



A STUDY OF MOTHERISM IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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Abstract

The world fictionalized in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is "divided by war and united by love". Drawing on Catherine Acholonu's "motherism", this paper aims to show the motherist activism of the women characters, especially that of Olanna, the lead character in Adichie's novel. During the Biafran War, when the nation and the family are at stake, Olanna sustains the family with her nurturing love. She takes care of everyone around her –her own child, the boy servant, her husband, and her neighbors without any discrimination. Along with Olanna, her sister Kainene are not mothers in the biological meaning of the word, yet they emerge embodying such key tenets of motherism as 'love', 'service', and 'tolerance'.

Keywords: activism, Biafran war, love, motherism, service, women.

Introduction:

Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) is the second published novel of the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie who is called "the 21st – century daughter of Chinua Achebe". Achebe himself lauds Adichie: "We do not usually associate wisdom with beginners, but here is a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers. Adichie knows what is at stake, and what to do about it" (qtd. Mukerjee 2015). Almost all the novels of Adichie are rooted in her motherland and fictionally explore with remarkable artfulness its troubles and tribulations. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is regarded as the "Best of the Best" and won Adichie Women's Prize for Fiction in 2007. In 2020, on the 25th anniversary of the Women's Prize for Fiction, it has once again been declared "winner of winners" of the Women's Prize for Fiction. The title *Half of a Yellow Sun* refers to the image of the sun in the Biafran flag and the novel set in the 1960s fictionalizes the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) which is also known as the Biafran War. Through

three characters – Olanna, Kainene, and Ugwu, Adichie has focussed the struggle of the Nigerian civilians, those who have not directly participated in the war as soldiers but have fought their own fights and has interlaced their lives as the storm of the Civil War breaks into Nigeria. "*Half of a Yellow Sun* is a remarkable novel about moral responsibility, about the end of colonialism, about ethnic allegiances, about class and race –and about the ways in which love can complicate [and un-complicate] them all" (*Half of the Yellow Sun* 2017).

Half of a Yellow Sun has sparked many critical responses. Roshan K. Morve in "Representation of History in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)" has made an effort to understand the cause of the war, the reasons for the suffering of the Nigerians, and the nature and impact of the conflict on the Nigerians. In "Tales of War for the 'Third Generation': Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*", Serena Guarracino argues that Adichie's narrative

focus is not restricted, local and selective. Being a third-generation writer, her narrative focus is a cosmopolitan one. In a postcolonial background, Adichie has presented the Biafran War through “multiplying layers of re-telling” to a global audience. In “Genocide and Hubristic Masculinity in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*” Chigbo Anyaduba presents how Igbo men are misrepresented to be solely responsible for the violence and catastrophe of the Biafran War as a result of which the actual culprits go unpunished. Anyaduba rejects the critical reception of this image of the Igbo man, especially in feminist scholarship on Biafra, writing that accepts it as an accurate and unproblematic representation of Igbo maleness and Igbo men’s historical place during the conflict” (86). Alphonse Dorien Makosso’s paper entitled, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*: A Transmitted Trauma” focuses on the trauma of war which Makoso argues has passed from one generation to the other – from Adichie’s parents to Adichie, and from Adichie to the readers and so on. Janice Spleth presents Adichie’s shift of the narrative center from the site of the battlefield to the domestic front. In other words, Adichie has privileged the domestic front and presented “the real nature of civil war and its consequence for the civilian population” (129). Carol Ijeoma Njoku in the article, “Contrasting Gender Roles in Male Crafted Fiction with *Half of a Yellow Sun*” looks at the novel as an “intervention into Nigerian war narratives – a rediscovery of the Nigerian-Biafra female heroine” (154).

This paper extends these critical responses and intends to deviate from the referred readings of Adichie’s novel by exploring motherism in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Drawing on Catherine Acholonu’s “motherism”, this paper aims to show the motherist activism of the women characters, especially that of Olanna, the lead character in the novel.

What is Motherism?

Let us begin by asking what is “motherism”? Motherism is the Afro-feminist take developed and theorized by the Nigerian thinker and writer Catherine Obianuju Acholonu (1951-2014) in her

1995 book *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. In presenting this “Afrocentric alternative to feminism”, Acholonu was to a great extent influenced by Philomena Steady, Alice Walker, Ama Ata Aidoo (Otiono 78). Motherism has been defined Acholonu as an

Afrocentric feminist theory...anchored on the matrix of *motherhood* which is central to African metaphysics and has been the basis of the survival and unity of the black race through the ages. Whatever Africa’s role may be in the global perspective, it could never be divorced from her quintessential position as the Mother Continent of humanity...Africa’s alternative to Western feminism is MOTHERISM and Motherism denotes motherhood.... The Motherist is the man or woman committed to the survival of Mother Earth as a hologrammatic entity. The weapon of Motherism is love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation of the sexes. (Acholonu 3)

Motherism springs from a humanist take on feminism. It is the blossoming and oozing of the essential self of a woman. Motherism is holistic in overtone, positing love at the center of things. It is against any ideologically poisonous assumptions, for example, all “men are distasteful or evil” (Otiono 77). It is a “philosophy of action” with unalloyed optimism. It is rooted in the belief that hatred is a defeating and destructive force while love is a positive, unifying, conquering, and constructive one. Motherism upholds “that the world is full of love, even if there is lots of hate around. The light is there and invariably, the light will overcome darkness...love conquers evil all the time (Otiono 78). Motherism is one of the offshoots of African feminism and is different in its essence from western feminist practice as it denotes “motherhood, nature and nurture” (Eyoh 5). It will be wrong to assume that motherism is a one-dimensional activity. In Acholonu’s words, motherism is “a multidimensional theory which involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with nature at all levels of human endeavour” (qtd. in Eyoh 5).

Motherism in *Half of a Yellow Sun*:

As the quintessence of motherism is “love”, “tolerance”, “service”, and “mutual cooperation”, this paper will explore how the women characters especially the protagonist Olanna embodies these cornerstones of motherism.

Olanna is love incarnate. She loves and tolerates Odenigbo with all his faults, she loves the boy-servant she loves her kith and kin, and most importantly she in her own way loves and tolerates her native place. During the hard times of war, Olanna does not leave her country for which her parents have made arrangements. She holds tight to her near and dear ones. Overcoming her personal losses, she comes to the aid of others. Olanna loves Odenigbo so much so that she goes against her parents’ will to live with him. In her absence, Odenigbo slept with Amala. Olanna adopts their child and brings her up like her own mother. Odenigbo’s mother considers Olanna to be a witch. She accuses Olanna of casting an evil charm on her son and insults her on each visit. But Olanna does not mind and goes on loving him. Their relationship suffers a serious jolt in the tumultuous time but Olanna’s love keeps the relationship steady. During the war, Odenigbo has lost everything – his job, his security, the money he has invested. Olanna stands by stricken Odenigbo as a solid rock: “She cradled him, wrapped her arms around him, and slowly he relaxed against her. His arms circled her. His sobs became audible. With each intake of breath, they reminded her of Baby; he cried like his daughter” (*Half of a Yellow Sun* 314).

On her first meeting with the boy-servant Ugwu, she establishes a friendly relationship and extends her helping hand: “Let me help you with that” (24). When Ugwu comes to know that Olanna will live with master Odenigbo, he gets tensed because he is afraid that things are going to change in the household. But Ugwu is fascinated with her ways very fast. On the first meeting, Ugwu associates her with mother nature: “Her oval face was smooth like an egg, the lush color of rain-drenched earth” (HYS 23). The association with nature continues: “There was something polished

about her voice, about her; she was like the stone that lay right below a gushing spring, rubbed smooth by years and years of sparkling water, and looking at her was similar to finding that stone, knowing that there were so few like it” (HYS 24). This association with mother nature points at the nurturing nature of Olanna. For Olanna, Ugwu is more than her domestic help. When the soldiers “conscripted” Ugwu, Olanna “felt as if she were about to turn a corner and be flattened by tragedy” (HYS 356). She has spent her last saving to bring Ugwu back: “I bribed that soldier with all the money I have” (HYS 334).

The mother in Olanna comes out when she chooses to take Baby in. Baby is not her biological child. Odenigbo and Amala are the biological parents of Baby. During wartime, Amala cannot afford the baby, and so she decides to abort the baby. Olanna agrees to adopt the baby, despite the facts that the baby is a girl and she has always fancied a boy, and her own biological child is due as she is pregnant, and also that “it is not right for [her] to raise the child [Odenigbo] had with a village girl [Odenigbo] impregnated while she is away” (HYS 239). Olanna tells her sister that she is formally adopting Baby neither to gratify her lover Odenigbo nor to gratify other people but to help another helpless mother. Olanna is so noble that she decides to give Baby back whenever Amala returns and is able to take her back: “I’ll have her call me Mummy Olanna or something so that if Amala ever comes back, she can be Mummy” (239-40). Olanna rejects the name, Obiageli given by her mother, names her Baby, and declares that Kainene will be the godmother of Baby. Olanna mothers Baby and makes and treats her as her own child. On the day of adoption, she feels restless that is compensated by discovering something new in her:

She shifted this way and that in bed that night. She had not felt sorry for the child. Instead, holding that tiny, warm body, she had felt a conscious serendipity, a sense that this may not have been planned but had become, the minute it happened, what was meant to be. (HYS 239)

During the war, “the swift roar of planes and the sharp ka-ha-ka of anti-aircraft gunfire” makes Olanna panicked and she hides in the bunker with Baby. The safety of Baby is of prime importance to her. She waits in queue to get dried egg for Baby. She is so worried about Baby’s safety that the mere mention of two lice eggs in Baby’s hair freaks her “Lice? What are you saying? How can Baby have lice? I keep her clean. Baby! Baby!” (263). Olanna is so freaked out that she dreams of “Dark Swoop: A thick blanket descended from above and pressed itself over her face, firmly, while she struggled to breathe” (148). Olanna tolerates a lot for Baby who allegorizes Biafra, and allegorically she becomes the mother of the nation to be born.

Olanna expresses love for her native place by rejecting the aristocratic life of her parents or the Western lifestyle. She is Olanna Ozobia, the daughter of Chief Ozobia. She could have lived a life of luxury away from her native place but she decides to stick to it. She offers her “service” by becoming a “national actor”. Amid violent attacks, she continues teaching students, making them aware of the dreamed nation Biafra and its flag:

She taught them about the Biafran flag. They sat on wooden planks and the weak morning sun streamed into the roofless class as she unfurled Odenigbo’s cloth flag and told them what the symbols meant. Red was the blood of the siblings massacred in the North, black was for mourning them, green was for the prosperity Biafra would have, and, finally, the half of a yellow sun stood for the glorious future. (HYS 267)

During one of the air attacks, Olanna becomes infuriated and decides to go “swadeshi”. She makes soap at home, revives the dream project her husband has initiated:

She dissolved the ash in a basin of cold water, stirring with a force that made the water splatter on her legs. There was something delicious in the sweat that trickled under her arms, in the surge of the vigour that made her heart thump, in the odd-smelling mash that emerged after

cooling. It lathered. She had made soap. (HYS 267)

Such willed acts make Olanna rise as a unique individual exalted with motherism.

Besides Olanna, Kainene shows her love for the country by offering essential service during the war. She provides in the refugee camps the most vital thing during the war: food. She takes upon herself the task of supplying and distributing food in the refugee camps and takes initiative to grow food independently: “I’ll distribute the food to the refugees myself and I’m going to ask the Agricultural Research Centre for some... Manure. We can start a farm at the camp. We’ll grow our own protein, soya beans, and akidi ” (HYS 302). Moreover, she shelters Olanna, stands by her in her need, and finally forgives and tolerates both Olanna and Richard for having a physical relationship while she is not present.

Women other than Olanna and Kainene have expressed their love for the dream nation: “Mama Oji started the song, “*Onye ga-enwe mmeri?*” and the other women responded “*Biafra ga-enwe mmeri, igba!*” and formed a circle and swayed with graceful motions and stamped down hard as they said *igba!*” (HYS 315). Ordinary Igbo women have sacrificed everything they have hoarded— money, jewellery for the national cause. Mrs Muokelu whose husband got terribly injured in the war leaves her teaching job and opts for doing business. Her responsibility for the family outweighs her national responsibility. Women thus fight shoulder to shoulder for the familial cause vis-à-vis the national cause.

Conclusion

Women’s actions in the novel are the human actions. Their engaging action and empathetic intervention into crisis give the message that they understand the pain, the suffering caused by the war. Their “confidence comes from the belief that all human beings resemble each other, that others carry wounds like [them] – that they will therefore understand” (Pamuk 2007). Motherism thus gives women agency, to be more particular human agency which is a must during the disastrous

phenomenon of the Civil War. Motherism adds a new dimension to their being and helps them rise above the societal stock expectations. "The truth the book tells is about the horror and the pity of war. About the human beings who had to suffer it" (Jordison 2020). And most importantly Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* tells us how women live through the war. Olanna and other women exemplify motherism and through the fictional representation of them, Chimamanda Adichie completely qualifies as a "motherist writer". Catherine Acholonu mentions that "A motherist writer is not a sexist. The motherist male [or female] writer or artist does not create his [or her] work from a patriarchal, masculinist, dominatory perspective." (3). Chimamanda Adichie is one such writer who does not indulge in "sexism". She refrains from "phallogocentric" practices, and from hegemonizing the novel by giving preference to the male agency.

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