

WOMAN AS NATION: A NEW NIGERIAN WOMANHOOD IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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Abstract - This paper explores Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a poignant account of the Biafran War and its harrowing aftermath, in terms of its celebration of diverse sexual identities and behaviors in Africa, as well as the harsh realities of life in a conflict zone. Through the characters of Kainene, Mama, and Olanna, the novel depicts Nigeria's struggle for freedom. Mama represents the past, Kainene the future, and Olanna is the embodiment of feminine national identity. As both extreme ends are deemed unacceptable, Olanna, a well-educated woman from Europe, embraces a combination of Kainene's courage and Mama's traditions to join the Civil War. By the end of the novel, she emerges as the representation of women as the nation in the new Nigeria.

Keywords: Achievement, Battle, Individuality, Patriarchy, Sexual assault, Survival

As the novel's events unfold, Olanna's Western-influenced way of life changes due to the challenges she confronts with other Igbo women. These women, who are shaped by a nationalist view of femininity, have a significant impact on Olanna's transformation. In the face of the difficulties brought on by war, Olanna takes on the role of a 'national' figure by assuming the role of an adoptive mother, teaching young children in refugee camps about The Republic of Biafra, collaborating with other women to provide food, and fighting to keep her family alive. The commerce structure was dominated by men, who marginalized women's participation in commerce. However, after the British withdrew in 1960, women resumed their role in producing food and sustaining their communities. Subsequently, during the war in 1967, while men were fighting, women took on new roles.

The allegorical portrayal of women as sustainers and nurturers of the nation became more prominent during the war. Women were compelled to undertake caregiving and provisioning roles and to reclaim some of their pre-colonial trading status to survive. These roles, which Kandiyoti identifies in her analysis of nationalist movements, are embodied by Olanna as a representative of women as the nation. During the British occupation, the contribution of Nigerian women was largely marginalized by an export-driven economy that prioritized the education of men and restricted women to domestic roles as wives and mothers. As a result, women lost their active participation in community life and were confined to the domestic sphere. Meanwhile, men were educated according to British values that reinforced a subordinate role for women, leading to the double colonization of Nigerian women. Thus, the pre-colonial involvement of Nigerian women in commerce was displaced by a Eurocentric model of a male-dominated commercial system that excluded women.

After the departure of the British in 1960, Nigerian women resumed their role in producing food and sustaining their communities. Subsequently, during the war in 1967, while men were fighting, women's roles were redefined allegorically as sustainers and nurturers of the nation. Women were compelled to undertake caregiving and provisioning roles and to reclaim some of their pre-colonial trading status to survive. These roles, which Kandiyoti identifies in her analysis of nationalist movements, are embodied by Olanna as a representative of women as the nation.

To understand Olanna's evolution from a Western woman to an allegory, it is necessary to examine Kainene and Mama, who represent extreme and partial models of nationalist women. Jameson defines third-world allegorical literature, explaining that "all the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of collectivity itself" The influence of Nigerian women in the refugee camp shapes Olanna's character and completes Adichie's allegory.

Adichie presents Kainene as a dominant and self-reliant woman, who defies traditional gender roles. This portrayal of Kainene goes beyond the conventional representation of women. Adichie emphasizes Kainene's power through her relationships with Richard, her lover, and her father. Richard is intimidated by her strength, which causes him to be impotent during their initial sexual encounters. Kainene's indifference and reserve, in contrast to other women, further highlight her inscrutability. On the other hand, Olanna's feminine traits make Richard feel more masculine, but he and Olanna fear Kainene's wrath if she discovers their relationship.

Kainene's business acumen is a source of great power, particularly in her relationships with men. Unlike Olanna, who works directly with Nigerian women and children in refugee camps, Kainene uses her skills to navigate the patriarchal system and build relationships with powerful male leaders. Through her connections in her father's corporation, she gains access to food depots that are typically off-limits to women and negotiates deals to help the refugees in the relief camps. As frustration mounts over the inadequate food supply in the camps, Kainene takes matters into her own hands and embarks on an "afia attack" – a risky mission to procure supplies from across enemy lines.

In "Igbo Women in the Nigerian-Biafran War 1967-1970: An Interplay of Control," Christie Achebe defines the Afia attack thus: "Afia attack" is so called because its war-like nature mimics the military attack against an enemy stronghold. The shrinking of food sources during the war was a direct assault on the capability of the women to successfully carry out what they perceived as their traditional role. It was an attack that impugned their very reason for being – to oversee the health of the nation. This was a war of survival that was making a mockery of the women's self-worth and integrity and was threatening to strip them of their status in society. They had to modify their role to fit the new emergency. Kainene's character stands out from other women as she does not conform to the traditional gender roles mentioned by Achebe. She shows no fear of crossing enemy lines, which sets her apart from other female characters. Kainene's primary focus is on her job, and she is determined to get it done. Despite her strength and independence, she still takes risks when going on afia attacks, both literally and figuratively "crossing the line."

Adichie presents Kainene and Mama as polar opposites, and as such, they are eventually phased out of the story. In contrast, Olanna embodies the best qualities of both women. She assumes the nurturing role of a mother like Mama, serves as an educator, works closely with refugee women and children, and fights for their well-being and that of her family, just like Kainene. Adichie's novel creates an important link between the struggles of women for survival and the men who are fighting a war to save Nigeria. While the men are fighting to rebuild the nation, Adichie chooses to explore the Nigerian Civil War through the story of twin sisters who become estranged from each other. This allows her to represent the efforts of women in the process of building a new nation. Historically, women have been given a limited role in nationalist struggles and wars, but Adichie's portrayal of the twin sisters highlights the critical role that women play in shaping the future of their countries.

In this allegory, the division of Nigeria parallels the dichotomy between Kainene and Mama, representing the modern and traditional ends of the feminine spectrum respectively. The masculine attitude towards war results in a national ideal of women that is limited in scope. The North is concerned about the loss of wealth from the South if secession is successful, while the Igbo in the South secedes due to cultural, ethnic, and religious differences with the North. However, the end of the war brings together the divided country, much like how Olanna embodies the strength and determination of Kainene and Mama, representing the modern and traditional perspectives respectively. Through her experiences surviving the war, Olanna transforms from a Western woman to a Nigerian woman, coming to symbolize the woman as a nation through various life-changing events.

Throughout the novel, Kainene's perspective highlights Odenigbo's passivity, contrasting with Olanna's strength. While Odenigbo is involved in war-related discussions and activism with fellow university professors, he remains an observer rather than an active participant. Olanna's love for him perhaps blinds her to his limitations. However, after learning of his mother's death at the hands of Hausa soldiers, coupled with his reduced living conditions due to the war, he becomes a powerless drunk. Olanna then steps up to lead the family forward, displaying a strength that mirrors Kainene's but also includes nurturing and caring. This embodiment of both the old and the new reflects Olanna's struggle with conservative and modern gender roles, as she takes on the traditionally masculine role of family leader.

As the novel progresses, Olanna takes on the role of protector in her efforts to prevent Ugwu from being conscripted, which is traditionally a masculine role. Conversely, both Odenigbo and Ugwu appear as weak male characters in their respective roles as observers and servants, with Ugwu having to submit to the wishes of his social superiors, Olanna and Odenigbo. However, when Ugwu is wounded in battle and is recovering, both Odenigbo and Olanna view him differently.

As the novel progresses, Olanna also takes on the role of protector, assuming a traditionally masculine role in trying to prevent Ugwu from being conscripted. While Ugwu initially appears weak in his role as a servant, as a result of being socially inferior to Olanna and Odenigbo, their views of him change when he is wounded in battle and recovering. Odenigbo's admiration for Olanna's strength reflects his own recognition of his weakness. When they bring Ugwu home together, their family is reunited, and healing begins for all three of them. With the rescue of Ugwu, Odenigbo and Olanna function as a married couple, balancing traditional and modern elements to create a more equal partnership. Olanna embodies the new vision for women, balancing her modern marriage with the more conservative nurturing role to which women are often assigned. She cares for Ugwu, unknowingly preserving his life for the future of the nation.

Olanna's character in the novel challenges the traditional portrayal of women in nationalist struggles, going beyond the binary representations embodied by Kainene and Mama. As the story progresses, Olanna sheds some of her Westernized ways and embraces a more indigenous approach in her quest to find Kainene, which is ironic because Kainene embodies the modern and powerful woman who would have dismissed such superstitious beliefs. Olanna's ability to balance both modern and traditional roles as a wife, mother, protector, and caregiver, redefine the role of women in Nigeria's struggle for independence. The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* portrays Nigerian women, symbolized by Olanna, as rediscovering themselves through their struggle to survive and preserve the next generation during the Civil War. These women draw from both traditional and modern elements that reinforce feminine and human solidarity, reflecting a postcolonial definition of Nigerian womanhood. Having been double-colonized by the British from 1900 to 1960 and then facing the challenges of defining their nationhood just seven years into independence, Nigerian women found themselves as outsiders in their own country. However, with the men fighting the war, the novel suggests that women were able to redefine themselves and their roles in society.

Olanna's strength in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is often interpreted through a feminist lens, but it is important to note that her strength is derived from shedding her adherence to modern, Western ways and embracing a combination of modern and conservative values that allow her to become a representative of the Nigerian nation. Despite her ability to speak European languages, Olanna desires to learn more native languages to better communicate with those around her. The uncertainty of war causes her to commit to her relationship with Odenigbo through marriage, despite her previous reservations. She becomes a mother, fulfilling the cultural role of motherhood that she thought was unavailable to her due to her infertility. Adichie also emphasizes the importance of Olanna's work as a teacher to the next generation of small children in refugee camps, while keeping her position as a university teacher vague.

As a result of the Civil War, Olanna finds herself for the first time inside the fold of Nigerian women, and through her experiences, she is able to redefine womanhood in those changing times. Olanna's ability to combine modern and conservative ways reflects the postcolonial definition of Nigerian womanhood, drawing from both traditional and modern values to reinforce feminine and human solidarity. With the men fighting the war, Nigerian women like Olanna rediscover themselves through their struggle to survive and preserve the next generation, ultimately embodying the new vision for women in Nigeria.

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