Reconstructing African Womanhood: Feminism, Patriarchy, and Female Agency in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Novels

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Abstract

The literary creative output of African feminist writers demonstrates an engagement with the project of redefining and reconstructing African womanhood through the representation of positive textual female characters and the awakening of feminist consciousness in the minds of readers through thematization of issues of feminist concerns in texts. Adichie's novels *Americanah London*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Purple Hibiscus* portrays the female characters that exhibit strength and reject the institutionalized structures of patriarchy that keep them subjugated. However her approach to empowered female characterization is not oversimplified or monotonous but nuanced. This is because she represents women who are not powerful but who irrespective of their weakness manage to navigate the confines of patriarchal structures thus coming out better than they previously were. By doing so, she realistically highlights the complexities of women's identity in the African setting.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchal structure, monotonous, weakness, navigate

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is a Nigerian author, writer and thinker of the twenty-first century who proclaims her unique thoughts on feminism and worldwide gender politics. 'Though her writings are woven around.her own experiences, yet they represent the interwoven and multi-faceted nature of the disguised realities of gender politics. Of her beginnings as a writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says: "I didn't ever consciously decide to pursue writing. I've been writing since I was old enough to spell, and just sitting down and writing made me feel incredibly fulfilled" (Anya, Oct. 2003). The fictional world of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has significant strands of feminist perspectives that have established her as a feminist writer among the contemporary Nigerian writers. Feminism is a multi-faceted term which includes manifold movements and ideologies aimed at achieving equality in cultural, socio-economic and political arenas for women (Beasley 3). In recent times, there has been vigorous development in feminist and gender discourses not only in Africa but all over the world.

The revaluation of the role of patriarchy in the oppression of women, debates about advancements in the areas of women empowerment and liberation, and the positive reconstruction of women-centered ideologies have become more pronounced Feminism has become a buzzword not only female but also male propagators. Bell Hooks (1984:26) aptly and most precisely defines feminism as "the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives". All strands of feminism are motivated by the experiences of women, especially concerning their social, political, and economic inequalities. The Feminist movement gained prominence not only in the field of music, cinema, theatre, visual arts, architecture, etc. but, the feminist literature became a highly sought literary trend among writers around the globe. Feminism is an ideology that was governed by the distinctive indigenous approaches from country to country.

Research Methodology

The paper examines the representation of women, patriarchal oppression, female agency, gender roles, and alternative forms of masculinity in three novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Purple Hibiscus (2003), Half of a Yellow Sun (2006), and Americanah (2013). It uses qualitative and interpretative anlysis of the text. Its method is interpretive rather than statistical:

it discusses characters, narrative representations, and gender relations to develop an argument about African womanhood and feminist consciousness

Analysis and Discussion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is not only a champion of the national cause of Nigeria but as a writer she is also aware of the gender bias prevailing in African Societies. The way in which Adichie makes her women characters brave the harrowing experiences of patriarchy also entitles her to be called a feminist. Feminism made waves as a white women's movement in the early years of twentieth century but it gained momentum in African countries through various terms propounded by Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, Clenora Hudson-Weems, etc, The difference between the while feminist movements in France, America and other whiter parts of the world and Black feminism is clearly stated and elaborated in the chapter dealing with Adichie's feminist perspective. The Black Women seek for emancipation at the two levels, both the domains of race and sex are contentious for them. A woman of colour attains freedom when she rises from her sufferings and achieves the traits of resilience, and challenges the duplicity of black society.

Adichie's women characters are neither subjugated nor silent sufferers. In fact, they are revenge seeking women of the twenty-first century who do not budge from speaking their hearts out when it comes to their liberal way of life. Yet, it is noticeable that they gain empowerment and courage to reverse the old existing gender dichotomies of Igbo society only after undergoing a metamorphosis consequent to their victimization. A comprehensive exploration of Adichie's works shows that her women characters emerge as heroines of the narrative and also deny the victimhood associated with women and are true examples of the third wave feminism. Indigenous physical traits of African women like kinky hair, caramel skin, full figured body, etc. have never been so powerfully portrayed in fiction before Adichie and it is here that the aggressive struggle for African identity on the international level is displayed. It is found that her women characters capsize the notion that man is the giver and the woman is the seeker in the game of love. It becomes evident from the study that Adichie's women characters are the creators of their own future and do not depend on men for their happiness. At times, they also appear libertine. Thus the women in Adichie's novels succeed at beating men at their own game of love. '*The Second Sex* which was initially published in French is based on the existentialist

perspective of feminism. Beauvoir believed that a woman is born as a free individual but society makes her 'the other' or the marginalized sex.

Elaine Showalter, in America, emphasized on developing a feminist critique in literature and called it gynocriticism. The way in which she divides the historicity of women's literature into the feminine phase, the feminist phase and the female phase, shows the evolution of women's writings from the era of protest towards the age of female experience as an independent art. Hence, in America, feminist critique was different from the French feminist ideology. While these social movements gained sympathy in the European or American white societies, a distinct ideology was deemed necessary for the African women. These societies had, for long, been benefitted by an independent status and so the European connotation of feminism appeared alien to the black women. So, in Africa, feminists argued for a separate ideology for black women because they could not relate to the ideas propagated by the white feminists. African feminism gave voice to the colonized and doubly oppressed black women, who remained oblivious of their rights since times immemorial. It also helped in realizing the challenges black women face in the societies of the African subcontinent and those women of African descent, who have become a part of the global diaspora. There are subtle differences between feminist approaches within Africa too because of multi-cultural regions within the continent.

While discussing feminism in Africa one cannot ignore the term Womanism which was coined by Alice Walker in her 1979 short story "Coming Apart" and this term applies to the metamorphosis a suffering woman undergoes as she rises up courageous, audacious and bold : from the shackles of society as well the patriarchs. Walker later used the term Womanist in her work In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose and explained the basic distinction between womanism and feminism by highlighting that womanism raised issues not only related to gender inequality but also colour and race based oppression, faced largely by the African Womenfolk. Womanism has an ingrained opposition towards racial and gender discrimination. It deals with the daily monotonous challenges a woman faces in her life but womanism aims to eradicate all social inequalities. Adichie is not only a champion of the national cause of Nigeria but as a writer she is also aware of the gender bias prevailing in African societies. The way in which Adichie makes her women characters brave the harrowing experiences of patriarchy also entitles her to be called a feminist.

Feminism made waves as a white women's movement in the early years of the twentieth century but it gained momentum in African countries through various terms propounded by Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, Clenora Hudson-Weems, etc. The difference between the white feminist movements in France, America and other whiter parts of the world and the Black feminism is clearly stated and elaborated in the chapter dealing with Adichie's feminist perspective. The black women yearn for emancipation at the two levels, both the domains of race and sex are contentious for them. A woman of colour attains freedom when she rises from her sufferings and achieves the traits of resilience, and challenges and duplicity of black society. Adichie's women characters are neither subjugated nor silent sufferers. In fact, they are revenge seeking women of the twenty-first century who do not budge from speaking their hearts out when it comes to their liberal way of life. Yet, it is noticeable that they gain empowerment and courage to reverse the old existing gender dichotomies of Igbo society only after undergoing a metamorphosis consequent to their victimization. In an interview with Krithika, Adichie declares, "My attitude to feminism is this: I am a happy feminist" (The Hindu, 2).

A comprehensive exploration of Adichie's works shows that her women characters emerge as heroines of the narrative and also deny the victimhood associated with women and are true examples of the third wave feminism. Indigenous physical traits of African women' like kinky hair, caramel skin, full figured body, etc. have never been so powerfully portrayed in fiction before Adichie and it is here that the aggressive struggle for African identity on the international level is displayed. It is found that her woman character capsizes the notion that man is the giver and the woman is the seeker in the game of love. It becomes evident from the study that Adichie's women characters are the creators of their own future and do not depend on men for their happiness. At times, they also appear libertine. Thus, Adichie's women succeed in beating men at their own game of love. Adichie portrays multiple female identities that are complex, dynamic, and probable.

The women represented in the novels are realistically and remarkably diverse characters that represent positive examples for women in text and context. In the *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Purple Hibiscus*, and *Americanah*, Adichie represents an array of women from all social classes. Strong-willed, educated, and assertive modern women such as Olanna and kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and women in traditional roles as mothers and un- empowered, uneducated housewives like Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*. There are those who, irrespective of being illiterate,

completely reverse gendered roles and distinctions thereby expressing their sense of autonomy such as Mrs. Muokelu and Aunty Ifeka in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The first category of Adichie's female characters are propagators of patriarchy. Adichie portrays the female characters in this group as unambitious, stoic, and unassured of their capabilities as women. They either choose to remain torpid within the spaces and limitations earmarked for them by the society, or through their adherence to traditional conventions contribute to the propagation of patriarchal ideals, Because of their passivity, these characters negate the ideals of feminism. Therefore, they are sparsely presented and mostly as subsidiary characters, with little contribution to the advancement of the plot.

These characters include Arize, Anulika, Mama Odenigbo, Mama Oji, and Mama Adaku in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. They are illiterate, timid, and parochial. The second category of Adichie's female characters are the border-lines. This category of female characters depicts women who irrespective of their educational status are neither forceful in their feminist assertiveness nor desperately incapacitated by patriarchy enough to be powerless women, Although some of them display feminine strength to a reasonable degree, they inadvertently enable patriarchy and as such do not qualify as literacy feminist models for emulation. While some of them, like Kosi in *Americanah*, Mrs Ozobia and Mrs Ezeka in *Half of a Yellow Sun* ate Stepford wives, Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* portrays the long-enduring wife who only exhibits strength at the end. In addition, others like Ojiugo and Ranyinudo in *Americanah* simply adapt themselves to patriarchal laxity, and perpetuate sexist attitudes towards women due to their culture of dependency on men. The third category of Adichie's female characters are the game changers. Adichie's three novels are replete with female characters that are independent, modern, and assertive. The few women characters in this group who are illiterate demonstrate a modern and progressive outlook to life.

They refuse to be limited by their situations and each of them defines her life on her own terms. Also they all possess the strength and individual will to assert their voices and identities in the midst of societal pressures. Therefore they transgress the traditional African societal expectations of women with regard to marriage and women's freedom to express their sexuality. These women include; Aunty Ifeoma, Kambili and Amaka in *Purple Hibiscus*, Kainene, Olanna, Aunty Ifeka, and Mrs Muokelu in Half of yellow sun, Ifemelu, Shan and Obinze's mother (Mrs . Maduewesi) in *Americanah*.Adichie successfully presents an array of female characters in her

three novels that react differently to the patriarchal socio-cultural context in which they find themselves. While a small fraction of these characters succumb to the patriarchal expectations and limitations which strive to keep them marginalized, the majority strive against the odds to carve a niche for themselves and assert their individuality, One may argue that because Adichie's feminist vision aims at the portrayal of female wholeness, she refuses to focus on the depiction of female victims. This is why even the most subjugated of her female characters, such as Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*, finds a way of self-redefinition albeit in an extreme manner.

Adichie's protagonists are sophisticated, proactive, and assertive, strong women who have crossed the boundaries marked out by society and tradition to assert themselves within male- dominated academia and entrepreneurial spheres. These female characters do not enjoy any special privileges because they are women, and they refuse to be demeaned because of their femininity. They do not assume masculinist tendencies in order to proclaim their strength. Instead, they exhibit as much strength as vulnerability as we have seen for instance, in the case of characters such as Aunty Uji in *Americanah*. They are also human and as such, they are flawed, Adichie's female characters are not primarily victims of gender prejudice nor are they crippled by the patriarchal strictures of their societies. They are projected as overcoming the hurdles of life with fortitude and sensible thoughts and actions. In her 2013 TED Talk, Adichie argues that if the goals of gender equality are to be achieved it is imperative that we should "all be feminists" regardless of our gender. Men as much as Women have to be advocates for transformation in gender relations. Together with the notion of inclusivity, the concept of feminist empathy comes in handy in highlighting the significant need for change in gender relations in the African feminist context.

According to the male Nigerian feminist critic Chielozona Eze, feminist empathy is the ability to feel oneself into the experience of women in undeserved suffering. It comes to fruition when we switch perspectives with a woman experiencing unfairness, injustice, or oppression because of her gender. He argues that by switching perspectives with a person in undeserved pain we are able to put ourselves in such a person's position, therefore putting ourselves in a position to address the system that made the pain possible. The implication here is that if men espouse feminist empathy, they are more likely to address the patriarchal structures that negatively affect women and men and by doing so they qualify as feminists. Therefore, Adichie infuses her novels with empathetic male feminists as models in tune with the African feminist

idea of gender inclusivity and as literary models for African men. For instance, in the three novels under study, she creates an array of male characters who display various forms of negative masculinity, including gendered dominance, sexism, and the patriarchal notion of the status of the head of the family. These characters include violent and abusive patriarchs like Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus*, shameless philanderers like Chief Ozobia in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and retrogressive chauvinists like Bartholomew in *Americanah*, who are a source of unnecessary anxiety and unhappiness to their female partners.

However, not all the men in the novels are unsympathetic chauvinists. This is because Adichie "takes up the question of hegemonic masculinity by exploring a range of male types" (McGuigan, 2014:88). By doing so, she does not depict all the male characters in her novels as monolithic representations of negative masculinity. Instead, she portrays such characters to highlight the negative consequences of masculinist attitudes on both men and women and not with the aim of vilifying all men. Adichie also presents positive male characters who are exemplary models of alternative masculinity or what Nigerian women's writing specialist, Jane Bryce (2008:59), in her analysis of African women's writing refers to as "gentle versions of masculinity". These characters consider the women in their lives as their partners and not inferior subordinates. They also regard themselves as allies in women's struggles for an equitable society by consciously resisting societal pressures to conform to the masculinity status quo. This paper illustrates how Adichie's literary oeuvre transcends the stereotypical misrepresentation of women in African literature by positioning her as a contemporary feminist voice whose main objective is the redefinition of the African women in contemporary African fiction. It argues that she uses a multiplicity of female characters in her three novels who depict the variety of African women's real lives, while she projects the more positive women as feminist models who are worthy of emulation.

Conclusion

Furthermore, rather than reinforcing patriarchal ideas that keep women in subjugation, Adichie deconstructs them in the particular sense that she goes beyond an embattling approach towards an inclusive one that simultaneously critiques both men and women performance of gender. That is, she calls for the adoption of re-socialisation to correct the existing damage and a feminist-conscientised socialization going forward. In a similar vein, she unshrouds the secrecy and demystifies the shame associated with female sexuality while

advocating for a holistic, audible, and visible image for the African woman. Nigerian author Ben Okri, best known for his Booker Prize-winning novel The Famished Road in an interview with Vikram Kapur at the Jaipur Literature Festival acknowledges to the question, "What do you think of the generation of Nigerian writers that have followed you: Helon Habila and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie?" as they are a very vibrant generation. They are aware of the social responsibility of literature and the fact that writing is not just about yourself, They carry on the tradition that has been intrinsic to African literature where the writer is more than just the writer. The writer is also the teacher, the social critic (The Hindu, Jan 29, :2012; Weekly Edition-2, 1).

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