

Womanism and Gender Reinvention in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*

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Abstract

The explorations of gender roles, a leitmotif in many modern African literary texts, has received critical investigative attention. Different scholarly perspectives have redefined gender movements and ideologies with the uniqueness of the African cultural space. This study examines the appropriation of the tenets of Womanism as a gender theory and movement in two of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*. Using Womanism, the texts are subjected to critical analysis with a close reading of the characters, events, actions, and utterances of the female characters featured in the two novels. The evaluation of the texts reveals that most of the female characters portrayed by Adichie transcend gender limitations as they reinvent themselves. By implication, Adichie characterised females in these novels as playing roles that are socially constructed as masculine such as strength, bravery, intelligence, freedom and breadwinning. Some of these characters play such roles in addition to the stressful tasks of motherhood. In line with the tenets of Womanism, the female characters in the novels are accommodationists, not separatists: they like men and children and collaborate with fellow women to achieve their dreams.

Introduction

Gender discourse has become a topical issue in modern African prose fiction. This is the case with Nigerian literature, where many female writers recount women's experiences and challenges in a male-dominated society. The gender question in Nigerian literature became prominent during the end of European colonialism. The pioneer Nigerian novelists were perceived to be patriarchal and chauvinistic in their characterisation of women in line with the cultural manifestations of pre-colonial African society. Critics of the earliest works of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, and Elechi Amadi explore what they perceive as the subjugation and invisibility of the womenfolk. On this note, Sotunsa (2008: 55) observes:

Since African tradition is primarily based on a patriarchal structure, it is often considered a veritable means of expression against the African woman. African women in Emecheta's fiction attempt to break free from the noose of the rigid, oppressive culture and tradition that eventually end up in self-destruction or get estranged in the process (Sotunsa, 2008: 55).

Like Sotunsa's observation, Akorede declares that "the negative portrayal of women in literature appears to be man's artistic way of getting even with a woman for her role in man's loss of endemic tranquillity" (Akorede, 2011: 11). The depiction of women, as mothers, wives and breadwinners in African literature, is socially convincing—it foregrounds the patriarchal structure of Africa, where women are culturally and socially constructed as inferior and invisible. However, there are exaggerative markers in the demonisation and debasement of the woman's image in male-authored works. According to Ellman (1978), the stereotypical representation of women in the pioneering works of African male writers is shoddy and counterfeited. Critics of Ellman's view refer to masculinity in the works of Achebe, Amadi, Ekwensi and other pioneer male chauvinists. In a similar view, Okereke (1998: 145) opines that earliest male novelists "relegate their female characters to secondary spaces, indeed to literary ghettos, as lovers, bedmates, entertainers and sexual background for man in power". Many feminist scholars think that the public image of women in male-authored works is that of man's appendages and courtesan (Kenneth, 1980; Frank, 1987 & Akorede, 2011).

However, education and exposure of African women to Euro-American culture have brought a new dimension to the portrayal of the image of women in African literature. Women had come into the

creative scene to rewrite their experiences. The earliest form of writing by women merely exposed the predicaments of the woman in a male-dominated society without making much effort to restore/encourage her visibility. This narrative pulse runs through the works of Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali and others. While some of these female writers foreground the repressive forces of patriarchal oppression on the African woman through the instrumentality of polygamy, others narrate the challenges the womenfolk encounter in trying to cope with their roles as mothers, wives and career-builders. In whichever way, the African cultural construct influences the depiction of African woman's image in works authored by female writers. This is why Akorede (2011: 11) notes that "the perception of women in different cultures and societies affects how they have been "led to imagine" themselves". In acknowledging the domestic and public responsibilities of the African woman who struggles with the challenges of motherhood, Omolara Ogundipe (1987: 6) regards the traditional sweet mother as the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice. Sotunsa (2008) reveals that "female writers in Africa and worldwide agree that male writers do not present or portray the authentic and acceptable portrayal of the woman character. They accuse them of resorting to the use of stereotypes" (126).

The study adopts Womanism, an African variant of feminism, to investigate Adichie's portrayal of female characters that transcend patriarchal limitations. The healthy collaboration of the female characters in the two novels attests to the tenets of Womanism as an accommodationist theory that privileges the woman's social growth. The deployment of the womanist theory will help explicate the women's roles following the African norms and values and those that deviate from the African mores. This is to examine the influence of Euro-American culture on African woman's rethinking of gender roles. Through the combination of these theoretical ideas, unhealthy gender stereotypes will be exposed and interrogated.

As an ideology, Womanism is an African variant of feminism, which evolved due to the deficiencies of feminism. African and black scholars claimed that the ideology of feminism in emancipating women from sexist oppression does not consider the peculiarities of black females and other women of colour. Sotunsa (2008: 16) observes that "in practice, feminism concentrated on the needs of middle-class white women in Britain and America while posing as the movement for the emancipation of women globally". Bell Hooks (1998: 1, 844) accentuates this notion when she states:

Feminism in the United States has never emerged from women who are most victimised by sexist oppression, women who are beaten down daily mentally, physically and spiritually and powerless to change their condition in life. They are the silent majority.

Also, the African American Patricia Collins (1990: 7) reveals that black women intellectuals "have not been full participants in white feminist organisations". Sotunsa further affirms that "the deficiencies of feminism as practised by middle-class white women and the need to evolve a theory or an ideology that caters specifically for the needs of black women folk later led to the development of another variant of feminism called womanism" (Sontusa, 2008: 17). African scholars and intellectuals are also of the view that some of the tenets of feminism such as lesbianism and radicalism are against the traditional African norms as applies to the issues of the marital relationship. This and many other reasons gave birth to Womanism, first as an ideology and later as a theory (Walker, 1984; Ogunyemi, 1988; Hudson-Weems, 1991; Kolawole, 1997; Sotunsa, 2008, Akorede, 2011, Emama, 2020).

The origin of Womanism is credited to Alice Walker's collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Alice Walker (1983: xi) summarises the tenets of

Womanism when she states that a womanist is "a black feminist or feminist of colour... A woman who loves other women. Sometimes love individual men, and/or non-sexually, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health". Though Walker is cited as the originator of Womanism, it is given much credence in the works of Ogunyemi (1988) and Kolawole (1997), who defined it as a tenable gender theory in African literary studies. Furthermore, Hudson-Weems' (1991) discussion of Africana-womanism is in tandem with the guiding principles of Womanism. She declares:

Africana-womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, necessarily focuses on African women's unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between mainstream feminists, the black feminist, the African feminist and the Africana womanist (Hudson-Weems, 1991: 24).

According to Akorede (2011:44),

As an ideology, Womanism is the black woman's intellectual framework articulating her standpoint in self, community and society. It is committed to forging positive self-definition, self-relevance, self-reliance, self-discovery and self-independence capable of fighting racial and sexist oppression.

Walker describes Womanism as a universalist ideology "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, 1983: ix). This implies that womanism privileges mutual relationships and respect between African men and women. Akorede (2011: 44) adds that "womanism emphasises the centrality of the family motherhood and mutual coexistence". His observation lends its central concern to those of other gender movements and theories against the actualisation of women's desires for sociopolitical and economic relevance. One prominent feature of Womanism is that it discards the separatist agenda. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1988: 65) makes this notion very vivid:

Womanism is black-centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. It is also interested in communal well-being... (65).

African women recognise the interdependence of the sexes, and they deploy Womanism as a convenient approach and movement to celebrate motherhood and, at the same time, highlight the black woman's struggle to protect herself and her child from physical danger and domestic violence (Christian, 1980 & Akorede, 2011). This is why Mary Kolawole (1997: 24) describes Womanism as "the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways". The womanist theory in this study will help to unfold the exploration of gender roles in Adichie's novels, highlighting the influence of the patriarchal structures on the demotion of the woman's image. In the investigation of the selected novels, a form of syncretism will be carried out by condemning bad inter-gender conduct while at the same time projecting gender behaviours that are capable of stimulating peaceful coexistence between men and women. Therefore, this study examines appropriations of the womanist tenets that privilege the African woman's industriousness, strength and intellectuality in Adichie's novels *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*.

Analysis and Discussion

The narrative of Adichie's *Americanah* centres on the experiences of Ifemelu, the novel's protagonist. The story reveals the struggles and triumphs of the young Ifemelu in Nigeria and abroad. She was born in Lagos, Nigeria, where her mother and father raised her in a small apartment. She experiences a difficult childhood because her father loses his job at an unnamed government agency, and the family struggles to make ends meet. Despite all these obstacles, Ifemelu excels in school, where she meets the love of her life, Obinze. Intellectually, the two are equals, but Obinze has had a more refined upbringing, thanks to his mother. After arriving in America, she falls into a deep depression. She refuses to consider "depression" because she does not believe in the American habit of diagnosing every feeling as a mental illness. However, in the long run, she is integrated into American culture by adopting certain aspects she deems necessary while at the same time retaining solid aspects of African culture. In *Americanah*, through the character of Ifemelu, the reader comes across the industriousness and intellectuality of some Nigerian women who struggle hard enough to make it abroad and take care of their parents and siblings in Nigeria. These women in the novel transcend patriarchy's limitations on the female gender in African society. They reinvent themselves and play socially constructed roles assigned to men. Also importantly, the female characters in the novel collaborate significantly to triumph in the new settlement; in some cases, they engage in healthy relationships to realise their dreams. This collaborative effort of gender underscores the accommodationist tenets of Womanism as a theoretical orientation.

In Adichie's *Americanah*, the female characters unite to help one another achieve their dreams and aspirations. For instance, when Ifemelu arrives in the US, she is accommodated by Auntie Uju, who exposes her to the challenges of an African-American and how to surmount such challenges. For instance, when Ifemelu arrives in America, she struggles with identity because she is treated as an outsider in the new land of her dreams. She stays in Brooklyn for the summer with Auntie Uju, who gives her a fake identity card to look for work. Ifemelu only has a student visa and goes to Philadelphia for school. The relationship between Auntie Uju and Ifemelu attests to the Womanist orientation that privileges the collaboration of women, and in some cases, with men, to redeem oppressed and repressed women.

The African female characters in *Americanah* are intelligent, innovative and hardworking. Above all, they collaborate intelligently to help themselves. Ginika, another African female character in the novel, introduces Ifemelu to American culture to blend into American politics. Ginika tells Ifemelu that "fat" in America is a bad word, hearing with moral judgement like "stupid" or "bastard" and not a mere description like "short" or "tall". This exposure, like others, facilitates Ifemelu's coping strategies in the novel. Ginika further educates Ifemelu on the need to relax her natural hair to blend with the American politics of survival:

She was also made for relaxing her natural hair in America; at first, she refused when the hairdresser touched her and said why don't you relax your hair, she responded that she liked that hair the way God made it. Aisha clearly could not understand why anybody would suffer through combing natural hair instead of simply relaxing it (12).

When Ifemelu arrives in America, she chooses to braid her hair with long extensions, and she wears each style for three or four months until her scalp itches unbearably. Therefore, relaxing her hair to meet up with the American realities becomes a new adventure for her. As a strong-willed lady ready

to meet her dream in the new settlement, she tries to adapt to the new norms of Ginika and Auntie Uju, fellow women who engage in healthy collaboration for their success. The excerpt below captures her gradual efforts in practising the new tradition of hair-do:

In her bathroom, she carefully smeared the protective gel around her hairline before she began to slather the creamy relaxer on her hair section by section, her finger in plastic gloves; the smell reminded her of chemistry lab in secondary school, washing off the relaxer in precisely twenty minutes, she has got the white- girl swing (203).

Ifemelu's effort to adjust to the American lifestyle attests to her smartness and intelligence. For instance, even in terms of communication, she tries to imitate the American accent very well. She has perfected the accent by carefully watching friends and newscasters. She learns about the blurring of theatre, the creamy roll of 'r', and so on. Ifemelu's ability to master the American accent within a short time underscores her commitment as a focused, strong-willed, intelligent woman determined to make it in life. The adventurous qualities that Ifemelu bears counter the stereotypical depiction of the African woman as fragile and capable of deep, intellectual thoughts.

Though Ifemelu is faced grim economic realities upon arriving in the US, she refuses to submit to the financial pressures. She works hard enough to succeed. It is learnt from the narrative that the financial pressures faced by Ifemelu alienate her from herself and other characters in the novel. At first, she struggles to get a job to pay her rent. With her focus on survival, she gets the job of babysitting for a wealthy, liberal white woman named Kimberly, who is charitable and friendly. She gets involved with Kimberly's brother, Curt, a rich and handsome white guy, and he takes her on many trips and helps her get a good job and a green card. Ifemelu cheats on Curt, and they break up. Since she is desperate to make it, she gets another job with a magazine company and resigns later. The manager begs her to remain because of her significant impact on the company. Again, this conveys that productivity and managerial abilities are not the exclusive reserves of the menfolk. Ifemelu distinguishes herself among her peers— males and females— as an intelligent, dynamic, and industrious woman. The excerpt below expresses the manager's plea to Ifemelu after she resigns from the magazine company:

She had not planned to resign, but suddenly it seemed to be what she had to do, so she typed the letter on her computer and took it to her manager's office; the manager begged her to change her mind, but she refused and told him 'its personal, family reasons (302).

Ifemelu's blog is another evidence of her productivity and intellectual depth. When she set up the blog, she never imagined that it would someday become this successful. The blog has become very prosperous, and its fans have increased worldwide. Sometimes, she sees her post reposted on other sites, and in such a situation, she feels an air of fulfilment and accomplishment.

Ifemelu gets emails from readers who volunteer to support the blog. They urge her to speak to students about diversity. She also receives a mail from a corporation in Pennsylvania telling her that a local professor has identified her as a provocative race blogger and requires her to lead their annual diversity workshop. Furthermore, an editor from Baltimore leaves a mail saying they want to include her in a list of ten people to watch. She is photographed next to her laptop, her face doused in the shadow under the caption "the blogger". As Ifemelu's readers increase, she receives more invitations. From this point, she becomes an elevated woman with class. She is one of the most sought celebrities.

To receive phone calls, she puts on her most serious pair of trousers and most muted-shaped lipstick, and she speaks upright at her desk, legs crossed, her voice measured. Ifemelu appeals to us as a dynamic young woman that transcends gender limitations. Her creativity through her blog eventually makes way for her:

Ifemelu started making money with her blog, “she bought a small condominium, she had been startled when she first saw the listing in the rear section of a pape-realise she could afford the down payment in cash signing her name above the word "homeowner" she starts her race blog, and it gets trendy which is an integral part of the novel (305).

Ifemelu, therefore, reinvents herself as an adventurous woman. Ifemelu decides to return home (Nigeria) after spending thirteen years in the United States, not because she is a failure but out of a strong desire to return home. Nigeria becomes where she is supposed to be, the only place she can sink her roots without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. Going to Nigeria is also an ample opportunity to reconnect with Obinze, her first love, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself.

Obinze's mother is another significant character that demonstrates the dynamic nature of the African woman. Obinze's mother is a widow and a professor at Nsukka University. She is said to have a striking resemblance with Onyeka Onwenu— she, like Onwemu, possesses a full nose, full-lipped beauty, a round face framed by a low Afro and her faultless complexion, the the colour of a deep brown of cocoa (p. 68). It is rumoured that Obinze's mother is a brave and fearless woman who attacks a fellow professor, which is why “she had to leave the University of Nsukka” (p.59). Her fights with the male Professor attest that Obinze's mother is not fragile; she is strong. In other words, the stereotypes that denigrate women do not work for her.

Obinze's mother's fight with the male Professor causes a serious scandal at Nsukka University, and the university students respond that the man should never have struck her. The male Professor had tried to take advantage of her womanness to repress her. She, however, resents the injustice and fights back, thereby earning the applause and support of the student body. This act makes Obinze's mother very popular at the university. Returning that day, she feels outraged and keeps talking about how things have changed. She writes circulars and articles about it, and the students' union gets involved. Some of her female students print her on T-shirts, making her well known. Obinze's mother is usually reticent and does not have many friends. She takes a much-needed vacation in Lagos, leading to Obinze and Ifemelu's meeting. Her sudden illness also leads him and Ifemelu to change their college plans and enrol at Nsukka University together. She is firm, outspoken and discusses sex with the embarrassed Ifemelu with Obinze. Obinze tells Ifemelu that his mum wants to meet with her (p. 68). Obinze's mother's invitation frightens and excites Ifemelu for days, and she is worried about what to wear. Aunt Uju, therefore, advises Ifemelu to be herself:

"My advice is that you wait; you can love without making love, it is a beautiful way of showing your feelings, but it brings responsibility, great responsibility, and there is no rush. I will advise you to wait until you are at least in the university until you own yourself a little more" (p 72).

In the novel, Obinze's mother shows her progressive nature in dealing with sex as a woman. Her character is used to charge women to stand up for themselves in all situations. To her, if women refuse

to shy away from the reality of life, they will reinvent themselves and transcend patriarchal limitations. She recognises that society and the nature of pregnancy are unfair to women, so Ifemelu must be more careful. She is frank to the point of embarrassing Ifemelu and Obinze, but she proves her values as an intelligent and practical role model for people.

Furthermore, the character of Ifemelu's Aunt, Aunt Uju, is another strong-willed woman in Adichie's *Americanah*. Aunt Uju is a mistress to the General and lives in style. She is classy and lives an elitist style of life. For instance, she has a driver (Sola), a gardener (Baba Flower), and two helpers (Inyang and Chikaodili). She had steadied herself into her new life with a lightness of touch, more consumed by the General than her new wealth. Aunt Uju's relationship with the General is a complex one. For example, he would give her as much money as she wanted but only give her a little at a time, so she would return, asking for more. Ifemelu is shocked when Aunt Uju tells her she 'will ask Oga', her lover, to give her money for their rent:

Ifemelu stopped, you don't have money? "my account is almost empty, but Oga will give it to me, and do you know I have not been paid a salary since I started working? Oga never gives me big money, he pays the bills, and he wants me to ask for anything I need (p.76).

Aunt Uju is an innovative, intelligent and manipulative woman. She has great aspirations and wishes to make it big in life. As a result of her quest for a great life, she refuses to submit to the small things. Ifemelu is surprised that Aunt Uju lives in a big pink house with a wide satellite dish blooming from its roof; her generator brims with diesel, and her freezer is stocked with meat, yet she needs money in her bank account. Aunt Uju, however, assures Ifemelu that the general will change: "he will change, I will make him change, I just need to go slowly" (79). She is confident she can manipulate the General, her lover, to get anything. By implication, Ifemelu strongly believes in herself. Aunt Uju is pregnant for the general, and he promises to take her abroad to deliver. She has the liberty of choosing a country and goes for the USA, which the General grants. Aunt Uju prides herself very highly, and she deserves respect from him. Though the General eventually dies in a military plane crash a week after the birthday of Aunt Uju's son, Dike, she lives her life in a dignified manner and earns the respect of both men and women.

Aunt Uju is a woman who strives to liberate herself from patriarchal ties. For instance, after the death of her lover, the general, she meets Bartholomew, an accountant and divorcee, who is ready to remarry. Ifemelu senses from his demeanour a deprived rural upbringing that he tried to compensate for with his American affection, his "gonna" and "wanna". Aunt Uju knows that Bartholomew is not interested in Dike and does not bother to pretend about it. In Aunt Uju's relationship with Bartholomew, she exhibits a characteristic submission that attests to the tenets of Womanism. A womanist loves men, women and children. That is why it is regarded as an accommodationist theory. Aunt Uju is urged to marry and bear more children so that her first son, Dike, will not be lonely. She acknowledges the value of marriage in African society. Bartholomew displays some level of patriarchal arrogance and boastfulness, but Aunt Uju tries to tolerate his excesses.

It saddens Ifemelu that Bartholomew creates the impression that Aunt Uju is privileged to have her. Aunt Uju once complains to Ifemelu about how Bartholomew exhibits the arrogance and boastfulness characterising patriarchy in Africa. By implication, Bartholomew appeals to Aunt Uju and Ifemelu as a chauvinist. The ability of Aunt Uju to manage such a marital experience conveys her respect for African cultural norms and mores. The narrator reveals that Bartholomew orders Aunt Uju to cook peppered gizzard for him on Saturday while he watches football. At times, she reacts to

redeem herself. As a womanist, Auntie Uju loves children — she does not joke with her son, Dike. She wishes to give unconditional love to any man who fully accepts and treats Dike as his son.

Ginika is another committed female character in the novel that emboldens the tenets of Womanism. Ginika is one of Ifemelu's childhood friends. She moves to the United States before Ifemelu and gets established in Pittsburgh, where she later helps Ifemelu adapt to American life. Ginika is ready to be made over; she changes her ways to adopt the ways of the whites. Her determination to succeed is perceived in her conscious efforts to imbibe the American lifestyle. The female characters in Adichie's *Americanah* are smart, intelligent and industrious. They are also lovers of men, fellow women and children. These characters carry themselves as true womanists who agitate for the redemption of the womenfolk from patriarchal stereotypes. As evident in the novel, their productive and adventurous lifestyles transcend the limitations of African patriarchal structures. In other words, characters like Ifemelu, Auntie Uju and Ginika reinvent themselves and play roles that may be stereotypically defined and constructed as masculine.

In the second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie also presents the value of women in the sociopolitical and cultural domain of any society. Olanna is the beautiful daughter of Chief Ozobia; she resents greed and evil of any form. Through the dignified and morally impressive image of Olanna, Adichie demonstrates that women can serve as the conscience of society and help facilitate social redemption.

Olanna's parents are shallow and greedy, but Olanna has a strong character and a sense of morality. A case in point is when Chief Okonji visits, and Olanna's parents host her at a special dinner. Olanna resents the atmosphere, given the image of Chief Okonji. She wants to avoid dinner with her parents since they invited Chief Okonji. She eventually joins in the dinner through the appeals of her Mom. Before she joins in eating, she appreciates Maxwell, the chef, who was not regarded by Olanna's greedy, proud parents and guests. The narrator conveys the intelligence and moral maturity of Olanna: "Olanna wished they would; it was such a simple thing to do, to acknowledge the humanity of the people who served them" (p 37). This is a pure demonstration of the trait of a womanist who is a lover of humanity. The womanist hates oppression and fights to liberate oppressed men, women and children. To Olanna, Maxwell is oppressed and repressed; she struggles to give back to Maxwell and his sense of humanity.

Olanna is one of three characters through which the novel is told. The womanist craves freedom; this is manifest in the character of Olanna. Olanna and her family are Igbo and so are greatly affected by the massacres of the Nigerian Civil War. Olanna freely chooses life partners and walks away once she notices any form of repression or strain. She is involved with a Hausa man named Mohammed but later leaves him for Odenigbo, whom she loves deeply. She is described as "illogically beautiful", but this does not get into her head. A man seated next to her in an aircraft once says: "I just have to tell you, you are so beautiful" (35). Olanna fights patriarchal arrogance to redeem herself and humanity generally. For example, her parents try to offer her to Chief Okonji for sex to help secure business deals:

She wondered how her parents had promised Chief Okonji an affair with her in exchange for a contract. Had they started it verbally, plainly or had it been implied? (39).

Olanna fights patriarchy by declining this imposition of a man on her. After which, she relocated to Nsukka, where she eventually applied as an instructor in the Department of Sociology. Though she gets the job, her adventurous spirit makes her relinquish it (p 38). Consequently, Olanna's connection with her parents weakens, and she gravitates towards her Aunt Ifeka and Uncle Mbaezi in Kano. She announces: "I have made plans to go to Kano to see Uncle Mbaezi and the family and Mohammed as

well” (39). Olanna is undoubtedly an adventurous woman, evident in her characterisation throughout the novel.

Another committed female character in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* is Kainene. Kainene is Olanna's twin, and she seems to be, at first, very different from Olanna. She is a strong-headed woman, independent, calm and very calculated. Kainene lives in Port Harcourt, where she runs her father's business:

Kainene will manage the cement factory. Chief Okonji asked, turning to her father. “she will oversee everything in the east, the factories and our new oil interest. She has always had an excellent eye for business (39).

Kainene’s father is proud of her smartness and adventurous spirit. Her productivity goes beyond roles assigned to women by patriarchy. She is so intelligent and hardworking that her father speaks of her to one of his friends that she is “not just like a son, she is like two” (p 39). Kainene is very ambitious and always nurses a positive view of life. She always plans to encourage the growth of her father’s business empire. She wishes to do better than her father in terms of achievements. She also privileges humanity at the expense of profiteering. Though at the beginning of the war, Kainene is a war profiteer, after witnessing the ravages and cruelty manifested by the war, she changes completely and becomes a humanistic, modest character; instead of running her father's business, she runs a refugee camp to help victims of the war:

A van delivered bags of garri to the house, and Kainene asked Harrison not to touch them because they were for the refugee camp; she was the new food supplier. " I will distribute the food to the refugees myself, and I am going to ask the Agricultural research centre for some shit, she told Richards (p 400).

Kainene is brave and determined to salvage humanity. However, amid her fearlessness or bravery, she makes mistakes by trading with the enemy, risking her life. She, in that instance, fails to take permission from anyone. At the end of the novel, the reader cannot determine her fate— she does not return from the war, and there is no clear report that she dies in the war: "My wife went on afia attack some days before the war ended, and we have not seen her since”(p 535). The courage of Kainene is also evident in other areas of the novel. She is brave enough to confront Father Marcel when she notices that he has been having sex with young girls in exchange for food:

Later Ugwu watched Kaine push at Father Marcel's chest with both hands shouting into his face and shoving him so hard that Ugwu feared the man would fall (p. 499).

As shown in the extract above, Kainene is a young woman whose characteristics transcend what African patriarchy assigns to women. Her industriousness, bravery, strength and intelligence show the reinvention of gender roles, thereby countering patriarchal limits. Through her conduct, it is evident that gender is socially constructed— there are so-called masculine roles that females play, like Kainene.

Odenigbo's mother, characterised as Mama in the novel, is another strong character whose roles open up a conversation on the social construction of gender stereotypes. Mama is a traditional village woman from Abba. She opposes the relationship between Odenigbo and Olanna because she perceives the present state as threatening and abnormal. Mama upholds the traditional, pre-colonial roles assigned to men and women, especially those with mutual respect and submission. As a result,

she believes that too much education spoils women. Mama refers to Olanna as “these girls that go to university follow men around until their bodies are useless; nobody knows if she can have children” (124). Her traditional conception of a good, decent woman goes against her social conduct of Olanna. Therefore, mama brands free women like Olanna as ruined and useless and prefers her son to marry an educated girl who would be submissive.

Odenigo’s modern world is strange to Mama. She also feels that Olanna is a strange being and even a witch since her mother did not breastfeed her. She once interrogates Olanna: “I hear you did not suck your mother’s breast” (123). This revelation is abnormal to Mama's traditional worldview. While mutual submission and respect are qualities that the woman in the marital space should exhibit, it is evident that Mama’s mind is not ready to accept social change. She remains in the pre-colonial era and maintains the undiluted cultural realities of the Igbo people. After realising that Olanna did not take breast milk, Mama concludes that Olanna uses witchcraft on her son and that Olanna, owing her un-Igbo or un-African conduct, will not marry her son. Mama, therefore, recommends Amala, the village girl that works for her, for her son, Odenigo. Since Mama craves grandchildren, she encourages Amala to sleep with Odenigo. The narrator reveals Mama’s appeal to Amala: “Whether or not Mama had told her to go to his room, she had not even considered that she could say no to Odenigo, who made a drunken pass. She submitted willingly and promptly, he was the master, he spoke English, he had a car, it was the way it should be”(p 313). Amala gets pregnant after making love with Odenigo, but after giving birth, she refuses to take the child and sends her back to Mama: “you know her mother has refused to touch her, the nurse said, as she handed the baby to Odenigo” (p 312).

As highlighted in the preceding paragraph, Mama's perception underscores the interplay of womanhood and motherhood in African society. To Mama, making children makes humanity, men and women, complete. The manifestations of Mama and Olanna foreground aspects of the tenets of Womanism that accommodate men and women. However, extreme parts of Mama’s and Olanna's worldviews should be discarded for a healthier, productive partnership between males and females in the marital domains. For instance, it might be erroneous that Mama perceives education as an exclusive reserve of the men, but the ‘wildness’ of Olanna, to an extent, is not the attractive trait of the woman celebrated by the womanist. Mama conceives:

“...And on top of it, her parents sent her to university. Why? Too much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that. It gives a woman a big head, and she will start to insult her husband. What kind of wife will that be?”... “These girls that go to university follow men around until their bodies are useless. Nobody knows if she can have children. Do you know? Does anyone know” (p. 124)?

By breaking these boundaries and studying to higher levels like men, the women of the older generation branded them ‘ruined’. They preferred their sons to marry unschooled girls who would be submissive. Mama, therefore, brought a young girl, Amala, from the village and used charms to make Odenigo have unprotected sex with her, resulting in pregnancy. Mama says

I do not mind where the woman my son will marry comes from. I am not like those mothers who want to find wives for their sons only from their hamlet. But I do not want a Wawa woman, and none of those Imo or Aro women, of course; their dialects are so strange I wonder who told them we are all the same Igbo people. Nkem, my mother's entire life is in Abba. Do you know what a small bush village that is? Of course, she will feel threatened by an educated woman living with her

son. Of course, you have to be a witch. That is the only way she can understand it (p. 129).

However, beyond Olanna's outstanding education, Mama may have been threatened by the free, 'un-woman' lifestyle of Olanna. To Mama, a woman should behave in specific restricted ways. Mama's worldview is pre-modern. However, suppose anything is needed to be taken from it. In that case, it should be the African's craving for children and women's submission or respect for the man in marriage, which the womanist privileges. Olanna's sister, Kainene, is also an educated woman. She is a strong-willed and bright businesswoman who is determined to prove that she is as good as the son her father regrets he does not have. In contrast with Olanna, who, during crises, strongly asserts her womanhood, Kainene strongly asserts her freely-assumed masculinity.

Conclusion

The discussion above shows the appropriation of some of the basic tenets of Womanism as a gender orientation in two novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The analysis reveals some gender stereotypes and demonstrates how strong-willed women reinvent themselves to play socially-constructed masculine roles. The evaluation of both novels focuses on a close reading of female characters to highlight their limitations, wishes, strength and fulfilment within the confines of Womanism. It is evident from the analysis of characters and events in the novels that gender roles are fluid. In the contemporary world, African women, as depicted in the novels, transcend the gender stereotypes imposed by society. The women in the novels are career women, mothers and breadwinners. Some female characters also play other roles, such as masculine strength, wisdom and intelligence. By implication, these female characters reinvent themselves and live beyond gender limitations.

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