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## THE JOURNEY OF THE NIGERIAN WOMEN EN ROUTE TO EMPOWERMENT IN THE SELECT WORKS OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

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**Abstract:** The article examines the efforts made by women towards empowerment in the two novels of the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The study focuses on how the doubly oppressed African woman, *being* both a woman and black, has gradually undergone metamorphosis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The journey of the women towards emancipation, however, was not sans obstacles. The predicament of the women in Africa was onerous. They had to struggle vehemently against the patriarchal African society to shatter the traditional roles assigned to them. Various scholars, activists and women writers pioneered an intellectual revolution to replace the tradition that considered women to be 'the Other,' 'the oppressed,' and 'the Second-Class Citizen' put to silence. Many African women writers offer a different and realistic picture of the women's world ignored by male writers. Their stories seek to excise the peripheral position assigned to women. While some female writers explore the subjugation of women, others like Adichie tackle the problems and offer constructive solutions. The article focuses on the subjugation and marginalization of women in the select works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and also explores the strategies employed to challenge and subvert patriarchy. Adichie views women as agents of social, economic and political progress. She aspires to see an end to the unfair treatment meted out to women. She advocates a change in the condition of women but realizes that the struggle by women to assert themselves in a male dominated world is far from over. The study reveals that Nigerian women in particular and African women in general are still oppressed and exploited. Their emancipation continues to be in its nascent stage. They have not yet attained full empowerment and they have a long way to go.

**Keywords:** African women, empowerment, marginalization, performativity

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**Introduction:** Black women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are no longer relegated as 'the Other,' 'the oppressed,' and 'the Second-Class Citizen' put to silence. Over the years, the subjugation and the oppression of black women stemming from patriarchy and colonialism has been challenged, subverted and reconceptualized by African women scholars, activists and writers. While some Nigerian women writers explore the subjugation of women, others like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie tackle the problems endured by black women and offer constructive solutions. Adichie's two prominent novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be regarded as radical novels that trace the metamorphosis of the women characters from an enervating state of helplessness and passivity to a position of emancipation and authority. In an effort to empower women, Adichie not only interrogates the marginalization and the exploitation of the African women, but also maps the journey of the doubly oppressed Nigerian women en route to empowerment.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of Nigeria's most talented young woman writers. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* published in October 2003, deals with patriarchy and domestic violence. It was short-listed for Orange Fiction Prize and won the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award (2004) and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book (2005). *Half of a Yellow Sun*, her second novel, was initially a short

story. This novel, built on the themes of colonialism, corruption, love, marriage and domestic disunity, is set in the background of the Biafran war. The novel received the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction 2007. Through the narratives of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie engages herself in the arduous exercise of re-conceptualizing the stereotypes and myths that have surrounded and defined women. She celebrates the empowerment of women and views women as agents of social, economic and political progress.

Empowerment implies decentralization of power and authority. It refers to a process that enables the marginalized to rise above their suppressed condition. It encourages them to fight for the right to education, equality, independence, and to the freedom to make their own decisions. Empowered people become confident enough to face and overcome various obstacles in their life and their work.

Empowerment of women is not only essential but also imperative and crucial for the enhancement of the status of women and the all round development of the country. It enables women to realize their full potential and their power in all spheres of life. The emancipated woman does not lament over her misfortune. Instead she battles against oppression, slavery, colonialism, racism and sexism and fractures the patriarchal social structures.

The need for women's empowerment arises from the subordinate position that has been accorded to them for a long time. The journey of black women towards empowerment was not sans obstacles. Being both a woman and black, they had to fight tooth and nail to debunk male domination and rise above the harsh social traditions that peripheralize them. Black women, underscores Ogunyemi in *African Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, are:

... disadvantaged in several ways; as blacks they, with their men are victims of white patriarchal culture; as women they are also victimized by black men; and as black women they are also victimized on racial sexual and class grounds by white women. (67)

The empowered black women vehemently reject the traditional roles of being a 'woman' assigned to them by patriarchal society. They are no longer the overburdened and oppressed woman with the "six mountains of her back" as referred to by Molara Ogunjipe-Leslie (1994) in her essay, "African women, Culture and Another Development." They have evolved into strong, empowered, independent African New Women capable of independent thought and action.

Adichie's African New Women are Kambili, Beatrice, Auntie Ifeoma, Olanna, and Kainene, among the others. They are educated, career-oriented, and strong-willed; hence, they refuse to be compartmentalized into their chiseled up roles as 'wives,' 'mothers,' and 'daughters.' They embody 'womanist characteristics' and fervently resist sexual discrimination, unhappy marital life, and patriarchal oppression. They assert that all women have the right to be empowered, to be enlightened and to ultimately reach their full potential in the social, economic and political spheres. Education, they affirm, is a great determinant in the empowerment of women which can bring about an awareness related to their social status, and the injustice and differentiation meted out to them. They envision the notion that an economically independent woman can gain self-respect and self-dignity. The institution of motherhood is questioned and indicted. They disagree to the idea that women can only be respected if they fulfill their biological duty of mothering. Thus Adichie's female characters are women with a mission to realize themselves and carve a space for themselves.

Adichie's well-crafted stories excise the peripheral position assigned to women and charts the development of female characters and the strategies they employ to emerge as self-empowered women. She identifies domestic violence, religion, traditions, family life, in-lawism, civil unrest, extended families, polygamy, the desire for sons, racism, colonialism and neocolonialism as instrumental in the

exploitation of women. She decries unfriendly masculine actions like domestic violence in Eugene's household in *Purple Hibiscus* and sexual exploitation of women in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In the two texts, Adichie prods society to review the way women are treated.

A woman assumes the 'feminine' gender, explains Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, and performs the feminine roles such as passivity, nurturing, and subordination out of fear of being attacked or insulted by patriarchal society. Hence, women create the disadvantageous situations for themselves. Butler extends de Beauvoir's famous insight that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes a 'woman,' to suggest that 'woman' is something we 'do' or 'perform' through our bodies and through the process of repetition of various 'gender acts,' rather than something we are. As a result, gender norms constructed by the patriarchal society can be challenged and overturned.

Butler suggests that if the feminine role that subordinates woman is subverted, it can lead to changes in the political culture and improve the miserable condition of the women. Adichie delineates female characters who step out of their enervating condition and protest against the atrocious behaviour of their oppressors. She ridicules characters such as Beatrice who meekly endures the physical assaults meted on them in silence. Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* is a typical traditional African woman who lives in a world exclusively controlled by her husband. She is afraid to express herself out of fear of her husband's tortures. She is even denied the freedom to make any choice of her own. A visit to Father Benedict after a Sunday service reveals the husband's disregard towards his wife's feelings. Though Beatrice expresses her desire to stay in the car because of her feelings of nausea and dizziness, she is compelled to obey her husband's orders. "Let me stay in the car and wait, *biko*", Mama said, leaning against the Mercedes. "I feel vomit in my throat" Papa turned to stare at her... "Are you sure you want to stay in the car?"... Mama looked up. "I'll come with you. It's really not that bad." (29) Thus, Beatrice is compelled to obey her husband's orders in silence.

Silencing is a grave feature of oppression employed by patriarchal society. According to Uwakweh silence imposes restriction on a woman's social being, thinking and expression. It is a "patriarchal weapon of control ... used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or muted female structure" (75). Okuyade in 'Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as a Character in *Purple Hibiscus*,' traces the developmental growth of Kambili as she struggles to make her mouth function and define herself beyond

the funless world fashioned for her by her strict father.

Like her mother Beatrice, Kambili is forced into silence. She performs the role of a 'silent' daughter by dashing off to her father's waiting car without exchanging pleasantries with her classmates after class. Kambili is afraid to speak to her friends out of fear her father's punishments and hence is labelled by her classmates as a 'backyard snob.' However, the exposure to the liberated lifestyle of her Aunt Ifeoma and cousins brings about a change in her life. She realizes that women have been deprived of certain rights, are always victims of gender discrimination and that they can speak. Eventually, she wakes up from her docility and speaks out against her violent oppressive father. She discards the identity she had constructed for her father and discovers who she is without him. Kambili, thus, grows into an independent, spirited, and self-assertive woman; thereby proving, as pointed out by Butler, that it is possible to do one's gender differently. The evolution of Kambili from an innocent and helpless position to a state of self-empowerment is due to the influence of Aunt Ifeoma and Amaka. Their womanist characteristics influenced Kambili towards self-identification.

Education is another fundamental factor that leads to the empowerment of women. Consequently, in her novels Adichie uses women's education as a strong socialization tool to fight female subordination and oppression. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Odenigbo informs Ugwu that, "Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tools to understand exploitation?" (11). This statement is quite applicable to the education of women. Abolishing illiteracy can lead to the emancipation of women. It would enable them to understand the structures that muzzle them and to strive to end their onerous predicament.

Adichie portrays Arize, a character who has disregard for education. Arize views that education for women delays a woman's entry into marriage and the subsequent subordination of that institution. Adichie ridicules this false notion of education. Through the characters Aunt Ifeoma, Olanna and Kainene, Adichie makes a strong point that education enables a woman to acquire knowledge, skills and economic independence. Mothers themselves can put an end to the sexual discrimination exercised in families by educating their daughters.

A believer in the independence and empowerment of a woman, Ifeoma takes total charge of her life and lives according to her own rules and regulations. Unlike her sister-in-law Beatrice who depends on her husband economically due to lack of proper education and a paying job, Ifeoma caters for the

needs of her children single-handedly. She advocates that economic independence is a major factor that can contribute towards women empowerment. Similarly, Olanna manages to live an independent life after quarrelling with Odenigbo's mother. This was possible only because she was employed. Kainene too decides to help her father in his business by making use of the skills and knowledge acquired from her education. Adichie thus portrays the miracle of education leading to the empowerment of women. It has empowered them to see themselves beyond the roles of 'daughters,' 'wives,' and 'mothers.'

Adichie criticizes the patriarchal ideology which socializes girls into accepting the myth of motherhood. Women are forced to believe that they have to become a mother in order to have an identity in society. Motherhood, decries Adichie, is not the only justification of a woman's life. She envisions a world where the status of a woman will not be undermined by being childless or by having only girl children. Butler too questions the gender norm of pregnancy. She argues that, not all women can reproduce; and those that can reproduce are not fertile for the greater part of their lives. Butler wonders if this criteria will stop an infertile woman from 'being' a woman as constructed by society.

The experience of Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* is reminiscent of what Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) goes through as she struggles to prove herself a mother. Similarly, the desire for children is also expressed by Odenigbo's mother. As Olanna refused to be pregnant, her mother-in-law coerces the maid Amala into sleeping with Odenigbo as she wanted a grandson. Through her narratives, Adichie suggests that the problem of childlessness can be tackled through adoption. The protagonist in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna performs the ascribed role of a mother by adopting Amala's girl child, reading books on motherhood and hiring a wet nurse. Thus, biological duties of mothering can be redefined.

Today there is no domain of work which men can claim to be theirs only. The moon, the vast oceans, and the high mountain peaks have been explored by women. They have made the impossible possible. They may not be accepted in their new roles but this has not stopped women from doing what they can and desire to do. Adichie traces the contribution of the empowered women to the development and welfare of society.

The concept of nation which is often viewed as a male formulation has been deconstructed by Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie redefines the role of women, who are always left out or peripheralized, in the construction of a nation. Adichie redefines women as agents of progress. She narrates the

experiences and contributions of Olanna and Kainene during the formation of Biafra in Nigeria. The female protagonists are portrayed as channelling their energies into constructive endeavours during the civil war. While Olanna engages herself on the pedagogical aspects of teaching children, Kainene works on the economic side. Kainene works as a supplier of food in the refugee camp, starts a farm, and requests the Red Cross to send them a doctor every week. Thus, they have attempted to bring about a change in their community by resolving many dilemmas at the time of the crisis.

Nigerian fiction is gradually shifting from a fully-constituted masculine self and debunks the myth that the feminine is essentialized and mythologized. Nigerian women writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie suggest that obstacles such as patriarchal obligations, lack of education, hostile society and meager financial position are no longer hindrances in the path of the empowerment of women. Strategies such as education, voicing oppression, challenging oppressive traditional norms and practices, and adoption among the others can be employed to debunk male subjugation and oppression.

Adichie's novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are a clarion call to all women to realise that they can live independent lives. She condemns the unfair treatment of women and aspires to put an end to marginalization, exploitation and suffering of both men and women. Employing the characteristics of womanism in her female characters Adichie narrates how women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century employ new tactics in the war against patriarchy. However, she realizes that though women have flourished in various fields, the situation continues to be wretched. Their emancipation is still in its nascent stage. The struggle by women to assert themselves and attain complete empowerment in a world dominated by men is far from over.

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