

The Socio-Feminist Context Of The Nigerian Chimamanda Adichie’s Prose Works (Half Of A Yellow Sun And Purple Hibiscus)

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the Socio-Feminist Realism of the novels of Chimamanda Adichie. The selected texts for analysis are Half of a Yellow Sun and Purple Hibiscus. She attempts an interrogation of Nigerian socio-cultural environment and issues in her fictional world especially in the analysis of domestic, national and gender problems. Most interestingly and the focus of this research is the cradle way Adichie handles the problem facing the girl-child at the domestic level within her family as she grows up (Kambili in Purple Hibiscus for instance). Adichie builds in salient socio-cultural and religion themes within the notion of Feminist Realism. Using the sociological feminist approach, this work aims at the contents of Adichie’s selected works and accentuates these areas of thematic concern in its detailed analysis to reveal through characterization, gender issues at the socio cultural background in Africa. The research is an extra diversion and contribution to the existing literature where feminist ideologies are studied but yet to be given much domestic and socio-cultural attention. The author also interrogates the issue of family unity and female vulnerability in crises situations, using the Nigerian civil war as chart table. In both novels, female vulnerability in the face of emergent unhealthy social realities is succinctly interrogated.

Keywords: Socio-Feminist , Hibiscus, feminist

INTRODUCTION

Gender studies in Africa have taken various dimensions; sociological, economical, philosophical, psychological, political, agricultural, and educational in literary views on the position of women across disciplines. In literature, studies in gender issues have to take into cognizance the ingredients used by the writer to make the ‘soup’. This is for the mere fact that gender literary studies in Africa are based on the cultural sensibilities of the people. The content and context of the culture are the aesthetic parameters on which this studies bases its analysis. Most of the critical international acclamation for Chimamanda Adichie’s selected texts, the Purple Hibiscus in particular, is that; “the text powerfully evoke the Nigerian landscape...so detailed, evocative and emotionally true...with swift, seamless storyline that makes it politically tumultuous and intricately textured Nigeria, completely accessible”... (Harford Courant, 2006). The connection of Adichie’s stories with nature and mother earth i.e sun and flower is glaringly a symbolic and deliberate establishment of the natural usefulness, relativity and sufficiency of African land and ecology for easing the problems of its citizenry. Adichie begins her setting in African sensibility. She unites naturalism with realism and exposes for instance, the traumatic moments and familiar brutalities confronting the female child victim in a typical Nigerian family; rich

or poor. The selected texts are adventurous and the reader is made to travel along and gain life experiences. The African socio-cultural set up is self-sufficient yet has given room for western cultural intrusion as a result of greed and the craze for enlightenment/civilization. This leads to socio-cultural conflict and extends to socio-political massacre. For instance, the murderous military regimes of our recent past Nigerian government and the reasons for the murder are major themes in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Hence, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*, the selected novels of Adichie are socio-cultural exposures into gender masculinities and femininity that delimit concentration on feminism alone but agitate for cultural reconstruction of the image of a female and a male at the domestic level. And this is why both her major male and female characters do not only question every circumstance and occurrence but also suggest alternative measures. While *Purple Hibiscus* focuses on the social insecurity of both women and children within the domestic environment, *Half of a Yellow Sun* focuses on the external social environment in a war-torn Nigeria. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is an epic story of love; a substitute for the ugly experience of the Nigerian civil war during the 1960s. The novel recounts the lives of three characters caught up in events they cannot handle. Ugwu is a young houseboy who works for a University Professor. Olanna is the Professor's wife. Another character named Richard is a British expatriate in love with Olanna's twin sister called Kainene. Richard and Kainene's relationship had to break up as the civil war escalates, as during one of the drunken nights of Richard, he spends the night with professor's wife, Olanna, Kainene's (his mistress's) sister. This practice in the African community is an abomination and a taboo; a pollution to the land. The cause of the problem is both the British intrusion and the civil war. Hence, the pragmatic theory is one that cannot be separated from any socio-cultural context since pragmatic is the study of Language use in context. What Adichie seems to be exposing are the bad effects of the Nigerian civil war on humans. She gives vivid scenes of anti-cultural and anti-religious practices as she was told in the stories she heard about the civil war, and which she is sharing with her audience. Hence, she goes in search of 'half of the yellow sun'; not the whole of it. The novel ends on a note of hope.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the notion of black versus white (racial differentiation and segregation) is more pronounced. For instance, right from chapter one, the catholic mission rejects the use of the Igbo language for recitation of Credo and Kyrie. Subsequently, the 'natives' unconsciously and perpetually continue to refer to Father Benedict of St. Agnes as "our new priest" despite the fact that Benedict had been with them for seven years. The concept 'new' negates 'old'. The natives subconsciously differentiate the Whiteman from themselves using the nomenclature 'new', just because he can simply not be part of them. Hear Adichie in the following lines: "To them, Father Benedict is different; looks different; the colour of his face, his British pinched and narrow nose e.t.c." (*Purple Hibiscus*, 2004:3) *Purple Hibiscus* is a sensitive, sorrowful and touching story that takes us through life in a Nigerian cultural home of the Catholics. The novel exhibits the horrors the female child faces in the home while growing up. The narrative voice and major character is Kambili a young female who is confronted by the cruel abuses of her father, who turns callous as a result of his fanatical involvement in Catholicism. And Kambili helplessly watches their existing peaceful and loving home breaking up. Adichie gives details and accounts of events and empowers her victim through the use of subtle words that help to reduce heart pains. She does this with the implantation of certain native words, coinages, societal nuances that can keep her character at ease and be hopeful. Hence, Adichie juxtaposes the notion of sorrow and joy. While cry and sorrow exist in Kambili's family house, laughter and happiness resound in her Auntie Ifeoma's house. Eugene Achike, (Kambili's father)'s hard ways are perpetually linked by his sister, Auntie Ifeoma to his fanatic ways of practicing Christianity. The attempt to be purely civilized and western, leads Papa to his non-use of Igbo language in public unless when he is angry.

This paper examines gender as it occurs in using the examples of the two selected texts of Chimamanda Adichie; *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*. Socio-cultural and literary theory is a feminist movement that advocates for social rights and special accommodations for women. It was

first used to describe members of the women's suffrage movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who were concerned with social problems that affected women. The paper observes the socio organizations and stratifications from the texts with reference to the male and female sexes with particular emphasis on the female and her role, stand, image and place within the society, her community. The conflicts encountered therein are traced to societal and human causes. The women's cause is the man's. hence the significance of mutual existence of both male and female is accentuated in our observation of the setting, the scenes in the plots, language use, the themes and in particular the female and male characters schematized by Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*. Chimamanda Adichie portrays aspects of culture in relation to the female image. The culture, religion, tradition and social dictates that negate women liberation are represented and restructured in favour of both man and woman for the achievement of equality between the two genders.

Feminist Ideologies and the Female Image in African Literature

The social feminism matrix is the reduction of the dominance of men in social and cultural practices. By this, the women can equally be 'in charge of' and become also recognized as the heads of families with powers and inheritances. The belief in women's right creates an opportunity for women's attempted equality with men. The sociological approach puts on record the cultural credentials of a society; customary practices, norms, laws, rules and orders, expected codes of conduct, behavioural patterns etc. all of which as it is in Africa, favour only the male gender. However, a fusion of the feminist theory enables this work to examine the female within the social context and attempts to restructure the female image and identity within the given socio-cultural society. This is because in the first place, the feminist theory challenges the other literary abstractions that claim to be universal while in fact, they concentrate on the male perspective. To the feminist activist and theorists, any literary theory that is universal but does not involve the female experience, is not a unifying theory. Hence, the feminist theory is a challenge to the other theories, as its primary concern is the reconstruction of the sociopolitical and cultural experiences of women. Feminism agitates for women's social, political, economic and cultural equality with their male counterparts. Elaine Showalter (1987) identifies two broad categories of the feminist discipline and doctrine; the feminist critique and the Gynocritics. She says the feminist critique is concerned with the plight of women as the reader's focus is on the critic's interpretation and analysis. The critic interrogates the image of the women as projected by a cultural set up. Feminism should be viewed from the cultural perspective, if transformation is to be achieved. This is why socio-cultural analysis is imperative for the analysis in this study. More so because, it is an inevitable element in religion. Culture establishes itself through the religious practices of the people. And Bryon Wilson (2010) reinforces this when he says: Culture is the trails of individual behavior, the interpersonal relationships evident and persisting, that it is the residual elements of religious consciousness, the motivations that are built into the economic, political and status structures of a system, and sometimes used to reveal their religious roots. Both Religion and culture are interwoven elements used in determining the status, position and image of an African woman and the Nigerian female in particular. The established religious structure of a society, form the foundation for dictating the laws, the political system and the general ideology of the society.

Domestic Violence in the Family Setting

Both men and women are victims of violence. However, women suffer more of the violence effects than men. Violence means the use of verbal threats, force and injury on the other person. It is the infliction of pain; physical, emotional, mental, sexual and psychological on others. It includes the humiliation and degradation of the other person.

Sexual violence carries along with it beatings, force, harassment, rape and attack, there are different types of violence. The violence within the home is caused by the male member of the family i.e the husband and the woman and children, victims. This type includes verbal abuse, incest, beatings, forced marriage, child marriage. It includes the mutilation of the female genital and the commitment of femicide. At home, the African woman is not allowed any right. They are denied of time for relaxation and are made to do most of the work. Financially, they are most times not allowed to accumulate wealth or control their own income. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) is about the domestic family of Eugene Achike, a Christian, a Catholic fanatic, who since his conversion into Catholicism becomes a stranger to his family. His daughter, Kambili, the protagonist of the novel, is disturbed by the recent harsh voice of her abusive father. For the reader to comprehend the changes in the natural environment and the denial of peace and love as a result of the introduction of a new religion, Adichie juxtaposes two families Eugene Achike's and Aunty Ifeoma's. Kambili's aunt (Aunty Ifeoma)'s household is presented as a happy one where "laughter always rang out a bell..." Adichie (2004: 140). This led to Kambili's yearning for self-identity.

Another character by name Eugene is another male who is also colonial trained. Funny enough, Eugene denounces his native Igbo language to the preferred white man's language. He therefore encourages his children to speak the English language always, even at home. He changes his accents when he speaks with the white man (p.46). Hence, Adichie satirizes his self-identity and the identity of his daughter who describes his father's foolish actions of the colonialists. Adichie is interested in exposing the so-called religious fanaticism and faith and reintroducing the indigenous culture and religion. Hence, Anikwenwa, an old man of Papa-Nnukwu's age addresses him thus: "You are like a fly blindly following a corpse to the grave" (p. 70). Further in the search for identity is the role of Aunty Ifeoma to leave like a sacrificial lamb for her family. She is a mother, she teaches despite children custody, washes plates and clothes, cooks and works for the whiteman. Hers is the survival of the fittest.

Emotional Violence

This type of violence is not physical. It includes the negligence of women by refusing to give her any affection or sexual satisfaction. This type includes also forcing the woman to have sex or do things against her wish. The menace of sharing a husband gives the women psychological torture. The male subjects the woman to his whims and refuses her having relationships with the wider community, even with friends, colleagues and relatives; silent brutality. Other identified forms of violence include rape, women trafficking, denial of widowhood rights, blackmail, deceit e.t.c Aunty Ifeoma became psychologically derailed on her father's death and utter the following statement when the father's burial was intended to be a Catholic one "I said I will sell Ifediora's grave first! Was our father a Catholic? Uchu gba gi! Aunty Ifeoma snapped her fingers at Papa; she was throwing a curse on him. Tears rolled down her cheeks" (p. 186).

Psychological Violence

Prolonged absence on the part of the men, adds to their wives' problems, mentally and psychologically. Failure to provide sexual satisfaction would be the emotional distress by the man, in addition to loneliness. This is why perhaps a young and newly married nose-pickers and interrupters as a result of certain historical recounts, formulated in storytelling. One of these stones thematically refers to a very inquisitive woman who nosed into chieftaincy decisions. For this reason, witchcraft became associated with women generally. The woman faces the rigor of pregnancy, child delivery, child care, cooking, fetching water, farming, e.t.c When Jaja and Kambili returns from Aunty Ifeoma's house, their silent suffocation reduced as they discover a new life beyond the confinement of their authoritarian father. Education is the process that provides the young with knowledge, skills, values, enlightenment necessary for any society especially a developing one like ours. Emphasis here is on formal education.

The best education that a female is believed to be capable of having is cooking good food, and helping in the household jobs. The men prefer to educate the male children rather than the female for selfish interests. Also, women are denied governance and democratic rules, in most societies, and this can be regarded as socio and legal injustice. The Nigerian constitution is itself discriminatory. For further instance, it is written in the masculine gender. The language use in the constitution is male-domineering. And this exemplifies the stereotype thinking that women are after-thoughts and not equal citizens and do not have the rights of the male citizens. Offodile in *Purple Hibiscus* for example married an American wife in order to obtain American green card.

ETHNO RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE, PROTESTS AND RESISTANCE IN ADICHIE'S NOVELS

Olowoyeye and Atanda (1998) opine that: “the family constitutes the first world of the child. The home is the first agency of the child’s education, health and welfare. Despite child custody, total family provision and guardianship as part of the responsibilities of women’s role, women are denied their rights. They gradually become the sole maintainers of the family. Domestic violence varies and results into family war. Chastisement (wife beating and assault) is a common Nigerian form of domestic violence according to customary laws. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979) states that discrimination against women is not allowed but what is the situation of things at the domestic and socio cultural levels? The aspect of the constitution on fundamental Human Rights emphasizes that: “a citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, and place of origin, circumstances of birth, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he or she is such a person be discriminated against”. Although customary laws vary from place to place in Nigeria, on the issue of violence against women, the various customary laws in Nigeria tend to agree in many respects. The UNESCO (1992) act also stipulates violence against women as: “any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm of suffering to women, including threats of such acts coercion or arbitrary-deprivation of liberty, whether occurring-deprivation of liberty”. This presupposes the fact that the fight of gender does not stop at describing the position of women in a patriarchal setting but it goes further to proffer various ways for women emancipation from patriarchal oppression. In line with this, African literature in general and Nigerian Literature in particular is poised toward championing the search for better conditions for women in Africa by attempting a portrayal of the realistic social situation of the African woman in fiction.

The need for the female in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* is insinuated right from the domestic setting where Ugwu, a male serving character experiences the domestic terrain of his white master. “Ugwu compares the white food making process to that of his father’s junior wife, Chioke. Let us listen to the following of Adichie’s words: “Ugwu’s mother would be preparing the evening meal now, pounding akpu in the mortar, the pestle grasped tightly with both hands. Chioke, the Junior wife, would be tending the pot of watery soup balanced on three stones over the fire” (2006:7) Even the activities and schedule of a typical Igbo female are further told from the point of view of Ugwu: The girls would have returned from the stream and would have been taunting and chasing one another under the breadfruit tree. The duty of the oldest child is to act as the mother for others already. And this is revealed in the character and position of Anulika in the household who steps and breaks up fights among her young ones. She is the fish divider when all the akpu have been eaten by all the children from the same bowl. She makes sure that each child had a piece (2006:39). Adichie juxtaposes the white home with occurrences in the African home, although the effect of colonialism is the pollution of the African culture, traditional setting and religion. The new culture, tradition and religion have in no realistic way been able to restructure the life of the female in their domestic and socio-cultural experiences. Religion and the fusion of culture rather aggravate the domestic war, the male superiority complex and the socio-cultural conflicts. Selfishness, ignorance and intolerance among families increased. And this is characterized in the person of Eugene Achike (Kambili’s father) in the *Purple Hibiscus*. Religion is used

to pacify the female gender in the catholic brand of religious fanaticism. Religion, ethnic affiliation and the general mode of behaviour have remained the primary variables responsible for conflict and generating economic and political exploitation. It becomes pertinent to briefly highlight the concept of religion. This will boost our understanding of the Igbo practices as enumerated and polluted by the whites in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus. Adichie is able to show how important the role of religion is in all aspects of life in the African society. According to Raymond Firth (1951); "Religion is one of the great driving forces in human endeavours, both individually and socially. It gives sanctions for a wide range of conduct" Firth (1951) by this definition accentuates the social realities of religion. He further opines that religion is a social institution that stands as an impediment to development because it is basic and fundamental to all problems of human existence in which case, we have to regard religion as a central and permanent and topological feature of social life." This means that a description of a set of people's day to day life activities will include their religious practices.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Realism is an ideology developed in the 20th Century by William Thomas who introduced "popular antiquities". This gave room for community theatre where the audience began to represent a close group of people thereby bringing performance into reality. Complex scenes were introduced and seeing became a practical experience. To cushion this effect, the stage became more manipulated. Lights/ props for instance were used to appropriate actions making the plots realistic. In line with many African Feminist Scholars in Women's Studies, there have been "Negotiating Spaces of Dislocation and Transformation in the Study of Women across the world the example of which are Josephine A. Beoku-Betts, Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi [2005 pp. 113-135} among others. This study presents Chimamanda's Purple Hibiscus as a total socio-cultural and religious realism glaringly evident in the scenes, plots, characterization, themes, setting and even in the language use.

This paper has dwelt on the different concepts that surround gender discipline in order to dissect the placement of the female gender; both the domestic and the socio-cultural levels. It examines critical views on the subject feminist realism at home and in the community. The advocacy for gender balance is accentuated in the review of the existing literature. Scholars and Adichie are seen to have observed gender as no issue since it has nothing to do with man's biological differences. The functional aesthetic agitation for gender equilibrium is pronounced in the themes, characters and plot construction of Chimamanda Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun and Purple Hibiscus. This research observes from Adichie's selected texts that female relegation and degradation in all ramifications, exposes its cause as the religion, culture and tradition in the society. Most scholars have treated Nigerian conflicts from the point of view of ethnical set ups and religion focusing on the Nigerian structure and cultural diversity. They have failed to relate and give inner focus to the Nigerian home; the home which is the principal base for any observation on religious and culture practices. This is to say that in the history of class struggles, the oppressed had included the female person and the oppressor, in constant opposition to the oppressed remains the male. And this is situation can be suppressed by the dethronement of religion a review of cultural contents, i.e law, rules, codes and regulations. Gender awareness training and gender analysis in law constitution of the society would help to make peoples mind open to readjustment.

Strategies and recommendations in this research are directed towards the attainment of positive shifts in the image making of the female and in the subsequent endorsement of an equilibrium power relation. In the first place, some policies made to enhance gender equality are left un-implemented, those that are implemented fail as a result of lack of their being principally linked to their conceptual background or without relevant socio-economic information. The public should be enlightened about violence in such a way that Adichie is literarily doing in her texts. The government should enact stricter laws against domestic violence and social harassment. In addition, religious leaders and preachers should be sensitized about the available categories of violence against women. This will enhance

collective national reconstruction and unity. The formal education of the female child should be a domestic necessity. This is why Adichie says in *Purple Hibiscus* that: “If a girl is not sent to school, how would she know the areas where she is being cheated?” (p 7). Knowledge and self – awareness will enhance the female consciousness and her ability to challenge the stereotyped masculine harassments. The female will be able to secure possibilities for equality between the male and the female in the private home and in public place economically and politically. The little informative details in characterization and thematization, in the selected literary works of Adichie are educational deposits for both the male and the female genders to learn from. To comprehend the importance gender in all fictional studies it is noted that we must relate gender to non-sexual analysis in the process of human development. Gender as it occurs in domestic and socio-cultural discourse, is a social stratification symbol with reference to the male and female sexes and with particular emphasis on the female sex and her domestic, social, economic, agricultural and political lives in the society.

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