She portrays the view that a girl should be treated with equal love and respect like a boy. She strongly asserts the fact that girls do not choose to be born as girls, it is natural. It is inhumane to discriminate anyone based on their gender.

Adichie through the words of Auntie Ifeka implies that a woman’s destiny is in her own actions:

When your uncle just married me, I wondered because I thought those women outside would come and displace me from my home. I know now that nothing he does will make my life change. My life will change only if I want change. You must not behave as if your life belongs to a man...(226)

Therefore, Olanna when she returns from her aunt’s home to Odenigbo she decides to not to marry him until it suited her. Olanna goes even a step further when she contradicts the African concepts of marriage and opts to live with Odenigbo. Adichie here tries to debunk the idea that marriage is not necessary for women to settle down in life. Despite, all the odds Olanna and Auntie Ifeka show uncompromising thoughts and do not allow themselves to become victims of anyone or any custom.

Olanna is able to stand firm and make her own decisions. Even when her parents don’t approve of Odenigbo she is tells them that she will marry him. She firmly says “I don’t want to work in Lagos. I want to work in the university, and I want to live with Odenigbo” (33). Olanna’s parents are only money minded and don’t hesitate to go to the extent of compelling Olanna to yield to the love overture of Chief Okoro. Africa patriarchal custom demands submission of girls to their parents, especially their fathers. However, Olanna is firm and scorns the patriarchal order by rejecting the Chief and teaching the men that women are not mere objects but they have their own rights to independent life.

It is evident through the novels that during the war women were traded for food and other commodities. Starvation makes women the victims of war. Soldiers who have access to food use it to hold women to ransom, to tempt and to subsequently rape them. Women were raped by the white mercenaries as well as and the Biafran themselves.

Ugwu the house boy of Odenigbo participates in a gang rape of a young bartender. Though he did not like it, he participates, to escape from being called a coward by the rest of his crew. It is ironical that to Norridge “rape is depicted as a bonding male excessive in the practice of war”(18). Ugwu to actually join the army to free his nation and restore peace destroys his own target by earning the hatred of female victims.

At this point, the bizarre case of Eberечи shows the male control on helpless women. It was common for soldiers to trade with parents to sleep with their girl child for mainly food for the family. Eberечи’s parent willingly hand her to a soldier who “the next morning, the beaming officer thanked her beaming parents while Eberечи stood by”(200). Similarly, even Nneshinachi too offers her body to ensure continued survival during the war. The picture that Adichie draws is quiet sobering as she demonstrates how a multitude of problems converge on women.

Olanna also is a victim of such acts of lust. Ambrose banks in on the inadequate housing facilities of the war stricken Nigeria. Women were to hurry their bath in the open before dawn and Ambrose peeps at the nakedness of Olanna. According to Nwahunaya “ Women turn out to be the main victims of these power profiteers. Given the situation where a few people have everything and the majority have nothing, the stage is set for the exploitation of whoever turns up” (183).

Even Kainene Olanna’s twin is not intimidated by the male culture. As chief Okonji rightly states to their father “Whoever said you lost out by having twin daughters is a liar.(31). Olanna and Kainene prove the Nigerian belief that newly born twins are “bad Omens”. Adichie presents them as educated and successful women.

The young women in the refugee camps were taken for granted. The commander of Biafran army, a white mercenary, raped defenseless girls and used his authority to sexually abuse the young girls publicly. Another man of this kind is Father Marcel, a religious is in charge of praying in the refugee camp. He sexually assaults the young hungry girls for food in the camp that Kainene runs. He uses their desperate

situation for his evil desires. The most mundane of this is his raping of Urenwa a little girl and getting her impregnate. When Kainene comes to know of this she is moved by the pathetic condition of the young girls. she tells Olanna "Apparently I have been blind; she is not the only one (220). The enraged Kainene wonders how it's possible for a religious leader to do such heinous crimes. She punishes both Father Marcel and his colleague Jude by sending them away.

Both Olanna and Kainene perform certain roles to help their society because of their education and economic independence. Through these women Adichie calls for the empowerment of women. Negotiation, compromise and reconciliation of power since the love of a good man and a stable home is a refuge for a woman" (Mboya,15) To her education is a veritable tool to achieve freedom for women folk of her nation. The life these two twins enforces that the notion that women are the weaker sex and unintelligent should be erased to create a peaceful society.

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