The Empowerment of Women through Education: A Reading of 

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* explores how female characters struggle with their subjugation and oppression stemming from patriarchy. She surveys the position of women in the world and the oppressive gender structures that push women to the periphery of the society. Her novels also foreground the public dominant power structures through which women are oppressed. She identifies domestic violence, religion, tradition, family life, in-lawism, civil unrest, extended families, multi-marriage, desire for son, racism, colonialism and neo-colonialism as being responsible for unequal gender relations forming the basis of domination of women. She describes unfriendly manly actions like rape in times of war, sexual abuse of children as shown when father Marcel exploits underage girls in exchange for food during the Biafra war in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie interrogates polygamy, in-lawism, and demand for sons, religious fundamentalism and their negative effects on women. In this texts, she persuades society to review the way it treats women.

**Key Words:** Women Empowerment, Women Education, Gender Inequality, Marriage, and Patriotism.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, presents yet another type of struggle from which the female characters seek their freedom. Women and children
were the most vulnerable group during the Nigerian-Biafra war. They usually suffer severe hardships. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, poses the multiple struggles of women who tend to free themselves from sexual abuse, exploitation, corruption, humiliation, civilian attacks, mass evacuation, depression, hunger, disease and death. Amongst the aforementioned conditions, sexual violence against women remains the most traumatic and the most shameful experience.

The desire for children is explored through the characters of Olanna, Arize, Odenigbo’s mother and Anulika among others in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It is the desire for a child and a grandson that drives Odenigbo’s mother to encourage Amala to live with Odenigbo and this leads to the near collapse of Odenigbo’s relationship with Olanna. To Mama, Odenigbo is a spoiled woman. She treats her as one who cannot bear children. Mama’s concern grows out of the significance attached to children in Igbo society and by extension Africa. She seriously wants to have a grandson. She complains that those girls who go to university follow men until their bodies are useless to have children. She says: “no wonder my son has not married while his mates are counting how many children they have” (97). The situation described here resembles what happens in Nwapa’s *One is Enough* (1990) where Amaka’s relationship with her husband Obiora is strained. The mother-in-law accuses her of being barren. Therefore, childlessness is apparently a permanent source of frustration to the African women as portrayed in Adichie’s *Half of a yellow sun*.

Children in the family are considered as nuclear part because they take care of parents and carry forward the family lineage. This explains why women and society are controlled by the desire to have many children so as to carry the family name and enlarge the husband’s clan. This, in itself, points to the patriarchal nature of Adichie’s society that ties a woman to the husband’s clan by virtue of having boys. In an effort to bring change in the institution of motherhood, adoption is suggested as progressive way to attempt childlessness. Olanna
adopts Amala’s child and care for her because her mother rejects her immediately when she was born. Similarly the same happened in Mrs. Ozobia’s life also. Aunty Ifeka nursed Olanna and Kainene because her breasts dried soon after they were born. As a result, Olanna thinks that Aunty Ifeka is as good as her mother. She always seeks the help of Aunty Ifeka when she has problems with Odenigbo.

Olanna also feels glad when the nurse asks her how many children she has. Her feelings throw out of what society demands from women: motherhood. A similar societal obsession with the desire to have children is what makes Arize’s mother-in-law disgraces her by demanding to know how many abortions she has had before marriage. Nnakwanze is also worried over Arize for not becoming pregnant during the first, second and third year of their marriage. Arize’s misfortune is a source of oppression from her mother-in-law. Amala suffers a lot in the hands of Odenigbo’s mother who wants to use her to get a grandson. Such a situation puts women under a lot of pressure, curtails their freedom, and makes them slaves of societal demands and desires leaving them without a choice of their own.

The characters of the old women “Mama” (mother-in-law) in the novel show that patriarchy has conditioned women to accept demand set across by the male order. In accepting the patriarchal demands and forcing fellow women to follow costume, they have become achieve of their own suffering. Through the characters of Ifeoma, Olanna and Kainene, Adichie shows that motherhood can be revised in order to stop women oppression and suffering. Adichie revises the perception on issues of motherhood through Kainene and Olanna. The *Half of a Yellow Sun* is captured in terms of women and motherhood progressively. Kainene and Olanna do not value motherhood so much because Kainene remains without a child for the entire life of the novel. Olanna adopts Amala’s child. Kainene and Richard are happy and wealthy despite childlessness. This is the world that Adichie proposes whereby women are less burdened by their biological duties of mothering.
In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie depicts daughters who reject to be tools of male exaggeration. It is highlighted through the episode where Ozobia uses his daughter Olanna to get a contract from the Minister of Finance; chief Okonji. Olanna is uncomfortable about and says:

She wondered, too, how her parents had promised Chief Okonji an affair with her in exchange for the contrast. Had they stated it verbally, plainly, or had it been implied? ‘I have made plans to go to Kano, to see Uncle Mbaezi and the family, and Mohammed as well,’ she said. Her father stabbed at his avocado. ‘I see.’ (32)

This extract points to the question of daughters being used as sexual bait. Kainene later observes:

The ten per cent is standard, so extras always help. The other bidders probably don’t have a beautiful daughter.’ Kainene dragged the word out until it sounded cloying, sticky: beautiful. She was flipping through the copy of Lagos life, her silk robe tied tightly around her skinny waist. ‘The benefit of being the ugly daughter is that nobody uses you as sex bait. (35)

Adichie points out that women are utilized for material gains. When the parents plan Olanna to get sexually involved with the finance minister, they paint an ugly picture of daughters who have no choice of even sexual partners. It is learnt that Olanna’s father did not receive her choice of Odenigbo positively. The narrator identifies that all is not well with Odenigbo as Olanna’s fiancée. She tells: “her father only wanted to gall him and show how unimpressed he was by a senior lecturer from Nsukka” (32). Such wish of parents to control Olanna’s choice of partners is explored when Olanna talks about her mother and the different opinions they hold over her choices. Adichie brings up a situation where Olanna rebels to suggest that women should stand their ground on issues of personal choice. Personal choice points to characters’ autonomy and some degree of liberty on the part of women. Eberechi
suffers during the war. She is used as sex bait. She does not have the right to choose a life partner. This act is a total disregard of her humanity and reject the young girl her basic rights. Adichie highlights this episode to indicate positive change for the betterment of women.

Adichie discredits those women who are immortalizing practices that degrade and oppress fellow women like Alice, Amala, Nnankwanze’s mother and Odenigbo’s mother. African scholars like Emecheta, Aidoo, Nwapa, Frank and Mariama Ba argue that wifehood and motherhood are the major source of oppression. It is palpable that other relationships with men are also oppressive. In such relationships, women unconsciously take advantage of fellow women as they live together with their husbands or boyfriends.

Adichie in Half of a Yellow Sun sees women as progressive elements in society. They are the promoters of their society during the Biafra war. Women badly and continuously search for food and medicine during the war. In this way, they sustain their communities. Kainene introduces the idea of growing cross to feed the refugees during the time when there is no food for the forthcoming Biafrans. Olanna goes ahead to try and get an alternative job for her husband who withdraws as the war push onward. She also starts a school to teach the children that there would be continuity after the war.

Onyango argues that abolishing illiteracy has been top on the women’s agenda for setting free. He admits that in many patriarchal societies especially in Africa educating a male child is more of a priority than educating a girl child. He argues that women’s education is a strong socialization device used by women in Adichie’s novels to fight female subordination and oppression.

The Nigerian writer Nwapa in her novel Efuru the reason why women are rarely educated in patriarchal societies: “It is a waste sending girls to school he says. They get married before the end of their training and the money is wasted” (191-192).
Although patriarchal society think like Gillbert, in Adichie’s novels female education is perceived differently. Odenigbo informs Ugwu in Half of a Yellow Sun that, “Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don’t have the tools to understand exploitation?” (11). This statement is quite applicable to the education of women because through education, women would understand the structures that oppress them and strive to end their corner.

Ugwu describes about Miss Adebayo that she is not the soft African woman who is quite but rather argumentative and firm. She is knowledgeable on numerous issues. She can engage male scholars actively and progressively. She is well-informed and challenges other professionals who meet at Odenigbo’s house. Olanna’s entry is impressive and Ugwu is carried away by her spoken English since she spoke, “the kind of English he heard on Master’s radio,” (22). Olanna pursued her master degree from the University of London. Abdulmalik holds Olanna with lots of respect and when he is introduced to her, he portrays: “expression of people who marvelled at education with calm certainty that it would never be theirs” (40). It is learnt from Arize that education for women delays marriage and the subsequent subordination of that institution. The narrator observes:

Arize’s round eyes were admiring and bewildered. ‘It is only women that know too much Book like you who can say that, Sister. If people like me who don’t know Book wait too long, we will expire.’ Arize paused as she removed a translucently pale egg from inside the chicken. ‘I want a husband today and tomorrow, oh! My mates have all left me and gone to husbands’ house. (41)

This is a strong statement that education delays a woman entry into marriage. Frank, Emechets and Nwapa that by acquiring education, women enter into the public sphere and positively fight with men as equals in job market. Olanna is employed as a lecturer at the
University of Nigeria. When she quarrels with Odenigbo’s mother, she goes to her flat and continues to do her job. Kainene informs chief Okonji that she would manage the father’s business in the east and she will utilize her degree for a good deed. Olanna chides the cousin Arize to concentrate on her sewing training so as to be independent. Adichie’s writings stress that education makes women attain the privileges of autonomy. Women could compete with men at all domains.

Olanna’s mother who is less educated clings to her husband. She is terribly depressed when she learns of his mistress. The least educated girls like Anulika, Nnesiachi, Amala and Arize are suffer on account of the oppression of the patriarchal order. Anulika is ready to marry when she is at barely sixteen. Amala is used by Odenigbo’s mother to live with Odenigbo and produce for her a grandson.

Adichie portrays the miracle of women empowerment by projecting characters who are educated and others with less or no education so as to draw parallels and give some freedom to the educated ones. Educated women in the two novels escape from the male oppression unlike uneducated women. The theme of women education in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* resonates well with Mariama Ba in *So Long a letter* where education has the potential to provide women with the possibility of crafting new identity beyond womanhood and acquire consciousness of empowerment. It has an impact on their relationship with male at the family and societal levels.

This paper has identified the perennial problems of women such as inequality, restrictions, penalties and denials directed towards women in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It is commonly believed that tradition, religion, marriage, motherhood and the desire for baby boys are the few obstacles that silence the emergence of women to achieve the goals in their life. Adichie strongly condemns such institutions and practices which perpetuate gender
inequality and continued to marginalize women. And also speaking to strong female characters, Adichie says that education for women and female bonding are identified as the strategies that women utilize to fight oppression and exclusion.

References


