

AN EXAMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN IN WAR AND IN TIMES OF PEACE: AN
ANALYSIS OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S
PURPLE HIBISCUS AND *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

Terhemba Hwande

&

Awase Prisca Unenge

Abstract

While fiction is not history it is a reflection of the society in which it is written, hence the popular phrase that literature does not exist in a vacuum. *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are novels set in Nigeria; *Purple Hibiscus* is set in a time of relative peace where the nation is not at war while *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set during the Nigerian civil war, a time of war. This research examines the two novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* and the violence that women face. *Purple Hibiscus* looks at the violence against women in the home stead in the time of peace, in an environment that exudes safety while *Half of a Yellow Sun* looks primarily at the violence directed at women in the time of war. This paper looks at the violence against women, the physical violence, the emotional violence and the violence of the lack of a voice. The feminist theory will be the guiding theory through the angle of womanism. This research concludes that while the violence suffered by the women is often at the hands of the men, the women also enable it by actively participating in being violent towards other women or by welcoming the violence with a docile attitude.

Key Words: women, violence, home, war, voice

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first two novels are usually classified as feminist novels as the novels seek to bring out the several burdens that women bear. One of such issues is the violence that women meet in the home in times of peace as shown in *Purple Hibiscus* and at home and war as shown in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In both novels the violence is usually perpetrated by the men but in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the women also partake in bring violence to their fellow women; they are either active participants or encourage the violence. As feminist, the novels obviously lean towards the feminist theory. *Purple Hibiscus* tells the story of the family of Eugene, his wife and two children as the main characters. While the country was ruled by the military, there was relative calm and peace. *Half of a Yellow Sun* on the other hand tells the story of the Nigerian civil war and how the war affected the lives of the main characters Olanna and her twin sister Kainene and their men and the people around them.

Adichie identifies as a feminist but in Adichie's text, "We Should all be Feminist" she calls herself a feminist but refuses to abide by any person's single definition of who a feminist is. She refuses to stay by other people's boundaries of who and what a feminist should be. She refutes this single identity by stating that when she was told that feminist are unhappy she called herself 'happy feminist', when she was told it was un-African she called herself 'happy African feminist, in this way she shows how she refuses to align and follow any single definition of identity. This way Adichie identifies herself as a feminist but is not concerned about observing any borders set by others. Adichie in these two novels shows the different ways and structures that enable women to be oppressed in the society and how easy it is to miss the oppression. C. Nidhyapriya says "Adichie's novel explores numerous societal structures through which women are oppressed. She identifies domestic violence, religion, traditions, family life, complacency as being

responsible for unequal gender relations forming the basis of exploitation of women and she challenges women to have a voice so as to comfort their oppression” (Nidhyapriya).

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of these novels will be done through the feminist theory. The feminist theory essentially fights for equality for women. The need for this fight for equality stem from how women are seen and treated many times as less than men. Feminist novels try to bring out where the female gender are treated poorly simply because they are women, where the belief that men are superior to women shows in the actions of men particularly. Charles Brresller states that:

According to feminist criticism, the roots of prejudice against women have long been embedded in western culture, the ancient Greeks abetted gender discrimination, declaring the male to be the superior and the female the inferior. Women, they maintained, lure men away from seeking truth, preventing them from attaining their full potential. In the centuries that follow, other philosophers and scientist continue such discrimination. For example, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882) announces that women are a “characteristic of ... a past and lower state of civilization.” Such being, he notes, are inferior to men, who are physically, intellectually, and artistically superior. (147)

This shows a long history of discriminations against women, centuries of being looked down upon. Starting all the way from the Greek civilisation. that equality for the women. The feminist movement and ideology started in the west it was unable to deal with the different needs of all the women. A new movement arose within the feminist circle called ‘womanism’ with Alice Walker as one of its earl proponents, it sought to among other things deal with the needs of the

African American women and by extension the African woman who did not seek independence from men but sought to be seen as competent as women, as mothers. Marwa Mahmoud Mohamed El-Shennawy reports that:

Izgarjan and Markov emphasize that: As Walker's literary scope expanded and she developed into a more mature writer and political activist, she became aware of the need for a movement which would be different from feminism and which would offer colored women a space to formulate their policy. She named it Womanism" (305).

Womanism seeks to take care of the need of the African American woman and their needs. While feminism seeks for equality for women, womanism seeks to largely show that women are capable in what they do, not just from recent history but from a long time ago. El-Shennawy in support of this view writes that:

The second aspect of the definition also describes the black woman as a capable person. This depiction is also another important difference between Feminism and Womanism because it represents the black woman as a powerful person who has the ability to lead the society for the better, and the courage to change the world around her to meet her expectations and to solve her problems. (378)

The two novels will be examined through the eyes of womanism, showing the injustice and suffering that the women in the two novels go through and at the same time showing how Adichie shows the women as competent and resourceful.

Violence Against Women in *Purple Hibiscus*

While *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set during the Nigerian civil war, *Purple Hibiscus* is set in a time of relative peace. In *Purple Hibiscus* the author tells the story of the family of Eugene as seen through the eyes

of Kambali, the daughter of Eugene. Eugene is a rich Nigerian man who is also a devote catholic who brutalises both his children, a son and a daughter and his wife. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie shows how women are oppressed in times of peace; the violence against the women in this novel is in the times of peace causing trauma to the women of all age and social background while the men in the novel enjoy relative peace. Kimabli's mother, usually referred to as mama suffers physical and emotional abuse from her husband and still has to keep a brave and happy face for the public. Eugene's violence against his wife shows how women are in a seemingly powerless position to stop the violence against themselves; forcing them to suffer in silence.

In the very first page and first paragraph of *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie introduces the readers to violence in *Purple Hibiscus*: "Things started falling apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go for communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the *etagere*" (11). Eugen's reaction to his son not going for communion is to turn his missal into a weapon and throw it at Jaja in frustration, the missal "... missed Jaja completely, but it hit the glass *etagere*, which Mama polished often. It cracked the top shelf, swept the beige, finger-size ceramic figurines of ballet dancers in various contorted postures to the hard floor and then landed after them. Or rather it landed on their many pieces" (15). Adichie takes her time to paint the violence for us to see to the point of describing the broken pieces of the ceramic *etagere* which belong to Mama. The violence against Jaja and his mother and sister watching it also share in the trauma while Mama "knelt down and started to pick the pieces on the floor with her bare hands" (11). Picking the broken pieces of her *etagere* makes her not just a passive watcher but both a victim and an enabler as she attempts to clean the evidence of the violence. The significance of the breaking of the *etegeres* becomes clearer as the author shows it as what mama cleans for comfort after suffering violence at the hands of her husband.

Mama later in the novel happily announces to Kamballi that she is going to have a baby, yet it only takes her saying she wants to stay in the car after service instead of following her husband to go and greet the priest and Eugene, her husband beats her till she suffers a miscarriage. Eugene waits till they get home, eat lunch before he begins to pummel her:

I was in my room after lunch, reading James chapter five because I would talk about the biblical roots of the anointing of the sick during family time, when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds ... I heard the door open. Papa's gait on the stairs sounded heavier, more awkward, than usual. I stepped out of my room just as Jaja came out of his. We stood and watched Papa descend. Mama was slung over his shoulder like a jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border (41).

Eugene carried his wife to the hospital after beating her while she was pregnant, when she comes back home the next day, she had suffered a miscarriage, "her eyes were vacant, like the eyes of those mad people who wandered around the roadside garbage dumps in town, pulling grimy, torn canvas bags with their life fragments inside. 'There was an accident, the baby is gone,' she said" (43). This confirms that the beating she received from her own husband made her to lose the baby in her womb. Knowing that she was pregnant with their child did not prevent Eugene from beating her till she started bleed before carrying her to the hospital where she had a miscarriage. The allusion that the author uses to describe her blank look; linking it to that of mad men on the road can be interpreted as the author showing us the trauma that mama went through in the process of the beating and the loss of the unborn child. Apart from telling her own children, no word was said to any other person neither about the beating or the cause of the miscarriage, suffering quietly in silence.

It is not not only mama that goes through the physical emotional torture, Kambili her daughter after having to mop the blood that stained the floor because of Eugene beating mama says “The words in my textbook kept turning to blood each time I read them. Even as my first-term exams approached, even when we started to do class reviews, the words still made no sense” (45). The trauma she experienced from cleaning the blood from mama’s blood (41) wrecked her emotionally so that she could not concentrate. Kambili eventually comes second in her class, Eugene waits till the new term begins and takes her to her class for Kambili to identify the girl that came first and forces her to go through the humiliation and embarrassment by asking Kambili if the girl that came first has two heads while the other students stare at her. He then brings out a mirror for Kambili to see if she also has one head and Kambili had to look in the mirror and agree that she has one head in front of her classmates.

Aunty Ifeoma, Eugene’s sister is also enduring her violence. Her husband dies and his family and the villagers believe that he left money that Ifeoma is hiding (82). This introduces us to Ifeoma and her own struggle with violence against women. A woman who has lost her husband is not allowed to mourn in peace but the husband’s family and even the people in his hamlet believes that she should share his money with them. It does not even occur to them that their brother was poor and died leaving nothing, the loud assumption is that if a man dies, he leaves behind wealth. The same will not be done to a man who has lost a wife she if she was very rich, it is a violence usually reserved for women and Adichie through this act, shows how the system of inheritance favours the men.

Adichie again introduces the readers to another occasion that only women can go through- menstruation and the discomfort that come along with it. Kambili’s period starts on the Sunday after Christmas in the village. She has menstrual cramps and needs to take Panadol, a brand of paracetamol. She eats cornflakes to take her

medicine all the while hiding from her father as she notes that they never break the Eucharist fast which mandates that they should not eat an hour before mass. Unfortunately, her father walks in and catches her just as she was about to finish the cornflakes. He is visibly angry and goes ahead to remove his belt and beat his son first, then his wife and Kambili. He does this repeatedly until he stops himself (110-111). By looping Mama together with her children in this beating, the author shows how the violence women are subjected to and the helplessness with which they bear the violence as if they are children. That stops by himself showing the helplessness of women in most instances to defend themselves against the men who are bigger and stronger than they are.

Another instance of male violence in *Purple Hibiscus* is when Eugene became aware that his children had slept in the same house with his father, Papa-Nnukwu who still worships idols and that his wife was aware but did not prevent it neither did she inform him knowing he was highly against it. Eugene beats his wife till one of her eyes is shut closed (199), gets water to boil, orders his daughter Kambili to get into the bath tub and pours it on his daughter's feet "I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing in almost slow motion in an arch to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed" (201). Shortly after scalding his daughter's feet, Eugene beats her for having the panting of her grand-father Papa-Nnukwu to the point where she passes out and is hospitalised. Kambili says "my whole body is on fire' ... I did not want to be awake. I did not want to feel the breathing pain at my side. I did not want to feel the heavy hammer knocking in my head. Even taking a breath was agony" (217). The description of the pain is vivid; She suffers a broken rib and internal bleeding (217). Even to smile was painful (219) Auntie Ifeoma on seeing the brutal beatings that Kambili endured says to Mama "This cannot go on, *nwunye m,*' Auntie Ifeoma said. 'When a house is on fire, you run out before the

roof collapses on your head” (219). The statement by Ifeoma shows that the author puts the salvation of the women not in the hands of a distant saviour but right in their hands, one of the options is to run.

While mama is undergoing this brutal violence at the hands of her husband, she is under societal pressure to keep silent and not complain, even to her own children. So apart from the physical violence of her husband beating her, she has lost her voice to express herself. Not only her but also her daughter Kambali who struggles to talk at home and even at school. Kimabili gets beaten and her hand is scalded by her father when he orders for water to be boiled and deliberately pours it on his daughters' hand. Both her and her mother are powerless to stop these acts of violence, the house is also always under tension when Eugene is around. This constitutes emotional violence that leaves its brutal mark on Mama and the children. Kimbali cannot stand up for herself which makes her an easy target for others too to bully. It takes spending a lot of time away from her father's house before she can get a voice of her own and stand up to her father. The total control that Eugene exerts on his house makes him to beat his wife and cause her to have several miscarriages while at the same time mama is under pressure to give birth to another child.

Mama continues to suffer miscarriages in silence, unable to speak out for the reasons while she has not been able to produce another child after two children. She also endures the various acts of violence in silence. In all the sufferings, the violence, even a voice to complain, to be heard is denied them until in the end Mama kills Eugene (294). This shows that her salvation, her escape from the suffering came at her own hands. This aligns with the view of the author throughout the text, showing that help will not come from anywhere else, the women will need to get up fight for their right themselves.

Violence in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Half of a Yellow Sun on the other hand recounts the story of the Nigerian civil war; the build up to the war and the war itself. Olanna is Odenigbo's girlfriend, she also has a twin sister called Kainenne. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a historical war novel, the author is able to show the violence that women meet in times of peace and in times of war. As the war progresses, different women in the novel experience different types of violence; physical violence, rape and even death. Most of the violence portrayed in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are perpetrated by the men but Adichie introduces what was absent in *Purple Hibiscus*, violence against women by women.

Most works on gender studies take the point of view of the violence and chaos the male gender makes against the female gender. Gender studies is quite easily seen as the study of culture that is enforced by patriarchy and the attitude of the male gender against women. Fashakin, Folashade Yemisi in an introduction to her work on gender studies says, "in recent years, attention has been paid to the writing of women in Africa... in order words there has been more interest in examining how men behave, particularly in relation to women" (1). The attention has always been on how the male gender treats the female and by Fashakin's admission, gender studies is about examining how men behave and treat women. But in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, while the author shows the different instance of violence against women as done by men, she also shows instances of women also doing acts of violence against their fellow women.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* it will be erroneous to conclude that the author is only concerned by the acts of war in the novel, Adaobi Olivia Ihueze says "violence also includes those acts that result from a power relationship, including threats and intimidation, neglect or acts of omission, in addition to more violent acts" (3). Violence is not just physical, neglect and other emotional acts of deprivation are also acts

of violence as portrayed by the author. Ihueze also opines that the authors of *Half of a Yellow sun*, *Destination Biafra* and *Roses and Bullets* “Contend that if men fought militarized battles with cannons and guns, women similarly fought against the forces of air raids, hunger and disease in addition to physical and moral rape, hence their roles and suffering should not be overlooked or undermined” (3-4).

Half of a Yellow Sun dwells a lot on violence, the violence of the civil war. Laure Clemence Zanou Capo-Chichi and Fifame Bodjrenou say “The narrator in *Half of a Yellow Sun* highlights the negative impacts of the war on Nigerian Igbo women through some female characters. During this civil war women are subjected to different forms of violence: military raids and more specifically, as far as women are concerned, rape...” (152).

That there is violence in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and that this violence is targeted at women in the novel is beyond doubt. While the men also suffer violence, the violence of the war is not what occupies the novel, the violence that is shown more in the novel is the violence at the homestead before the war, the experiences of women in the war more than the violence of the war with guns. From the early scenes of Chief Ozobia offering his daughter to the minister of finance to gain contracts to acts of rape and the various killings abound in the novel. What is unique is that the author treads a vein of women acting and perpetuating acts of violence against fellow women, women encouraging the culture of violence against fellow women.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie shows how women suffer violence both in the peace of the home and even in the war, this is significant because the home should be a place of peace and security but in *Half of a Yellow Sun* Olanna suffers violence in her father’s house when her father and mother offer her to the minister of finance in order to win a contract from the minister of finance. Olanna also suffers violence in the house of her lover Odenigbo, Odenigbo’s mother

succeeds in driving Olanana away from her shared accommodation with Odenigbo even though she bore the bulk of the expense for the house. Odenigbo's mother goes ahead to bring a girl called Amala from the village whom Odenigbo impregnates. When Amala gives birth and it is a girl, Odenigbo's mother wants to have nothing to do with the new baby girl neither does Odenigbo, even the mother of the child will not touch her. Odenigbo agrees that his mother did not want the baby because she had expected the baby to be a boy (250). This is a violent discrimination right at birth for no other wrong than for being a girl child. Olanna that had no real blood connection to the child that decides to adopt her and take care of her.

Adichie showing the life before the war and the life outside the war front enables her to show the violence that women equally go through in a war. Lauren Rackley collaborates the view that Adichie shows how her characters suffer violence, particularly the female characters who are not at the war front but suffer violence, she says

“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* counters the aforementioned authors' assumption that war is a predominately male experience through the depiction of female characters as active participants in the Biafran War. Adichie illustrates the various ways that middleclass Igbo men and middleclass Igbo women experience the Biafran war...”(6).

The riots that preceded the war also show how women are victims of violence even in the homestead. The various descriptions of the home environments in *Half of a yellow Sun* are filled with acts of violence against the women in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, a father offers a minister his daughter to sleep with so that he can get the contract that he is interested in. This happens in the house of Olanna's father in cooperation of her mother and twin sister. The visit of Olanna to kano introduces us to the family of Mbaezi, her uncle. In the riots

preceding the war, Olanna's visit to Kano affords the readers the opportunity to observe the killings of her uncle, aunt, and pregnant cousin right in their own house. While the killings in the Kano riots can be seen as involving both men and women; it no doubt also show us women as casualties of the war, as much as they are neither in the army nor in the war front, they still experience the violence of the war and die in it also. Olanna's journey back to Enugu on the train is also traumatic. Mother keeps the head of her daughter in a calabash on the journey, as they cross River Niger, she calls on the other passengers of the train to come and see what was inside the calabash, when she opens it "she (Olanna) saw the little girls head with ash-grey skin and plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She looked at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed" (149). What Olanna passes through after the Kano riots and the train ride can be called post-traumatic stress disorder, what is usually thought of as a problem of soldiers who have endured the violence of war; Adichie deliberately makes Olanna to suffer PTSD to make a comparison between the violence that the women at home had to pass through with the violence the men at the battle front endures. Kainene also goes through her period of PTSD when she watches the head of her worker cut and rolled up to her in a bombing in Port Harcourt. Ugwu's sister's is also brutalized and made ugly by the military men as they raped her, making her withdrawn and sullen.

In the area of provisions for the family Adichie shows the emotional violence that women endure for their families; to keep the family together and to provide for the family. Provisions are scarce, and the responsibility of feeding the family weighs on Olanna because she becomes reduced to begging at relief centres. She finds herself confronted by men attempting to steal her provisions soon after leaving the relief centre, and her "fear came with rage, a fierce and emboldening rage, and she imagined fighting them, strangling them, killing them" (342). Olanna's emotions reveal her strength and courage during

conflict because she continues to return to the relief centre despite her fear and guilt for receiving goods for free. War requires Olanna to provide for her family, but this does not stop her from believing she “[was] doing something improper, unethical: expecting to get food in exchange for nothing” (343). Yet, Olanna still returns to the relief centre every day, despite her pride, so that her family receives the necessary provisions to maintain life. These physical and emotional conflicts that Olanna encounters “reveal a shift in values, changing attitudes to life and the presence of women at the heart of the war zone, central to the preservation of life” (13).

Half of a Yellow Sun records two brutal rapes of women, in one of them Ugwu, one of the narrators of the novel is a grudging participant, in the second one his sister is the one that is raped so brutally that she is disfigured. After repelling an attack, the Biafran soldiers go to a beer parlour to drink beer, the female attendant informs them there is no beer, instead of leaving the group of young soldiers force her down and rape her one after another. Ugwu wanted to decline but when they said he was afraid, to prove his manliness, he also participates in the rape (365). At the end of the war, when Ugwu meets his sister, “he was startled to discover that the sister he had always remembered as beautiful was not at all. She was an ugly stranger who squinted with one eye” (420). When Ugwu asked what happened to his sister, they told him a group of soldiers raped her “they said the first one that climbed on top of her, she bit him on the arm and drew blood. They nearly beat her to death. One of her eyes has refused to open well since” (421).

Conclusion

The women in both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* endure violence both at home in times of peace and for *Half of a Yellow Sun* even in the Nigerian civil war, they experience a decent amount of violence and trauma. Adichie shows the unique view, often not

publicized that women are victims of violence even in the home stead in times of peace and also when war breaks out they also experience the trauma of war as the men. Adichie in these two novels shows the strength of the women as they handle the violence and every demand that the war brings on their lives. The author creates awareness about the violence that women face, she also wants the women to know that they can fight back, they don't need to wait for a man to save them.

Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Farafina, Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Farafina. 2006
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "We should All be Feminist". Fourth Estate. 2014
- Bressler, Charles, E. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and practice*. Fifth Ed. Longman. Boston: 2003
- Nidhyapriya C. "Oppression of Women and Domestic Violence in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*". *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)* Volume 9, Issue 10 October 2021 | ISSN: 2320-2882.
- Lauren Rackley. "Gender Performance, Trauma, and Orality in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*". Oxford 2015
- Laure Clémence CAPO- CHICHI ZANOU, Célestin Gbaguidi , Judith Akogbeto "Social Environment and Empowerment in Chimamanda n. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*". *Revue Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, de Littérature et d'Education* Volume 1 Numéro 1 Décembre 2018 ISSN 1840 - 9318.
- Fwangyil, Gloria Ada. A Reformist-Feminist Approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. *An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*, 261-274, 2011

Yemisi Folashade, Fasakin. Gender Violence In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half Of A Yellow Sun*, Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2015