

# Redefining the African woman in contemporary African literature: a study of Adichie's *Purple hibiscus*, *Half of a yellow sun*, and *Americanah*

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the Giants on whose shoulders I have been able to attain this height:

- My loving parents and demi gods, Sir and Lady C.E Okpala
- My ever-supportive and loving Sailmate Chikelue and my darling son Cephas
- My Siblings, Victoria Ezeukwu, Sophia Okpala, Lynda, and Cletus
- My second parents, Late Sir Chukwurah and Lady Rhoda Osuafor
- My dear family the Osuafor, especially Jason Osuafor

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*“Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be all honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy, 1:17).*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the redefinition of the African woman in the three novels of the Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, namely *Purple hibiscus* (2004), *Half of a yellow sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013). This involves the interrogation of Adichie's representation of female characters, African female experiences, and issues of feminist concern in her fictional oeuvre.

The aims of this dissertation were to analyse the representation of the female characters in the novels as feminist models, to explore Adichie's portrayal of African female experiences and thematic issues of feminine concern, and finally to examine Adichie's commitment to the African feminist ideological principles of gender balance, complementarity, and inclusivity.

To achieve these aims, the research utilises African feminism as a theoretical framework. Through a close reading and in-depth analysis of the texts, the study examines the representation of female characters in Adichie's novels. It further explores the textual strategies employed by Adichie to unravel and challenge patriarchal imbalances in her literary oeuvre. Therefore, different feminist thematic concerns in the novels such as patriarchy and sexist attitudes towards women, the suppression of female sexuality, and violence against women, including sexual violation and domestic violence, son preference syndrome, and the valorisation of marriage and motherhood come into focus.

My analyses of Adichie's novels affirm the vital role she has played so far and continues to play in redefining and reasserting the identity of African women. It also evinces her enunciation of their quest for agency and power, while emphasising the struggles women in Africa and the diaspora continuously face due to the persistence of patriarchal cultures on the continent. Indisputably, Adichie's fiction reveals the importance of literary creativity as a tool for arousing feminist consciousness and instigating change in gender relations.

This study establishes that negative masculinity, which refers to the cultural construct of manhood characterised by the extolling of machismo affects both genders. Patriarchal social constructs stifle both men and women. Therefore, both genders must coalesce in the spirit of complementarity to achieve change in gender relations. Furthermore, it reveals that Adichie's literary oeuvre re-envision the future of African women by proposing female education, financial independence, and female bonding as the ways through which African women can successfully confront and negotiate the issues of female subjectivity, stereotyping, and empowerment. Like most contemporary female writers, Adichie's inventions of the African female identity transcends societal perceptions of what a woman should and should not be. By doing so, she redefines the image of the contemporary African woman and renegotiates the patriarchal spaces she is accorded in African literature.

Therefore, this dissertation proffers a fresh insight into the African feminist discourse as it transcends not just Adichie's positive representation and redefinition of the African female identity, but also engages in a more complex and explicit analysis of feminist issues. The treatment of these feminist issues underscores the necessity for positive transformation of women's status in African literature and a redefinition of what it means to be an African woman in the fast-paced socio-cultural and political context of the twenty-first century.

Consequently, this dissertation concludes that through her authorial excellence and her commitment to constructing narratives that reflect the ambiguities, interests, anxieties, ambivalences, and gritty realities of not only African women but of women all over the world, Adichie epitomises major elements at the forefront of African feminist writing leading to a renewed examination of our very definition of feminism.

**Key terms:** Adichie, African women, African feminism, feminist, female/feminine, patriarchy, gender, complementarity, sexuality.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUALISATION

### 1.1 Introduction

This dissertation examines the representation of African women in the literary oeuvre of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, specifically her three works of fiction, *Purple hibiscus* (2004), *Half of a yellow sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013). In her novels, Adichie depicts a strong sense of commitment to issues of feminine concern such as socio-cultural sexism, sexual suppression, and gender relations in the African context. She highlights the complexities and realities of African women in fiercely patriarchal societies like the Nigerian society, which could serve as a microcosm for the rest of Africa. Similarly, she interrogates and decries all socio-cultural, religious, and political strictures that inhibit women from socio-political and intellectual advancement. In addition, she resists sexist attitudes, challenges patriarchal stereotypes, and denounces unguarded feminine conformity. Ultimately, Adichie redefines the African female identity as one that is grounded in the African essence while that identity remains economically and socially independent, politically active, and exhibits intellectual acuity.

The argument to follow therefore undertakes an analysis of Adichie's novels through the African feminist lens. It does this with the aim of exploring the writer's redefinition of the modern African female identity exemplified in her literary feminine consciousness and commitment to the African feminist ideology in her fictional oeuvre. To accomplish this goal, the study begins with an overview of the various conceptualisations of African feminism(s) to provide a background for its applicability to this study. Through a close reading and critical analysis of the texts, it further engages in an in-depth analysis of the female characters and an exploration of the feminine thematic concerns highlighted in the novels. The aim is to argue that the female protagonists in the novels are portrayed as heroines in their own right rather than as victims. For

example, the female protagonists in the texts such as Kambili and Beatrice (*Purple Hibiscus*), Olanna and Kainene (*Half of a yellow sun*), and Ifemelu (*Americanah*) challenge the circumscribed patriarchal social structures that suppress their individuality. In doing so, they succeed in breaking through the suppressive barriers of race, class, and gender discriminations to reaffirm their identities as mothers, wives, and women while continuing to function as positive individuals in the society. In conclusion, I will argue that the representation and portrayal of women in the three novels deviate from the traditional perception of women in male-dominated literature in which women are commonly depicted as powerless victims of their male counterparts. In contrast to this, the protagonists in the novels are portrayed as powerful catalysts for social change and human emancipation, irrespective of gender, race, and class.

Furthermore, my argument will illustrate that despite the subjection of women to institutionalised systems of patriarchy in various African societies, Adichie portrays feminist consciousness and ideals in her literary oeuvre. This is demonstrated by the writer's representation of themes such as patriarchy, male domination, gender stereotyping, sexual suppression, and violation of women, gender-based violence, the plight of women and children in situations of socio-political conflict, religious extremism, and race and class issues as major challenges inhibiting the self-definition and actualisation of African women.

This study concludes that even as a relatively recent new voice on the African literary terrain, Adichie has succeeded in creating female protagonists who are able to rise above the oppressive patriarchal systems to assert their individual identities. Similarly, in tune with the African feminist principles of gender complementarity and inclusivity, her fiction shows that males and females are different and unique but human, thus deserving respect and equal treatment. Through her affirmative representation of positive female identities and addressing of feminist concerns, Adichie articulates an African feminist aesthetic. She redefines the modern African female identity and her fiction situates the contemporary African female voice on the global stage.

## 1.2 Contextualisation of the Problem

Fiction, like every other literary genre, is created within specific social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. For example, women in Africa carry the double yoke of gendered poverty. In more urbanised settings and in the diaspora, the factors of neo-colonialism and racism are additional weights impeding the wholeness and involvement of the African woman. Since it is imperative that the literature of a given milieu addresses the issues prevalent within its specific context with the aim of bringing about positive change, the critical exploration of works of literature such as those under scrutiny here would arguably involve an intrinsic appraisal of the social and literary dimensions that inform such a work. This literary principle is applicable to African feminist writers who actively demonstrate varying degrees of social responsibility in their works by exploring pertinent issues of feminist concern.

Interestingly, the representation of women, that is, the delineation of women's roles, the examination of women's plight, and the portraiture of fictional female characters in African fiction is invariably a reflection of the situation of women in the African context. This is because the image of women in text is inextricably linked to the status of women in context, that is to say that these writers' literary works are more or less reflective of their social context. Women in Africa have for a long time been conditioned by culture, tradition, and the philosophy of dominant religions. The oppressed position of women is woven into the fabric of societal structures, hidden under the cover of patriarchal traditions and norms, therefore making it difficult to detect and tackle. The plight of women in most African societies concurs with Simone de Beauvoir's observation on women's status in society when she affirms that she "is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute – she is

the other” (1972:16). This is true, because women in Africa have been voiceless, repressed, and recognised only as appendages to men and not as actualised humans in their own right.

The responsibilities and limitations of being female in a male-dominated society are therefore realities that are constantly in the consciousness of every African woman. In postcolonial societies such as the Nigerian society, women, as Elleke Boehmer rightly notes are “doubly or triply marginalized. That is to say, they are disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and in some cases, religion and caste” (1995:224). Unfortunately, this situation fixates women into what Buchi Emecheta (1994) aptly calls the “second class citizen” status.

Within the literary context, African literature and criticism has been a male preserve and a means of projecting and maintaining male dominance. Lloyd Brown (1981:3) observes that

interest in African literature has with very rare exceptions, excluded women writers. The women of Africa are the other voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in the field. [T]he ignoring of women writers on the continent has become a tradition, implicit rather than formally stated, but a tradition nonetheless and a rather unfortunate one at that.

Although Lloyd’s observation is over two decades old, it remains relevant today as shown by critics such as Anne Adam-Graves and Carole Boyce Davies (1986), Florence Stratton (1994), and Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) who have explored the misrepresentations of the image of the African woman in male-dominated African fiction and contested the exclusionary literary practices that relegate women writers to the periphery.

The portrayal of women in the traditional and male-dominated literary corpus is decried for its perpetuation of a literary history characterised by either marginalised or stereotyped female characters. The image of women in the literary works by African men has always been formed solely on the traditional roles of marriage, motherhood, and feminine subservience as dictated by the patriarchal society. Through the feminist lens, patriarchy is considered a main factor at play

in the oppression of women within social settings and in male representations of women in text. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000:12), women as portrayed in male-authored texts in patriarchal societies “have been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images generated solely [...] by male expectations and designs”. This negative portrayal of women arguably has a negative influence on women readers by imposing traditional stereotypical roles on them. Some of these stereotypes include false assumptions that women are intrinsically inferior, powerless, and dependent on men.

Faced with this pre-existing alienation of women from the literary scene and under-representation of women by male writers in African literature the few emergent women writers join the literary train with enthusiasm to reappraise, revise, and rewrite the events of women’s history and, most importantly, to redefine the preceptions regarding African female identities. Consequently, there has been an upsurge of debates in the literary terrain about women’s role, place, and image in the patriarchal society. The effects of the relationships between men and women on these matters as well as gender inequality, domesticity, women in politics, and the binary situations of empowerment and powerlessness as they affect the African woman are now beginning to gain attention. To achieve and maintain the authorial voice of female empowerment in literature, emergent African women writers lean towards the feminist ideology of maintaining equality between different genders.

African feminism encapsulates a set of collective thoughts, actions, and arguments aimed at changing the patriarchal power relations in Africa while respecting all positive African values and advocating complementarity between the genders. Carole Boyce Davies aptly argues that a genuine African feminism should firstly recognise the necessity of a common struggle with African men to reconstruct Africa. She states that the ideology is not “antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples” (Davies, 1986:9). For example,

women deserve appreciation for their various positive roles and contributions to society as both women and mothers.

The politics of empowerment for African women that African feminism(s) proposes, searches for the full participation of African women in all spheres of the society while deconstructing all forms of suppression and discrimination against women in Africa. Therefore, contrary to widespread accusations levelled against African feminism(s) by its objectors such as anti-feminist critics as being a misandrist propanganda, African feminists strive to increase women's visibility and audibility in all social, cultural, and political aspects of living from which the strictures of patriarchy have kept them exempted. In addition to that, they aim to create spaces of female power in social and religious spheres and to transgress existing boundaries designed to perpetuate women's marginal position in the society. They seek to achieve this by illuminating and excoriating the forms and causes of issues of feminist concern and by highlighting their consequences as being detrimental to the wholeness of humanity.

With this overview in mind, this dissertation aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How does Adichie reveal the actualities of the African female experience; that is, how are feminine thematic issues such as patriarchy, racial, sexual, and gender discrimination portrayed in her literary oeuvre?
- (2) How are female characters represented in Adichie's novels as positive feminist models for African feminism?
- (3) What similarities and/or differences can be deduced from the three novels that underlie the comprehensiveness of Adichie's balanced portrayal of gender issues and adherence to the African feminist principles of complementarity?

### **1.3 The aims of the study**

The aims of this study are:

- (1) To explore the portrayal of African female experiences and thematic issues of feminine concern such as patriarchy, sexism, sexual, racial, and gender discrimination in the novels.
- (2) To analyse the representation of the female characters as positive feminist models for African women in text and context in Adichie's novels.
- (3) To examine Adichie's commitment to the African feminist ideological principles of gender balance, complementarity, and inclusivity.

### **1.4 Thesis statement**

In this dissertation, I propose to explore the representation of women in Adichie's three novels by engaging in an in-depth analysis of the female characters and an examination of the feminine thematic concerns highlighted in the novels. My argument will illustrate that despite the institutionalised systems of patriarchy that subjugate women in various African societies, the African notion of feminism recognises the difference between genders as something positive rather than an issue to cause strife between the sexes. The study concludes that despite being a relatively recent young and new voice on the African literary terrain, Adichie has succeeded in redefining what it means to be an African woman in the twenty-first century by creating female protagonists who are able to rise above the oppressive patriarchal systems to assert their individuality. By doing so, she shows us that although males and females are different and unique, they are human, and as such deserve respect, dignity, and equality irrespective of gender.

### **1.5 Methodology**

This study appropriates feminist theorising, which offers strategies for analysing texts to emphasise issues related to gender and sexuality in works written by both men and women, but is

particularly concerned with women's writing. The feminist theory of criticism is a relevant approach in my analysis of the texts because it rejects patriarchal norms in literature that propagate masculine ways of thinking that marginalise women politically, economically, and psychologically. As Toril Moi rightly asserts in the paper entitled *Feminist, female, feminine*, "feminist criticism is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature" (Belsey & Moore, 1989:117). Furthermore, the feminist theorising is useful in interrogating the extent to which Adichie Chimamanda as an African feminist writer has been able to portray not only positive but also realistic female characters. The choice of Adichie for this study is inspired by the fact that she is among the younger generation of African female writers (being under the age of forty) and one of the most prominent contemporary female writers from Africa. Having studied in the United States and incorporated her diasporic experiences into her oeuvre, Adichie stands out as an icon for contemporary African female writers. Most importantly, in all her literary works, novels, essays, and short stories alike, Adichie portrays female protagonists who, in spite of the initial negativity and subjugation they face, overcome the socio-cultural forces of oppression to establish their individuality.

## **1.6 An Overview of African feminist discourse**

In recent times, there has been vigorous development in feminist and gender discourses and studies not only in Africa but also 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 never been more pronounced than they are today. Feminism has become a buzzword gathering not only female but also male propagators. Although contemporary feminism as we know it today developed in the women's movement for equality of the 1960s, it has a longer history and can be dated as far back as the eighteenth century, most clearly with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A vindication for the*

*rights of woman* (1792). However, the concise beginning of feminism as a practical movement was marked by the struggle for universal women's suffrage, which was started in the United Kingdom and the United States but was first achieved in the United Kingdom in 1928, giving women a right to vote. The 1960s through to the 1980s marked the period of the second wave of feminism, followed by the third wave, also referred to as neo or contemporary feminism that sprang up in the 1980s up to the present. Interestingly, the radical climate of the 1960s gave rise to an explosion of women's movements with diverse ideological stands and strands, with women all over the world beginning to demand vigorously for equal rights in every sphere of human endeavour. Consequently, the feminist thinking soon found its way into the literary scene in the form of feminist theory and criticism.

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”. However, there are different adherents to the ideology and each one adopts diverse modes of advocacy. This means that feminism is a constantly evolving concept with multi-lateral interpretations and with as diverse definitions as its followers and branches, because of this, feminism defies being categorised as a monolithic ideology. Feminism is a collection of heterogeneous, sometimes competing and opposing social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies. Therefore, there is no universal definition to which all feminists ascribe. Nonetheless, all strands of feminism are motivated by the experiences of women, especially concerning their social, political, and economic inequalities. Another encompassing definition of the concept has been adopted to throw light on the heterogeneous nature of the ideology. Mabel Ewrierhoma (2002:41) provides the definition and indicates that in theory and practice

the new feminism consists of several linked movements: radical feminism, which sees men's oppression of women as a central historical event; bourgeois feminism, which

seeks to eliminate sexual discrimination and sex roles; cultural feminism, which hopes to embody a special, enhancing female sensibility, Marxist feminism, which integrates economic and social class and feminist analysis, black feminism which organizes the woman to often act out; lesbian feminism, which finds central bonds between women. However, they all share a special balancing of politics and culture.

In spite of the broad scope adopted in the above definition of feminism, it still does not include many variants of the movement. Pertinently, developments in African feminism may be elided by this kind of definition, even if there certainly are interfaces between African feminism and the definition such as the advocacy against sexual discrimination and for the holistic female empowerment in social, political, and cultural spheres of human endeavour. Similar to its western counterpart, there is no specific designating philosophy expressing what African feminism is, as it is fraught with pluralities and multiplicities. Instead, African feminism refers to a set of thoughts, actions, and arguments aimed at changing the patriarchal power relations in Africa especially as it relates to the suppression and relegation of women within the social structuring of the African society that is in the collective interest of men. However, African feminist discourse does not ascribe to the tenets of various western feminisms. They believe women have racial, social, cultural, geographical, political, religious, and economic differences, which place a diversity of priorities that further widens the chasm between them as distinctive groups. This ambivalent attitude towards feminism especially among Black American women necessitated the adoption of the term 'womanism' with Alice Walker as the proponent.

According to Alice Walker (1983: xi-xii), a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of colour

who loves other women, sexually and /or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually, and is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally Universalist [she] loves herself. Regardless; womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Although tailored specifically for women of African descent, Walker's womanism has been rejected by some feminists who argue that Walker promotes lesbianism as a trait to be applauded by women of colour.

These arguments for and against Walker's womanism gave rise to the emergence of 'Africana womanism. The exponent of the ideology, Clenora Hudson-Weems, who uses the word Africana to identify women of various ethnicities with an African ancestry, feels that western feminists ignore the specificity of Africana women's problems and speak in the name of all women without being sufficiently informed about the different situations and problems of women other than the white middle-class woman. Hudson-Weems therefore conceives Africana womanism as follows

Neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism, Africana Womanism is not Black feminism, African feminism, or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women [...] The primary goal of Africana women, then, is to create their own criteria for assessing their realities, both in thought and in action (Hudson-Weems, 1993:24).

Besides the main characteristic of family centeredness, Hudson-Weems further delineates the eighteen key features of an Africana womanist as one who is a "self-namer and a self-definer, family centred, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert with male in struggle, whole, authentic, a flexible role-player, respected, recognized, spiritual, male compatible, respectful of elders, adaptable, ambitious, mothering and nurturing" (Hudson-Weems, 1993:24). Hudson-Weems's Africana womanism is more acceptable to a wider number of African American women in the diaspora who abhor the lesbian tendencies attached to Walker's earlier concept.

Although Walker and Hudson-Weems conceptualised their ideologies with all black women or women of African descent in mind, African feminists decided to figure out for themselves distinctive self-naming concepts suited especially to the African provenance and socio-cultural context. Therefore, it was no longer possible to overlook the relevance of an indigenous African feminist consciousness and conscientisation. Speaking about the exigency of inscribing an authentic African feminist ideology onto the global space, Patricia McFadden asserts that

we must become scholars and intellectuals in our right. That is the cutting edge. We must bring African traditions of thinking and problem solving to the Global Women's Movement and participate in the formulation of new theories and methodologies. We are bright and intelligent; we must write about ourselves and speak for ourselves. I am sick and tired of being written for and about; let us say it the way we want to say it. Let us know the new theories and contest the production and processing of knowledge. We can no longer be decorations in the Global Women's Movement, the exotica in our beautiful clothes. We must be our own spokespersons and not allow anyone to appropriate our experiences or our voice [...] We have nothing to lose by envisioning and crafting a new future, and we have every reason to want something different for Africa in the 21st century. So whatever we take from the past, let us be very discriminating and take only that which will enable us to shape an agenda, an identity that will reflect new ideals and new traditions (1997:6).

Consequently, with more women that are African venturing into academia and the necessity to create their own voices both at home and in the diaspora, African gender theorists began to search for a name for themselves, their own shades of feminism. This act of indigenising the feminist movement, as Susan Arndt believes, is as “intractable as the dynamism of difference that propels it. Naming feminism is an act (agency) of resistance that sustains its dynamism and expands its horizon [...] Each of these African ways of naming feminism has a fundamental concern - the use of different aspects of African cultures, historical moments, and current global imperatives to make sense of feminist engagement” (Arndt, 2001:12).

Despite the need for a continental naming, due to the controversial nature of both western and black (African-American) feminisms, they are considered an anathema to most African men and women. Even notable gender scholars view them with suspicion, rejection, or denigration. Regarding this antagonism towards feminism, Kenneth Knowles Ruthven (1984:10) observes that for many men “the feminist critique of gender is intellectually disturbing [...] and a source of shame and guilt [...] Even in its milder forms, feminist discourse strikes men as being accusatory as it is meant to do; and in its most uncompromising manifestations it is unrelentingly intimidating”. However, it is pertinent to note that the opposition against the grounding of the feminist movement in Africa has come from both men and women who view feminism with anxiety. As Susan Arndt succinctly puts it:

they fear, not without reason, that feminism could challenge and transform existing gender relationships. The men's main concern is that they could lose their privileges. But many women also fear the power that traditional structures guarantee them. Feminism, for example, aims at undermining the power that mothers-in-law wield over their sons' wives. Moreover, many men and women consider it threatening to lose what they have always known and practiced what they have learned to accept as 'normality'. Obviously, feminism like every new political and cultural movement provokes fear in people simply because it is unfamiliar. It is due to these fears that men and women who are uninterested in changing existing gender relationships have developed various lines of argumentation against feminism (Arndt, 2001:27-28).

These lines of argumentation are manifested mostly in the form of pejorative appellations aimed at gender-sympathetic individuals. For example, while the females are labelled pretentious lesbians, home wreckers, and man-haters, the men are called women-wrappers denoting their lack of masculinity. This derisive attitude towards feminists accounts for the reason why most feminine conscious African men and women writers who clearly pursue feminist ideals through their writings adamantly refuse to be labelled 'feminist', as within the African context the term 'feminism' is misconstrued as western, homosexually-inclined, anti-religious, and anti-men.

Apart from the aforementioned reasons, African feminist scholars partially attribute the repudiation of the universal sisterhood proposed by western feminism to the cultural insularity, myopic stereotyping, and the distorted and presumptuous representation of African women's reality by their western sisters. This separatist phenomenon is what Chandra Talpade Mohanty terms the "third world difference" (1984:352). Mohanty further elaborates that in these western distortions

third world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read 'not progressive'), family-oriented (read 'traditional'), legal minors (read 'they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their rights'), illiterate (read 'ignorant'), domestic (read 'backward') and sometimes revolutionary (read 'their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they must-fight!'). This is how the 'third world difference' is produced (1984:352).

African feminists perceive the generalisations imbued in such distorted representations of African women by western feminists as condescending. They argue that African women in their rural traditional settings confront many economic, social, and political challenges which differentiates their status from that of their African or black sisters in the diaspora and further

widens the chasm between them and their sisters in the west. For instance, women in many parts of Africa are still grappling with, questioning, and redefining their individual and societal expectations with regard to gender and family roles. This dichotomy is further entrenched by the socio-cultural, economic, and political inadequacies that plague the continent. So that while feminists in other parts of the world have already made giant strides towards female empowerment and gender equality in socio-political contexts, a woman in a remote community in Nigeria, unlike her sister in the United States, still has to contend with retrogressive patriarchal cultures and traditions, poverty, illiteracy, and diseases on a scale of intensity and constraint perhaps not as prevalent there.

For this reason, they are still a long way off from the achievements of their western counterparts and westernised black (African American) sisters in terms of gender empowerment. As such, the idea of a global sisterhood is elusive and considered inappropriate to all women. Based on all these factors, African scholars both on the continent and in the diaspora began theorising alternative ideological concepts that reflect knowledge about the intricate condition of African women, thereby formulating nuanced theoretical approaches that shed light on African patriarchal issues, and finding their ways of self-definition, differentiated and informed by lived experiences. This has practically given rise to a variety of African feminist discourses. Noteworthy in this regard is the fact that majority of early theorising on African feminisms originates from gender scholars who are mostly from Nigeria such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Obioma Nnaemeka, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Catherine Acholonu, Mary Kolawole, Theodora Akachi Ezeigo, and Chielozona Eze. The array of ideological variants under the African Feminist discourse includes African womanism, stiwanism, motherism, nego-feminism and, most recently, feminist empathy. Since these developments inform the discussion of Adichie's feminist fiction I briefly unpack each.

The concept of African womanism became the first generally accepted strand of feminist ideology among women activists in Africa. In a similar vein with Walker's womanism and Hudson-Weems' African womanism, it advocates complementarity which implies the awareness that neither men nor women can exist in isolation, instead of a confrontational struggle for the equality of the sexes. But unlike Walker's womanism it out rightly shuns any affiliation to lesbianism or sexual bonding between women.

An exponent of this theory, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, accepts that it is an expanded adaptation of western feminism. She defines African womanism as "black centred; 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" (1988:65). Okonjo Ogunyemi's African womanism is a theoretical approach to fighting the deep-rooted structures of patriarchy in Africa and is all-inclusive as the onus lies not only on men and women but also on children. According to Okonjo Ogunyemi, an African womanist must incorporate into her philosophy not only her consciousness of sexual issues but also cultural, racial, economic, and political considerations. In addition to Ogunyemi, Mary Kolawole affirms that "any African woman who has the consciousness to situate the struggle within African cultural realities by working for a total and robust self-retrieval of the African woman is an African or Africana womanist" (Kolawole, 1999:34). Similarly, the Nigerian African womanist, Osita Ezenwanebe suggests that womanism in the African context

aims at a general social and cultural transformation. The starting point is not necessarily men. Rather it engages and interrogates culture and sees it as a platform for critical transformation. Womanism opts for an evaluation of men and women that will enthrone complementarity, instead of equality of the sexes. Complementarity implies an awareness that neither men nor women can exist in isolation. While gender peculiarity is accepted (man and woman are not the same), it calls for an urgent redefinition of social roles in the light of the changes in modern society. It is a call for equity and fairness in the relationship of men and women in order to build a society where men and women co-exist in equal dignity, mutual respect and self-actualisation. It is a protest against, and the quest for freedom from all forms of social and cultural oppression of African women (2008:188).

Ezenwanebe's submission summates the entirety of the African womanist ideology as it gives cognisance to the idea of complementarity. Another prominent gender scholar, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, propounds the concept of 'Stiwanism' as an individual variant of the African feminist ideology which, she argues, is rooted in the specificity of the African context. Instead of 'feminism' she advocates the word 'Stiwanism' which is the acronym of "*Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*" to "deflect energies from constantly having to respond to charges of imitating western feminism and, in this way, conserve those energies, to avoid being distracted from the real issue of the conditions of women in Africa" (1994:229-230). Further expatiating the concept, Ogundipe-Leslie states that "'STIWA' is about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa" (1994:229-230). Although stiwanism negates any connection with western feminism, it ideally speaks about the inclusion of African women into social and political transformative spheres while clearly stating that the intention of African women is not to go to war with men. Ogundipe-Leslie also clarifies the role of men in her theoretical formulation as partners in the quest for social transformation. In summary, her concept is about building a harmonious society and it seeks for the joint responsibility of both men and women to achieve such goals.

In a similar vein of feminist grounding in Africa, Catherine Acholonu proffers her concept of 'motherism' as an 'Afrocentric alternative to feminism'. Acholonu posits that motherism is the most acceptable term for a feminine conscious African ideology because it integrates the African ideals of womanhood, wifehood, and domesticity. In her conceptualisation of the ideology, Acholonu states that

motherism must be anchored on the matrix of *motherhood* which is central to African metaphysics and has been the basis of the survival and unity of the black race through the ages. Whatever Africa's role may be in the global perspective, it could never be divorced from her quintessential position as the Mother Continent of humanity, nor is it coincidental that motherhood has remained the central focus of African art, African literature (especially women's writing), African culture, African psychology, oral

traditions, and empirical philosophy. Motherism denotes motherhood, nature, and nurture (1995:3).

Acholonu rejects western feminist paradigms in their entirety arguing that they encourage African women to reject their traditional roles in the family and concludes that western feminism is “anti-child, anti-nature and anti-culture” (1995:82). Acholonu’s concept has not been the favourite of African feminists even if it shares reasonable ligature with the other strands of feminist thinking. The disapproval of motherism has been solely due to her forceful and almost imposing valorisation of motherhood, which most theorists regard as insensitive. Because as much as motherhood and mothering are important to the African way of living, institutionalising motherhood as the fulcrum of a women’s movement inadvertently excludes and stigmatises women who for health reasons or by personal choice cannot be mothers.

A more recent variant of feminist theorising on the continent is that propounded by the erudite Professor of Gender Studies, Obioma Nnaemeka. She limns at an indigenously significant African feminism in a concept which she tags Nego-feminism and defines as following:

First, nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation; second, nego-feminism stands for “no ego” feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance. Here, negotiation has the double meaning of ‘give and take/exchange’ and ‘cope with successfully go around’. African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with, or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework. Feminism is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies (Nnaemeka, 2003:378).

Like all the previously highlighted African feminist discourses, nego-feminism allows for the praxis of complementarity and inclusion. However, it deviates from the others in its recognition and openness to future mutations and its acceptance of possible dynamism and modulation along with shifting exigencies.

It is important to note that although all the concepts under African feminism bear different names they build on the same principles and hinge on similar nexuses. These commonalities include firstly, the idea of a collaborative synergy of mutual respect, compromise, interdependence, gender inclusiveness, and complementarity. Secondly, the positive affirmation of motherhood and the appreciation of family, and thirdly, the conscientious rebuttal of patriarchal structures in various forms of manifestations in African societies, especially those inimical to the advancement of a healthier gender balance. This means that although African feminism is respectful of African culture, in its criticisms of gender relationships it carefully sifts out traditional institutions and practices that are indisputably disadvantageous to women. Some of these retrogressive gender discriminatory cultural practices engaged in across Africa include female genital mutilation, forced brides and underage marriages, exclusion of girls from education and inheritance rights, virginity testing, widowhood practices, breast ironing and sexual ritual cleansing by ‘Hyena men’(also known as Kusasa fumbi) to mention a few. Finally, all strands of African feminism aim at discussing gender roles in the context of diverse mechanisms of gender oppression such as racism, neo-colonialism, (cultural) imperialism, women’s sexual and reproductive rights, socio-economic gender exclusion and exploitation, political disengagement, religious fundamentalism and extremism, as well as in conflict situations.

Because of these similarities, the term African feminism(s) is used in African literature as an encompassing ideology to represent all the budding strands of feminisms on the African continent, specifically those initiated by women of African origin. These feminisms are practically suited to the needs of African women regardless of class, race, and cultural bias. Boyce Davis formulates the most widely accepted definition of African feminism used in African literary theory and concretises the constellations and ambivalence of the movement when she states that

African feminism recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to men but it challenges them to be aware of women's subjugation which differs from the subjugation of all African peoples[...] African feminism examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women's agendas. Thus, it respects African women's status as mother and wife but questions obligatory motherhood (1986:8-9).

African feminism therefore aims at destabilising and transforming African gender relations and eventually ameliorating the problems of African women by illuminating and excoriating their causes and highlighting their consequences as being detrimental to the wholeness of humanity. Unlike some strands of the western feminist movement that frown upon marriage and motherhood and measure femininity in terms of bodily aesthetics, in African feminism, marriage and motherhood are considered acceptable so long as they are not imposed on the woman. Similarly, respect and love for both men and women is applauded and implemented as a feminist strategy, because the very principles of African traditional beliefs are built on binary axes. This means that for Africans human existence is fraught with duality which is reflected in nature as in humanity, therefore one gender cannot exist in total isolation from the other, and if they must coexist in harmony there must be complementarity and mutual respect.

Ultimately, African feminists are concerned with identifying new scopes and alternatives through which African women can navigate the inherent patriarchal strictures in such a way as to contribute to overcoming their oppression while maintaining peace and harmony with their gender counterparts. In their modus operandus, most African feminists and womanists deem the radical or militant approach in the opposition of masculine hegemony and patriarchal norms negative as such an approach would certainly be counterproductive. Rather they posit complementarity as a viable tool for dispelling gender disparity.

The African feminist movement, like all socially based organisations, is prone to evolution and a constant modification of its objectives and goals in accordance to emerging variances in its social context. African feminism is in theory and action characterised by its fluidity. It is a progressively evolving ideological body fully committed in all its shades and forms to the intellectual, social, economic, and political advancement of African women while retaining the nucleuses of family and community centeredness. It believes in the binary fusion of the sexes wherein they are interdependent on and complement each other. African feminism strives towards and encourages a symbiotic and complementary relationship between the genders.

I hope that soon, as the continent becomes more accustomed to the reality of differences in sexuality, African feminism would assume a more accommodating attitude towards the queer variants of the feminist ideology. This is because, presently, despite its gender inclusivise nature, non-heteronormative African women remain hugely excluded from African feminist discourse and engagement.

### **1.7 The status of women in Africa: text and context**

To comprehend the necessity of African feminism to this study, and to appreciate the unique contribution Adichie's fiction makes to the feminist discourse in African literature, it is necessary firstly to provide a brief contextual background of the social and literary status of women in Africa.

The inferior status of women in Africa is a kind of biological destiny designed by society rather than by nature, one that limits the female's identity, surrounds her with taboos and even restricts her physical mobility. Ogundipe-Leslie argues that the African woman's advancement is encumbered by six mountains weighing on her back. She delineates these mountains as follows: "one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neo-colonialism?), the second is from traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal etc., the third is her backwardness (neo-

colonialism?); the fourth is man; the fifth is her colour, her race; and the sixth is herself—that is, women against women” (1994:28). In theory and in praxis the women’s insurgencies in the West and Africa have different social realities; as a result, their priorities differ immensely. For instance, western feminist issues such as sexual freedom and individuality are practically a non-issue in Africa. This is because in spite of the advancements made by women on the continent in countries such as Rwanda whose parliament boasts of being almost two-thirds female, and Malawi, Liberia and Senegal that have women at the helm (Salami, 2013) of politics, women in Africa still grapple with numerous problems and more immediate challenges. These problems are identical in all African countries with very little difference in their level of deep-rootedness. On the one hand, these problems include poverty, illiteracy, and hunger, diseases like HIV/AIDS, male-child preference syndrome, female circumcision (including the more evasive versions such as clitoridectomy and infibulation), and maternal and infant mortality. On the other hand lies pertinent issues like polygyny, child marriage, forced marriage, sexual abuse, physical and domestic violence, oppression of barren women, educational deprivation of girls, outrageous discriminatory widowhood practices, social taboos and retrogressive cultural belief systems that dehumanise womanhood like the caste system among others. These issues of feminine concern coupled with the larger stronghold of patriarchal dominance form the core of African feminist engagement. These same issues gives differentiate the African woman’s quest for visibility and audibility from that of her western sister who is mostly free from these particular burdens.

Given these realities it comes as little surprise that the responsibilities and limitations of being female in a male-dominated society are constantly in the consciousness of every African woman. Raised in a culture that strongly advocates strict role differentiations, especially in adult life, the African female is always reminded of her so-called ‘natural’ roles as a wife and a mother. As Catherine Acholonu affirms, “motherhood and childbearing are central to the life of African people. It is not an overstatement that motherhood is the anchor, the matrix, and the foundation

on which all else rests in the African society and especially in the family” (1995:31). While her statement is true, it is also troubling because the fixation on these roles saddle women with the responsibilities of producing, nurturing children, and taking care of the home largely depriving them from active socio-political participation. The girl child is instilled with the importance of gendered roles from childhood so that by the time she reaches adulthood she comes to accept them as her *raison d’etre*. As Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo (1996:73-74) notes,

history reveals that no group or class has been more denigrated or muzzled than women in any society. Women have suffered all kinds of oppression – sexual, religious, cultural, political, social, and economic. No part of the world is exempted from this ‘crime’ against womanhood, although some societies and cultures are guiltier than others [...] from childhood, the female is confronted with her insignificance and her subservient role in society. She internalizes these images that condemn her to a life of perpetual dependence and diffidence.

Irrespective of the odds against women, the woman in her role as mother constitutes the most powerful means of production. Ibekwe Chinweizu recognises the very important and mostly overlooked role women play in society and argues that since “women operate by methods which differ from those available to men does not mean that women are bereft of power [...] the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world” (1990:15). African women are nurtured and enculturated early in life to be submissive to all males and are confined to the primary roles and responsibilities of wifehood and motherhood. Even though these feminine roles of the upbringing and nurturing of children are crucial to all of humanity, the magnifying of these roles unfortunately tends to limit women and confines them to a life of perpetual domesticity.

The African society discriminates against a woman; her uniqueness is neither appreciated nor is her personal worth assured. It is not just the culturally ingrained gender bias that women in Africa are confronted with but, worse, the repression of their activeness and significance in society by phallogocentric misrepresentation. Gerda Lerner (2005:127) argues that regardless of the fact that women have always been making history, living and shaping it, the history of women has a special character,

a built-in distortion: it comes to us refracted through the lens of men's observations; refracted again through the values which consider man the measure. What we know of the past experiences of women has been transmitted to us largely through the reflection of men: how we see and interpret what we know about women has been shaped for us through a value system defined by men.

Although the cultural and traditional practices of many societies play a huge part in the domination and silencing of women, religion plays an even more predominant role in the complete subservience of women. The culprits are especially the major religious sects whose doctrines on women have been misinterpreted and misapplied to suit the patriarchal ideologies of the male leaders. Kate Millet rightly notes that "men retain patriarchal power through myth and religion, patriarchy has God on its side [...] Eve was an 'after thought' produced from Adam's spare rib" (Haralambos *et al.*, 2004:113). Similarly, speaking on the relationship between religions, patriarchy, and women oppression, Anthony Giddens observes that "the Christian religion is a resolutely male affair in its symbolism as well as its hierarchy. While Mary the mother of Jesus may sometimes be treated as if she had divine qualities, God is the father, a male figure, and Jesus took the human shape of a man. Woman is portrayed as created from a spare rib taken from man" (Haralambos *et al.*, 2004:412). One can aptly argue that although the degree of oppression may differ slightly, there is not, and has never been, a society in which women do not have a relatively inferior status to that of men and that the religious beliefs of that specific society has not supported this oppression.

Because of these factors that enhance the subjugation of women in society (culture, religion, and patriarchy), various forms of violence are meted out against women. In Africa, in particular, violence against women comes in two major categories. The first form is the criminal or physical violence, which includes physical assaults such as hitting, battering, maiming, acid or chemical baths, sexual abuse (usually raping), and even killing. The second category is the emotional cruelty or psychological violence such as verbal abuse, withholding affection from the woman as a form of punishment, and taunting or frightening her. It includes any act which aims at systematic demoralisation of the woman. The financial abuse is another form: it involves

withholding money from a partner and reducing her to a beggarly state. Violence against women is a universal problem and can happen to anyone in any of the various forms irrespective of class, social standing, religion, culture, or age. Other forms of violence suffered by women include female circumcision, wife battery, and widowhood practices. The cultural norms in various African societies where patriarchy still has a stronghold incidentally permit most of these acts that are injurious and detrimental to womanhood. These constitute some of the issues of feminine concern discussed in the novels under study, and continue to remain controversial and problematic subjects of discourse in contemporary society.

Despite the oppressive nature of the society towards women, they have played notable roles in governance, economy, and the military and socio-cultural spheres of communities from pre-colonial times and continue to contribute substantively in all spheres of societal development. Even in rural African societies, women have always been and remain active in the economic development, being involved in farming, trading, and various craft and skill productions. Similarly, in politics and decision-making the history of various communities is replete with figures of outstanding women who fought their way up to positions of prominence and have made invaluable contributions to their society's development. However, despite their contributions to societal development, women suffer continuous repression under patriarchal dominance. Speaking about the devaluation of women using South Africa as an example, Cheryl Walker (1990:3) asserts that there is

considerable disagreement, not to say confusion, about how to explain women's oppression in contemporary South Africa, as well as how to analyze the intricate inter-relationship of gender, race and class and their differential impact on women. We are still a long way simply from mapping women's position, both historically and in the present, while much must be done to integrate these findings into our conceptualization of society. One major difficulty noted [. . .] is the absence from the historical record of women's voices, most pronounced in the case of black women.

Arguably, even where the impact of women is felt, they are not accorded the deserved recognition. The non-acknowledgement of women's contributions to societal development is

evidence of male hegemony, which is detrimental to social well-being. As El Saadawi rightly indicates, “it is no longer possible to escape the fact that the underprivileged status of women, their relative backwardness, leads to an essential backwardness in society as a whole” (1989:1). Even though El Saadawi was speaking of Egypt and the Arab world, the same applies to the status of women across the continent and by extension, globally. It is indisputable that the empowerment and integration of women into the socio-political structures of the society is a necessary move towards sustainable development. In Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo’s opinion, the growth and development of a nation “can best be judged by the quality of life of its female population” (1996:44). Therefore, it is right to assert here that we can no longer overlook or dismiss the devaluation and undermining of women’s intellectual and social developmental contributions in both text and context.

In recent times, there have been significant changes in Africa regarding the status of women. Factors responsible for these changes include increased awareness in the importance of female education, modernisation, the rapid introduction of feminist ideologies into the consciousness of men and women, and the influence of women-friendly international organisations and bodies. However, education remains the major catalyst for change and is capable of restructuring society while inculcating skills for development and enlightening the public about the need for gender complementarity and balance. Women from various social positions are now agitating for their rights and are making bold moves into previously male-monopolised economic and political scenes. Women are also currently playing significant roles in the areas of politics and governance, the academic and professional fields, managerial and industrial development.

Since the status of women in any given society is inextricably reflected in the representation of women in the literature of that given milieu, it is an established fact that women in African have suffered the same misrepresentation in texts as they have in their social context. It is also pertinent to note that albeit a predominantly male crime, the misrepresentation of female

characters is not limited to male writers as some female writers also berate and sometimes subjugate their female characters. The quest to address these problems and improve the status quo constitutes the core of African feminist writing and also forms part of the motivation for this study.

Writing is a medium of empowerment for the female writer because it enables her to confront the forces threatening to silence women. The power base of literary creativity implies power of some sort in the pen that transcends from the consciousness of the writer to that of the reader. The female writer has the autonomy to maximise this creative power and resort to her literary output as a vehicle for raising women's consciousness. Literature can be effectively utilised as a medium to bridge the gaps of differentiation between women in Africa and to enhance the representation of women in text and context. For instance, speaking of the South African literary scene, Cherry Clayton (1989:4-5) makes the following observation:

While black women are also affected by this social construct of sexual identity, they are equally affected by the African traditions which relegate women to inferior status, and which demand fertility and respect for the extended family [...] In South African women's writing, race thus complicates the question of gender in different social groups. The differences reveal how deeply cultural categories and social roles invade the psyche, and how often they have to be released in an imagined protagonist's quest and resolution.

Such discrepancies as are raised by Clayton place the onus on the female writer to take up the responsibility through her creativity to rectify and deconstruct such social anomalies that work against the full actualisation of women's humanity. There is need for all the problems facing African women to be addressed through the medium of literary creativity especially by women writers. But the beast that such writers face is considerable. As hydra-headed and monstrous as patriarchy is in its diverse forms, it is not the only culprit in the subjugation of women. Women on their part have inadvertently contributed to the persistence of their problems in society by their inert silence. Ezeigbo notes that

a great handicap of women is their inability or rather reluctance to speak out in asserting their rights or in protesting against injustice and oppression. Women have the tendency to

suffer in silence. Society has always prescribed silence, reticence, complaisance, patience and gentleness as the greatest virtues of the feminine gender (1996:15).

Silence and activism have crucial impacts on the status of women. This is because it is not enough to complain about suppression and subjugation and still keep mute about it. This situation explains why the French feminist Helene Cixous in her essay *The laugh of the medusa* (1976:875) asserts that woman

must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

It is of paramount importance that writers translate feminine consciousness into writing because the louder women's voices are heard and read the more attentive the world would be to women's issues. Furthermore, the more feminine consciousness is ingrained into the psyche of both men and women, the more likely we are to achieve progress in balancing gender relations.

While changes continue to be recorded in the status of women in Africa, female writers must be consciously committed to the task of using their creativity as a means of manoeuvring the misogyny and condescension faced by the average African woman daily. In this regard, the expression of the need for the conscientisation and redefinition of the African woman as an integral part of humanity in text and context is an on-going process that should be applauded and maintained. According to Ogundipe-Leslie, the woman writer in Africa is faced primarily with the challenge of depicting true womanhood in her works. However, her major responsibility is two-pronged, that is, "first to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective" (1994:57). In further explication of her postulations of the African female writer's role, Ogundipe-Leslie states that the African woman writer should be committed in her craft in three ways:

as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all three. As a writer, she has to be committed to her art, seeking to do justice to it at the highest levels of expertise. She should be committed to her vision,

whatever it is, which means she has to be willing to stand or fall by that vision. She must tell her own truth, and write what she wishes to write. But she must be certain that what she is telling is the truth and nothing but – albeit her own truth (1994:63).

These responsibilities are both intertwined and complex but they boil down to redefinition and reconstruction of the false images of the African woman depicted in male dominant literature and the depiction of African women's realities in all spectrums of human existence. To successfully achieve these literary goals, it is pertinent that the female writer "herself must know the reality of the African woman, must know the reality of the African woman and womanhood" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994:61). Earlier African female writers like Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali, Buchi Emecheta, and Mariama Ba to mention a few, have heeded the feminist call to action and set the tone for the literary revision of negative depictions of the African woman by male writers. They did this by representing female characters who struggled against all patriarchal odds to exhibit their strengths in realistic ways. However, their seeds of feminist consciousness and literary feminist resistance have since germinated and blossomed into the kaleidoscopic literary creativity of an emergent body of African female writers whose preoccupation embraces the reconstruction of the new portrait of the African woman, one that differs from previous depictions presented by male writers and even their literary foremothers. These contemporary or post-millennia (that is, post the year 2000) female writers include Chika Unigwe, Nnedi Okorofor, Zukiswa Wanner, Chinelo Okparanta, Lola Shoneyin, Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Lauren Beukes and Chimamanda Adichie to mention a few.

Since feminism in the African context and in African literature is a burgeoning phenomenon, the portrayal or representation of women in Africa in both text and context must be protean in nature. Therefore, the task of changing and redefining the status of women in Africa in text and context is the responsibility of female as well as male writers. The African feminist theory aims at reconstructing the image of women in texts and the active appraisal of women-centred issues from the negative representation and under-representation it has suffered under years of male literary dominance. In literary practise, this criticism of gender relations is often interwoven with

a deconstruction of the patriarchal use of language and a constructive portrayal of female characters, and exhaustive thematisation of gender issues in literary texts.

Having broadly explained what African feminism is about, it is pertinent to assert, therefore, that an African feminist text is one that challenges and/or questions retrogressive traditional norms, gender-oppressive cultural practices, or discriminatory attitudes and practices towards women within an African context. It redefines the portraiture of the African woman through positive but realistic representation of female characters and unapologetically highlights for constructive criticism all socio-cultural, political, and religious structures that impede the holistic self-actualisation and self-development of the African woman for the benefit of humanity. African feminism is employed in all its shades and hues as a theoretical model for interpreting the works of contemporary feminine-conscious men and women writers on the continent.

### **1.8 Structural outline of the study**

This study identifies with the comprehensive theory of African feminism. Its relevance to the thrust of this study is anchored on its excoriation of all socio-cultural patriarchal structures that impede on gender equality, the balance of gender politics, gender-inclusivity and complementarity, and its suitability to the African context. Finally, although African feminism demands equity, fairness, and justice for women, it adopts even in its most overt form, just as Chimamanda Adichie does in her fiction, an accommodating, understated, and complimentary approach.

Therefore, in this dissertation, I shall explore the representation of women in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fictional oeuvre by engaging in an analysis of the female characters and an exploration of the feminine thematic concerns highlighted in the novels. My argument will illustrate that despite women being subjected to institutionalised systems of patriarchy in various societies, the African notion of feminism recognises the difference between genders as something positive

rather than an issue to cause strife between the sexes. The study concludes that Adichie has succeeded in creating female protagonists who are able to rise above the oppressive patriarchal systems to assert their individual identities and show that males and females are different and unique but also human, and as a result deserve equal treatment.

This first chapter of the dissertation has provided an explanatory review of the theoretical framework for the dissertation (African feminism) highlighting the diverse strands of the burgeoning ideology, and a working definition of African feminism which mirrors its major objectives. Since Adichie's fiction categorically reflects the literary concerns of African feminisms, the subsequent chapters will attempt to establish Adichie's literary oeuvre as a pre-eminent African feminist. I will achieve this through a synchronic comparative analysis of the female characterisation and exploration of recurrent feminist themes in *Purple hibiscus*, *Half of a yellow sun* and *Americanah*.

The second chapter entitled 'Characterisation as an African feminist model in Adichie's fiction' engages in a critical analysis of the female characters in the three novels. It demonstrates how Adichie exercises her authorial responsibility of creating positive textual female characters and awakening feminine consciousness in the minds of the readers, thereby redefining the image of the African woman in contemporary African literature.

The third chapter explores the thematic issue of 'Debunking patriarchy and sexist attitudes against women' as the main crux of the African feminism as is reflected in the three novels under study. This chapter also discusses sexist attitudes towards women that keep both women and men from self-actualisation. These would cover thematic concerns such as the romanticisation of marriage and motherhood, male-child preference syndrome, and social sexist attitudes towards women and female bonding. Finally, it examines the broad feminist issue of violence against women that includes the theme of domestic violence as is explored in *Purple hibiscus*.

The fourth chapter explores how Adichie vibrantly breaks the myths and taboos shrouding African female sexuality, which inadvertently propagates the subjugation of, and sexism towards, women in her novels through her graphic description of female sexual desires and addressing of salient issues pertaining female sexuality. It also examines how she dignifies women not only as human beings but also as sexual beings by reversing the roles of women as inactive recipients in sexual relationships in her novels.

The fifth chapter examines Adichie's exploration of the African feminist principles of gender complementarity and inclusivity, which forms the basic strategy for rebuilding the future of sex relations in Africa in the three novels. This includes her adaption of the creative 'balancing act' of portraying the negative effects of patriarchal culture on not only female but also male characters. In addition, the epitomisation of male feminists in the novels will be explored since it elaborates Adichie's adherence to the principles of gender inclusivity and complementarity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FEMALE CHARACTERISATION AS AN AFRICAN FEMINIST MODEL IN ADICHIE'S FICTION

#### 2.1 Introduction

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 the thematisation of issues of feminist concerns in their texts. In the three novels under study, Adichie portrays female characters that exhibit strength and reject the institutionalised structures of patriarchy that keep them subjugated. However, her approach to empowered female characterisation is not oversimplified or monotonous but nuanced. This is because she also represents women who are not powerful but who irrespective of their weakness manage to navigate the confines of patriarchal strictures thus coming out better than they previously were. By doing so, she realistically highlights the complexities of women's identity in the African setting.

In her Ted Talk entitled the "Danger of a single story", Adichie emphasises the importance of avoiding stereotypes and the necessity of multi-faceted portrayal of stories and characters in literature. According to Adichie, "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story". As such, keeping to her literary principle, Adichie portrays multiple female identities that are complex, dynamic, and probable. The women represented in the texts under discussion are neither glorified nor exalted to perfection. Rather, they are realistically and remarkably diverse characters that represent positive exemplars for women in text and context.

Therefore, 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 Auntie Ifeka in *Half of a yellow sun*. In this chapter, the respective female characters in the three novels will be analysed distinguishing and drawing similarities between them with regard to their roles in the achievement of Adichie's feminist goals. I will achieve this by collectively classifying the female characters in the novels under three different categories, namely the propagators of patriarchy, the border-liners, and the game changers. As the titles indicate, each group reflects the nature and feminist identity of the belonging characters and are in ascending order of feminist priority. By beginning with the least inspiring feminine characters, it is my intention that their appraisal before the more feminist-conscious subjects will not only make the difference in their characters more conspicuous, but it will also lead to a clearer appreciation of Adichie's African feminist enterprise.

## **2.2 The 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.

For example, Arize demonstrates an unhealthy desperation for marriage and when her cousin, Olanna, advises her to avoid rushing into marriage and concentrate on her sewing lessons in order to gain financial autonomy, she retorts, “is it sewing that will give me a child?” (Adichie, 2006:41). Arize further expresses the retrogressive idea that education delays women’s chances at marriage: she tells Olanna “it is only women who know much Book like you who can say that, sister. If people like me who don’t know Book wait too long, we will expire [...] I want a husband today and tomorrow, oh! My mates have all left me and gone to their husbands’ houses” (Adichie, 2006:41). Arize’s lack of agency makes her opt for marriage rather than working to achieve some sense of self-actualisation. While marriage seems the apparent choice for young underprivileged girls like Arize who have limited access to education, Adichie proffers skill acquisition as an alternative means of achieving self-reliance. Similarly, Ugwu’s sister, Anulika, drops out of school to get married at the age of sixteen because, as she remarks, “her mates have started to marry”(Adichie, 2006:122). In addition, Anulika timidly propounds the male preference syndrome by saying: “I want to have a baby boy first, because it will place my feet firmly in Onyeka’s house” (Adichie, 2006:119). The fact that Anulika is fixated on the idea of securing her husband’s favour by bearing a male child first even before concluding her marriage rites elucidates her myopic mind-set.

Another weak character depicted in *Half of a yellow sun* is Amala, the young village girl Odenigbo’s mother brings to his house to bear him children, whom Ugwu describes as the “common quiet ordinary Amala” (Adichie, 2006:216). When the revelation of Amala’s pregnancy initially breaks, Ugwu is disappointed that “such an ordinary person in a nondescript dress and a cotton scarf around her forehead was in the middle of all this. She was neither beautiful nor ugly; she was like the many young women he used to watch going to the stream in his village every morning. Nothing distinguished her” (Adichie, 2006:239). Because Amala rarely speaks, Ugwu is surprised by how “childishly high” her voice is the first time she ever speaks to him. Although there is no indication of her actual age in the novel, the childish pitch of

her voice and the naivety she demonstrates are pointers to her immaturity. When Ugwu stumbles upon Amala in the garden “huddled in the mud like a pathetic animal, chewing slowly, tears streaming down her face” (Adichie, 2006:240), it turns out she had been chewing on ripe peppers with the hope that the heat from them would facilitate an abortion of her pregnancy. Due to her lack of enlightenment, Amala has no idea of what her reproductive rights are or how to go about the unwanted pregnancy. If Amala were more knowledgeable, she would be empowered enough to make her own choice of a partner without being bundled to Odenigbo’s house as a pawn in his mother’s childbearing hustle.

Olanna exhibits feminist consciousness in the situation by identifying Amala’s vulnerability and voicelessness and recognising that she “did not have a voice” (Adichie, 2006:251). So instead of turning against Amala, Olanna empathises with her and acknowledges her naivety and helplessness, she sees Amala as the actual victim in Odenigbo and his mother’s game. Olanna also reckons that Amala must have felt an awed fear for Odenigbo, as such “whether or not Mama had told her to go to his room, she had not said no to Odenigbo because she had not even considered that she could say no. Odenigbo made a drunken pass and she submitted willingly and promptly: he was the master, he spoke English, and he had a car. It was the way it should be” (Adichie, 2006:250). Olanna tries to reach out to Amala but is at a loss of what to say to her, so when she rejects her new-born daughter Olanna fully adopts the baby. Adichie uses Anulika, Amala, and Arize as a microcosm to represent the many underprivileged young girls in rural areas who due to their lack of access to formal education have little options but to succumb to the forces of patriarchy. For such girls, marriage becomes their only resort, a kind of vocation, or better still, their only means to self-fulfilment. Because they are parochial, illiterate, and uninformed, their outlook to life is narrow, and their expectations are terribly limited, therefore their self-agency is similarly minimised.

On his initial meeting with Mama Odenigbo, Ugwu notices her striking resemblance to his master, she “had the same stocky build, dark skin, and vibrant energy as her son; it was as if she would never need help with carrying her water pot or lowering a stack of firewood from her head” (Adichie, 2006:94). In addition to her imposing stature and seeming strength, “she sounded like Master, with that sonorous and authoritative tone” (Adichie, 2006:94). However, unlike her Oxford-trained Mathematician son, Mama Odenigbo is an uneducated traditional conformist, who is so fixated in her retrogressive ideas that she dismisses everything that is new or unfamiliar as negative. For example, when Ugwu offers to ignite the gas cooker for her to do her cooking, she timidly exclaims with a short laugh “we are village people who only know firewood!” (Adichie, 2006:94). Similarly, although “Mama herself is strong and self-determined” (Strehle, 2011:662), she detests Olanna for being different, well educated, and highly independent, and sees her as a threat. She accuses Olanna of being a witch because she did not suckle at her mother’s breasts; she categorically tells Ugwu “this is why I came. They said she is controlling my son” (Adichie, 2006:98). In Mama Odenigbo’s narrow-minded view, educated women are pompous and arrogant and do not make good wives as “too much schooling ruins a woman” (Adichie, 2006:98). Mama’s accusations infuriate Olanna and in a bid to pacify her, Odenigbo tries to dismiss Mama’s actions by explaining that “she’s just a village woman. She is trying to make her way in a new world with skills that are better suited for the old one. 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” (Adichie, 2006:100-101). However, Olanna refuses to accept Odenigbo’s excuses for his mother and asks him “why is your mother’s behavior acceptable because she’s a village woman? I know village women who do not behave this way” (Adichie, 2006:101). Olanna believes that being an uneducated village woman is not enough justification for Mama Odenigbo’s actions especially because she has relatives like Auntie Ifeka, who is progressive in her thinking in spite of her illiteracy.

Two other passive female characters represented in *Half of a yellow sun* are Mama Adanna and Mama Oji who become Olanna's neighbours briefly during the war while they resided at Umuahia. Mama Adanna constantly begs neighbours for food and basic provisions for her impoverished children without making any effort at self-reliance. After begging Olanna for provisions for three days in row, on the third day the other women in the compound booed at her. Then another neighbour named Mama Oji rebukes Olanna for enabling Mama Adanna's laziness shouting that she "should go and farm cassava and feed her family and stop disturbing people! After all, she is an indigene of Umuahia! She is not a refugee like us! How can she be begging a refugee for food?" (Adichie, 2006:327). Although Mama Oji acts as a medium through which Adichie voices her displeasure at the unhealthy sense of economic dependence amongst women, she is not any better. For example, Mama Oji is a loquacious woman whose constant "tirade was a staple of the yard" (Adichie, 2006:328). She exhibits proficiency at nothing else but chatting like a canary bird, spreading scurrilous rumours, and constantly picking verbal fights with her husband. Her daily routine includes catering for her children, after which she raises her voice across the yard to call out her husband for his laziness and irresponsible behaviour: "you castrated sheep! You call yourself a man, and yet you deserted the army! Let me just hear you tell anybody again that you were wounded in battle! Just open that dirty mouth one more time, and I will go and call the soldiers and show them where you have been hiding!" (Adichie, 2006:328). Mama Oji is observant and as such, she warns Olanna to be wary of Alice and informs her of Alice's affair with Odenigbo.

### **2.3 The border-liners**

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 literary

feminist models for emulation. While some of them, like Kosi in *Americanah*, Mrs Ozobia and Mrs Ezeka in *Half of a yellow sun* are 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.

In *Americanah*, Adichie portrays Kosi as an epitome of impeccable beauty with “a high, girlish voice” and eyes that are “perfectly almond-shaped” thereby adding “a startling symmetry to her features” (Adichie, 2013:22). Because of her charming beauty, Obinze perceives Kosi as “a touchstone of realness” who is “extraordinarily beautiful and yet so ordinary, predictable and domestic and dedicated” (Adichie, 2013:459). However, Obinze also observes that unlike Ifemelu who is an avid reader, Kosi is “a literal person who did not read”. She is “content rather than curious about the world” (Adichie, 2013:459). Even though Kosi’s intellectual inertia and indifference to life makes her personality somewhat unflattering, he still marries her with the hope that she would improve with time. But instead of redefining herself, Obinze regrets that after four years of their marriage Kosi does not evolve “except physically, in a way that he thought made her look even more beautiful, fresher, with fuller hips and breasts, like a well-watered houseplant” (Adichie, 2013:460). Therefore, throughout the novel, Kosi remains static. She transforms only to become more diffident. Obinze’s comparison of Kosi to a “well-watered houseplant” clearly posits her as a paragon of the domesticated, docile, and restricted feminine identity that develops only in accordance with the pruning and trimming permissible from patriarchal dictates. However, it is important to note that in contrast to the previously examined female characters like Anulika and Amala who practically have limited choices, in Kosi’s case she is under no subjugation because she has options made available by her education. She consciously chooses the comfort of mediocrity and works towards being the glorified epitome of feminine frailty.

In spite of being a graduate, Kosi prefers to lead a conservative life of luxury and fully immerses herself into the domestic roles of mother and wife. She is totally dependent on Obinze who complains that “all she wanted was to make sure the conditions of their life remained the same, and how he made that happen she left entirely to him” (Adichie, 2013:22). Her inability to carve a niche for herself and an identity outside her husband and marriage is the reason she fits into the mould of an uninspiring, stereotypical, and subservient woman. Although she comes across as possessing a genteel demeanour, Obinze remarks that “there was something immodest about her modesty: it announced itself” (Adichie, 2013:28). Kosi’s exaggerated diligence, over-done sucking up to people, flamboyant acts of kindness, and eagerness to please characterise her as an inanely flat-minded person.

In her marriage to Obinze, Kosi demonstrates her insecurities through her constant suspicions and possessive tendencies. For example, she always begins their phone conversations by demanding to know where Obinze is, “as if she needed the reassurance of their physicality when they were not together” (Adichie, 2013:21). However, Kosi dramatizes the height of her insecurity by sacking her new housemaid based on suspicions that she might seduce her husband. Obinze is absolutely disgusted when he realises that not only does she expect him to cheat but also that she actually expects him to do so as lowly as with a housemaid, and that her only concern is “to minimize the possibilities he might have” (Adichie, 2013:34). Therefore, in what categorically serves as “both a reassurance and a rebuke” Obinze tells Kosi “nothing can happen unless I want it to. I will never want it to” (Adichie, 2013:34). The rationale behind Kosi’s embrace of Pentecostalism and pretentious sanctimonious attitude proves faulty because it stems from a place of insecurity and desperation to appear perfect. Her attitudinal acceptance and expectance of infidelity from a spouse is equally problematic. This is because it is such patriarchal normalisation of licentious actions by men, which would be unacceptable from women under the same circumstances that perpetuate the masculine sense of entitlement.

Kosi's conventional outlook and her fixation on performing traditional normative gendered roles negatively make her an enabler of patriarchy. Obinze reveals that Kosi has "really basic, mainstream ideas of what a wife should be" (Adichie, 2013:450). For example, despite being an apparently better cook than she is, Kosi interdicts Obinze from cooking because she sees him cooking as an indictment to her womanhood. Similarly, she espouses the patriarchal preference for male children, which she exemplifies when "fresh from birthing their first child", she apologetically turns to Obinze and pleadingly says, "Darling we'll have a boy next time" (Adichie, 2013:459), much to Obinze's disgust and contempt. Comparably, because of her conformity to traditional female stoicism, Kosi prefers to remain in a dysfunctional marriage with Obinze even though she is aware that they are incompatible and he is emotionally and physically absent from their union. When Obinze finally tells Kosi that he wants to file for a divorce, he expects her to be furious. Surprisingly, she sinks down on her knees in an undignified manner and begs him to stay (Adichie, 2006:464). Due to her sole dependence on Obinze, Kosi finds it difficult to move on when the marriage ends.

Beatrice represents another paradigm of stereotypical wifedom in *Purple hibiscus*. Because she is uneducated, Beatrice lives in total submission and servitude to her abusive husband with no sense of individuality or a voice of her own and she erroneously accepts her condition as the ideal of a woman's role and place in society. Due to the domestic abuse she suffers, Beatrice is always withdrawn but her anxiety heightens when she is around her husband. For example, Kambili observes that at the dinner table, she is visibly shaken and nervous and tries to conceal her discomfiture by offering to serve Eugene. So "she hovers by him, offering to pour his tea" while he blatantly "ignores her" (Adichie, 2004:31), and neither appreciates nor reciprocates her efforts.

Beatrice bears the physical brunt of the regular battering she receives from her husband with evidences such as her limping, "a gait that made seem even smaller than she already was"

(Adichie, 2004:11), the jagged scar on her face and her swollen face and black-purple eyes (Adichie, 2004:190), and several miscarriages and constant bleeding (Adichie, 2004:32-33). Her marital experiences render her voiceless and silenced, so much that she rarely speaks. Kambili notes that she “did not usually say much at a time. She spoke the way a bird eats, in small amounts” (Adichie, 2004:20). Even when she talks, she does so in fright: “she usually speaks in a whisper” (Adichie, 2004:123). Eugene’s word is command in the house and true to his patriarchal nature; he gags Beatrice of any effort on her part at self-assertion or freedom of being.

In spite of her marital dilemma, she remains torn between her love for her children, a deep-seated sense of the traditional obligations of marriage, and her own lack of power. Although Beatrice’s devotion to the survival of her family is unquestionable she is unable to save her children from her husband’s brutality because she is as much a victim as they are. Nonetheless, she shows them moral support in the little ways she can. As Kambili reveals, “she always waited by the front door on the last day of school, to sing praise songs in Igbo and hug Jaja and me and caress our report cards in her hands. It was the only time she sang aloud at home” (Adichie, 2004:39). Her love for her children becomes the bond that keeps her from falling irredeemably apart. However, to an extent, Beatrice enables her own victimisation. This is because due to her social conditioning she indisputably accepts her husband’s authority and conforms unarguably. Her lassitude and stoicism gives Eugene the power he wields over her as she does nothing to resist his oppression neither does she stand up to his unjust behaviour towards her. Due to this inaction, Kambili feels a deep sense of repulsion towards her mother. For example, when Kambili is hospitalised after being assaulted by Papa she observes her mother from her hospital bed “crying, and her lips were cracked, with bits of discoloured skin peeling off” and she admits that although she wishes to get up and hug her, she however “wanted to push her away, to shove her so hard that she would topple over the chair” (Adichie, 2004:213). This is because she feels that Beatrice ought to do more than cry and whimper. Kambili expects her mother to stand up to

Papa and resist his brutality. However, the inaction she sees instead frustrates her, especially as Beatrice is the model of womanhood she ought to aspire to and emulate. This further explains why Kambili develops a keen admiration for Aunty Ifeoma and instinctively aspires to be like her (Adichie, 2004:76) therefore Aunty Ifeoma becomes the positive role model for Kambili, because she represents all the admirable attributes her own mother does not possess.

Like most women in volatile violent relationships, Beatrice is solely dependent on her husband and is incapacitated by her lack of education and economic viability. She expresses her feelings of limitation and inadequacy by resigning herself to an unhappy and violent marriage. Plagued by an inferiority complex and lack of self-worth, Beatrice succumbs to the fallacy that Eugene is doing her a favour by remaining married to her and not taking another wife to replace her as his relatives suggested. Beatrice's stoicism becomes rather disgusting when after Eugene batters her and her young daughter, Kambili, almost to the point of death, and she loses her long-desired unborn child in the process-. Unfathomably she chooses to remain in the marriage even against Aunty Ifeoma's advice that she leaves the marriage because "when a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head" (Adichie, 2003:213). Despite this Beatrice demonstrates desperation to remain married. She depicts her conformity to societal and religious expectations without taking her life and that of her children into consideration in her response to Ifeoma when she says that "a woman with children, and no husband, what is that? How can a woman live like that?" (Adichie, 2004:75). Such self-mortifying conventionalism constitutes a negative attribute to her persona and to womanhood, as women risk their lives in volatile marriages just to conform to sociocultural norms pertaining to marriage.

Ultimately, Beatrice finds the courage and strength to resist against the confinement of her patriarchal and marital bondage, albeit in a subtler, covert yet radical manner, by slowly poisoning Eugene to death. Although Beatrice's resort to violence is arguably commendable in the sense that she extricates herself and her children from years of incessant, dehumanising

emotional, psychological, and physical torture, it remains an extreme and morally questionable choice. Therefore, as Cheryl Stobie aptly indicates, the release from the situation of the marriage “is not portrayed as a triumph, but as a sad necessity” (2010:427). In my opinion, despite her radical self-emancipation, Beatrice does not qualify as a positive female character. I strongly agree with Tony Simoes da Silva that even though it is possible to interpret Beatrice’s ending act “as an illustration of Adichie’s commitment to an African feminist politics of empowerment, to do so is to ignore the fact that Beatrice never really comes into being as a ‘free woman’” (2012:460). For, not only does she demonstrate a sense of self-agency latterly and in a contemptible manner too, her irrationality costs her son his freedom for a couple of years.

In *Americanah*, Mama Ifemelu is depicted as “a vice principal on whose salary the family had to rely” (Adichie, 2013:46) after her husband’s forceful dismissal from work. However, in spite of her education and financial independence, Mama Ifemelu does not qualify as a powerful female character. She is religiously vulnerable and swings from St Dominic’s Catholic Church to Revival Saints and then to Miracle Spring and finally to Guiding Assembly within the course of the novel. Mama Ifemelu’s extreme religiosity drives her to a state of near-insanity with her making outrageous claims of seeing celestial visions and having conversations with angels. Ifemelu recounts that it all began when she was barely a teen and her mother came home from school one afternoon with her face looking “flushed, her eyes unfocused” (Adichie, 2013:41). She then proceeds to chop off her lustrous long hair, also gathering and burning up all the religious articles and objects of faith in the house. In a state of confusion, while crying and watching her mother, Ifemelu realises that “the woman standing by the fire, splashing in more kerosene as it dimmed and stepping back at it flared, the woman who was bald and blank, was not her mother, could not be her mother” (Adichie, 2013:41). Afterwards, when Ifemelu demands to know what happened, and her mother simply responds, “I am saved” (Adichie, 2013:41), she confirms that her mother’s essence had indeed taken flight. Because of her newfound religious extremism, there is no mother-daughter cordiality and connection between

Ifemelu and her mother while she grows up. Mama Ifemelu is too obsessed with her religious fanaticism to take cognisance of anyone or anything else. In fact, “everyone tiptoed around her mother, who had become a stranger, thin and knuckly and severe. Ifemelu worried that she would, one day, simply snap into two and die” (Adichie, 2013:42). As Ifemelu grows to maturity, she comes to realise the superficiality of her mother’s faith and she begins to repulse her pretentious grace-drenched persona. Her mother’s hypocrisy astonishes Ifemelu. For example, it irks her that her mother diligently prays for the sugar Daddy of her sister, Uju, a man known as the General: “she would say, ‘Heavenly father, I command you to bless Uju’s mentor. May his enemies never triumph over him!’” (Adichie, 2013:44). That is despite being fully aware that Auntie Uju is involved in an extramarital affair with him. Ifemelu finds appalling the fact that her mother, in view of her sanctimonious attitude never criticises or reprimands her sister about the relationship because of the material gains it brings to her (Adichie, 2006:44). Rather she hypocritically refers to him as Uju’s “mentor” and dutifully prays for him. Mama Ifemelu therefore epitomises the absent mother figure stolen by religious extremism, who exhibits activeness only in perpetuating retrogressive religious and cultural attitudes that keep women in subservient situations.

Moreover, Mama Ifemelu does not contribute to the advancement of Ifemelu’s character as a teenager or her career growth as a young woman. She displays more interest in pressurising Ifemelu into marriage than she does in instilling self-reliance ideals in her and just letting her define her success and fulfilment on her own terms. Consequently, Ifemelu finds her mother’s attitudes exasperating and wishes “fleetingly, that her mother was not her mother, and for this she felt not guilt and sadness but a single emotion, a blend of guilt and sadness” (Adichie, 2013:51). Summarily, in comparison to other mother-characters in Adichie’s fiction like Auntie Ifeoma (*Purple hibiscus*) and Obinze’s mother (*Americanah*), Mama Ifemelu assumes an inactive stance.

Another female character represented in *Americanah* with similarities to Mama Ifemelu in her religious hypocrisy is Sister Ibinabo, whom the members of Ifemelu's mother's church perceive as "the saviour of young females" and counsellor of "troubled and troublesome girls" (Adichie, 2013:50). While the women of the church see Sister Ibinabo as a spiritual superior and hold her in unquestioned reverence, Ifemelu objectively senses that she harbours a "deep-sown, simmering hostility to young girls" ( Adichie, 2013:50). Sister Ibinabo enforces the ideals of chastity on the girls and criticises them for dressing liberally. She also instils the fear of sin and shame in them by offering them indoctrinating pieces of advice such as "everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial. Any girl that wears tight trousers wants to commit the sin of temptation. It is best to avoid it" (Adichie, 2013:50). The principle of Sister Ibinabo's teaching proves faulty because of the accompanying attitude with which she goes about it, one that Ifemelu identifies as a "poisonous spite" masked as "religious guidance" (Adichie, 2013:51). Rather than instil body positivity and self-confidence in the girls, her teaching demeans their budding juvenescence by sowing negative fear in them. In Sister Ibinabo's pretentious and spiteful religiosity, Ifemelu recognises a semblance to her own mother. Although she affirms that her mother is a kinder and simpler person, nonetheless, just "like Sister Ibinabo, she was a person who denied that things were as they were. A person who had to spread the cloak of religion over her own petty desires" (Adichie, 2013:51). This characteristic sanctimonious self-righteousness is one of the behaviours that Adichie abhors and criticises through the overly religious characters in her novels such as Mama Ifemelu, Sister Ibinabo, and Kosi. This is because their unrealistic approach to real life issues is unprogressive in the sense that it unconsciously perpetuates negative feminine social conditioning under the guise of religion. Therefore, it is unfeminist and regressive.

Comparably, in *Half of a yellow sun*, Mrs Ozobia is portrayed as the extraordinarily stunning wife of the wealthy nouveau riche Chief Ozobia, who "owns half of Lagos" and who just like herself "has very little formal education" (Adichie, 2006:59). Despite her alluring beauty, Mrs

Ozobia has no sense of self-purpose or individuality. She is comfortably subsumed by her existence under her husband's social status. She epitomises the typical woman of leisure who, blinded by her gluttonous obsession with materialism, follows her husband around (Adichie, 2006:65). In fact, Mrs Ozobia's ostentatious tastes and lifestyle seem to be her defining qualities. For example, Olanna is irked by her mother's obsession with materialist hoarding and fails to understand why her mother "had too many bottles of perfume; they lined her dresser like a store shelf: stunted bottles, tapering bottles, rounded bottles. Even wearing them to bed every night, her mother could not use them all in fifty years" (Adichie, 2006:21). In fact, her self-indulgent and narcissistic tendencies are so grave that even in the worrisome situation of the Biafra war, she is neither perturbed about the welfare of her children nor the impending humanitarian consequences of the war. Instead, she shows more concern about the safety of prized trinkets and material possessions. When she visits Olanna to inform her of her temporary relocation to England until the war ends, Mrs Ozobia opens her handbag and gestures to Olanna to look inside. On peeping inside Olanna realises it is "full of the glitter and twinkle of jewellery, corals and metals and precious stones" (Adichie, 2006:188) To her dismay, Mrs Ozobia unashamedly admits that she carries them everywhere and she also reveals that she has her diamonds hidden in the cup of her brassiere (Adichie, 2006:188).

Mrs Ozobia's narrow-mindedness differs widely from her twin-daughters' intelligence and practicality. Due to their divergent outlook to life, Olanna particularly finds having conversations with her mother "tiring" (Adichie, 2006:34). She further reveals that she is accustomed to her mother's disapproval, which has "colored most of her major decisions" (Adichie, 2006:35), from her relationship choices to her resolve to keep Odenigbo's love child. Part of their incompatibility stems from the fact that Mrs Ozobia is complicit in her husband's unconscionable pimping of his daughters for financial gratification. Rather than stand up against such decisions that are inimical to her daughters' self-worth and feminine dignity, Mrs Ozobia unashamedly nudges Olanna to comply with their father's vices (Adichie, 2006:34).

When the issue of Chief Ozobia's clandestine love affair comes to the fore, Olanna reckons that her mother's concern is neither with the reality of her husband's infidelity nor even the mistress. Rather her main displeasure results from "the significance of what her father had done: buying the mistress a house in a neighbourhood where Lagos socialites lived" (Adichie, 2006:218). Just like Kosi in *Americanah*, Mrs Ozobia's social conditioning leads her to accept spousal infidelity as a norm. She is less worried about the attendant health consequences of her husband's licentious lifestyle than she is about the materialistic gain it accrues his numerous mistresses. Similarly, when Olanna encounters her mother disgracing an old member of her domestic staff for stealing a few cups of rice from her pantry, she is angry at her mother's "self-righteous outrage" (Adichie, 2006:220). She expresses her grievance at her mother's hypocrisy because, as she notes, her parents and their politician friends "steal money with their contracts, but nobody makes them kneel to beg for forgiveness. And they build houses with their stolen money and rent them out to people like this man and charge inflated rents that make it impossible to buy food" (Adichie, 2006:220). The manner in which Mrs Ozobia handles the situation further highlights the dubious, insensitive, and self-absorbed nature of her personality.

Irrespective of their high social standing, female characters like Mrs Ozobia and Kosi are uninspiring because they do not enhance their lives as women nor the lives of people around them. Instead, they are satisfied in their socially assigned roles and content with playing scripted patriarchal roles, not because they are incapable of feminist activism, but because they choose to be on the borderlines. Such ineptitude and static status is not worthy of emulation. Nonetheless, they depict women's reality and are positioned in the novels to instigate feminist consciousness in the readers when compared with the more positive characters.

While some characters like Aunty Uju and Nneoma in *Americanah* are able to metamorphose from a level of ordinariness to become phenomenal women, a few female characters degenerate from assertiveness to fitting malleably into the mould dictated for them by the society. Ojiugo in

*Americanah*, whose intelligence makes her Mrs Maduewesi's favourite student and the only one she deems good enough to be her research assistant, depicts an example of such character shift. While in university, Ojiugo's bubbly personality and edgy fashion sense gains her a celebrity-like popularity. For example, she wears orange lipstick and ripped jeans, speaks bluntly, and smokes in public thereby "provoking vicious gossip and dislike from other girls, not because she did these things but because she dared to without having lived abroad, or having a foreign parent, those qualities that would have made them forgive her lack of conformity" (Adichie, 2013:238). Through Ojiugo's portrayal, Adichie subtly demystifies the myths that non-conformity in African women is a western import because even though Ojiugo has never been outside Nigeria she defies sociocultural stereotypes. However, years later, after she has gotten married and relocated to England, when Obinze visits her home he does not find the same rebellious and individualistic Ojiugo. Rather he meets a sloppily dressed, ridiculously submissive, and domestic woman. Obinze is utterly shocked by the disrespectful manner in which Nicholas, her husband, speaks to Ojiugo using "the same tone as he spoke to his children" and her unusual agreeable demeanour, answering "Yes, Nicholas" (Adichie, 2013:239) to almost everything he says.

Obinze is dissatisfied by her transformation, and when he reminds Ojiugo of her vivaciousness during their university days, she simply laughs it off and timidly replies "marriage changes things" (Adichie, 2013:240). Given her earlier remarkable characterisation, Ojiugo's descent from an intellectually vibrant, zesty, and adventurous personality to a vapid, agreeable, and unquestioning subservient wife figure is as unfortunate as it is relatable. The downward plunge her character assumes is disappointing because it differs from the resolute strength epitomised by the other female characters who capably navigate between family life and a career. Nevertheless, it also gives credence to the diversity of women's experiences, and the situation of many women who are limited by domesticity in the form of marriage and motherhood.

Another lukewarm character in Adichie's *Americanah* is Ranyinudo, Ifemelu's life-long friend whom she describes as being arrestingly attractive, and a big "curvy woman, exulting in her weight and height" that "made her imposing, a presence that drew the eyes" (Adichie, 2013:386). Ranyinudo is educated and works for an advertising company but she lives well above her means. Ifemelu castigates her for "dating a married chief executive" who buys her "business class tickets to London" (Adichie, 2013:389), which her income cannot afford. In addition, she insinuates that men exist to Ranyinudo "only as sources of things" (Adichie, 2013:396). Ifemelu also likens Ranyinudo to the "many women in Lagos who define their lives by men they can never truly have" and are thereby "crippled by their culture of dependence" (Adichie, 2013:422). Although Ranyinudo is Ifemelu's only genuine friend who accommodates her on her return to Nigeria and helps her to settle back into life in Lagos, Ifemelu obviously plainly excoriates her lack of self-autonomy and conformity to societal standards. Besides her desperation for marriage, Ifemelu finds Ranyinudo's excessive greed and dependence on married men for financial gains quite denigrating to her sense of pride and female dignity. Rather than define her life in her own terms, Ranyinudo diminishes her self-worth in order to be likeable and remain a "sweet girl" for her sugar daddy, Don. Ifemelu is further infuriated by the fact that over the course of their relationship, Don had successfully "molded Ranyinudo into a malleable shape" (Adichie, 2013:416), a marionette who responds to his whims and caprices without hesitation, even to her own detriment. Even though Ranyinudo is educated and gainfully employed, she wilfully gives up her independence for subservience due to her quest for luxury. Through her character, Adichie condemns the culture of financial dependence on men especially by women who have an alternative to self-autonomy but choose to be kept women as it invariably perpetuates the subjugation of women. From the analysis of the female characters in this section, it is clear why they have classified as border-liners; their lukewarm attitude towards self-assertion, independence and the inspiration of change in their own lives as well as in the lives of other people around them places them in a marginal situation. They are neither powerful nor

positive rather they are content with their self-marginalisation. These character traits when compared with those of the female characters in the next section elucidates why the game-changers are considered feminist models.

## **2.4 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; Auntie Ifeoma, Kambili and Amaka in *Purple hibiscus*, Kainene, Olanna, Auntie Ifeka, and Mrs Muokelu in *Half of yellow sun*, Ifemelu, Shan and Obinze's mother (Mrs Maduewesi) in *Americanah*.

Auntie Ifeoma is the most powerful female character in *Purple hibiscus*. She is an educated, intelligent, confident, and independent woman, who, in spite of the victimisation she suffers as a widow at the hands of her in-laws refuses to succumb to the pressures of tradition and the patriarchal strictures placed on widows in the Igbo society. Rather than wallow in self-pity, Ifeoma doggedly takes up the sole responsibility of catering for her three children in her small flat at the University staff quarters where she teaches African studies. Irrespective of the difficulties she faces as a single mother Auntie Ifeoma rejects the notion that she has cower under a male figure in order for her needs to be met. For example, she refuses to remarry (Adichie, 2005:83), and focuses on her career and raising her children.

Besides her intellectuality, she possesses attractive physical attributes. Kambili reveals that she is as "tall as papa, with a well-proportioned body. She walked fast, like one who knew just where she was going and what she was going to do there. And she spoke the way she walked, as if to

get as many words out of her mouth as she could in the shortest time” (Adichie, 2004:71). Ifeoma commands respect just as she radiates respectability. She also has an endearing aura and a strong presence. Kambili observes “she filled a room” (Adichie, 2004:80). Her ebullient nature and enthusiastic approach to living is so intense that it envelops everyone around her including her niece and nephew - Kambili and Jaja - who are on holidays at her home. Although Ifeoma’s means are meagre in comparison to that of her brother, Eugene, Kambili affirms that she witnesses such joy and freedom like she has never experienced before at Aunty Ifeoma’s home. She notes that “laughter floated” around the house, “words spurted from everyone”, and one “could say anything at any time to anyone” because in Aunty Ifeoma’s house unlike theirs, “the air was free for you to breathe as you wished” (Adichie, 2004:120). So, what Ifeoma’s home lacks in terms of luxury, opulence, and space, it makes up for with its freedom, liberal love, and warm affection.

As liberal and non-constricting as Ifeoma’s parenting methods are, she inculcates good manners and civility into her children and she does not fail to discipline them when they err. For example, she punishes her son Obiora for rudely interrupting her conversation with her visitor and being disrespectful to her friend. She categorically rebukes him: “I do not quarrel with your disagreeing with my friend. I quarrel with how you have disagreed. I do not raise disrespectful children in this house” (Adichie, 2004:245). Contrary to her brother’s use of religious blackmail and brute physical abuse in raising his children, Ifeoma trains her children to be physically, emotionally, and psychologically balanced yet disciplined and well cultured.

Throughout *Purple Hibiscus*, Aunty Ifeoma maintains her stance as a feminist motivator, a role model, a source of encouragement and an embodiment of wisdom to all the other female characters in the novel. For instance, Ifeoma advises the young women in her class to resist societal pressures to marry and abandon their studies afterwards. Instead, she encourages them to postpone marriage, concentrate on their studies, and develop their identities and careers in order

to avoid the unfortunate dilemma of being restricted to a life of domesticity whereby their husbands would own both “them and their degree” (Adichie, 2004:77). When some of her students decide very early in their academic career to get married she bitterly bemoans the situation, saying “six girls in my first-year seminar class are married, their husbands visit in Mercedes and Lexus cars every weekend [...] and when they graduate their husbands own them and their degree” (Adichie, 2004:77). Although Ifeoma does not vilify marriage, she also does not believe that it should be the fulcrum of every woman’s existence. Ifeoma specifically espouses the idea that marriage should give a woman some measure of independence and room for self-actualisation and fulfilment.

In a similar manner, Auntie Ifeoma is relentlessly resentful of gender-divisive attitudes and injustice and she positively rubs off her feminist consciousness on everyone around her. Through her constant prodding, Ifeoma becomes the catalyst to Beatrice’s eventual and silent revolt against Eugene’s suppression as she repeatedly urges her to leave her pathetic marriage to Eugene. Because Ifeoma abhors sexism in every form, she firmly refuses to conform to the stipulations of Eugene’s patriarchal behaviour even in the face of the harshest financial difficulty. When Beatrice advises Auntie Ifeoma to beg Eugene for financial aid, she bluntly declines because it infuriates her that Eugene only offers to help her on the condition that she first obeys some of his orders such as sending her daughter Amaka to the Convent. She admits to Beatrice that she is in dire need of assistance but she proudly asserts: “I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things” (Adichie, 2004:95). Auntie Ifeoma simply refuses to be fixated into the spot of patriarchal dehumanisation: instead she resorts to her inner resourcefulness to pull through her difficulties.

Evidently, Auntie Ifeoma epitomises the African feminist ideal, because regardless of her education and modern outlook to life, she is tolerant of Papa Nnukwu’s traditional religion and understands that one’s religious beliefs are not the only pointers to their overall character. She

has a strong sense of respect for her cultural heritage and even acculturates her children with the positive aspects of tradition. For example, she takes them on seasonal vacations to the village, insists that they speak the Igbo language at home, and encourages them to learn proverbs and other elements of oral tradition from their grandfather. Thus, she maintains a balance between traditionalism and modernity, without succumbing to the detrimental aspects of patriarchy and tradition such as retrogressive widowhood subjugation. By creating this sort of balanced view with regard to accommodating traditionalism, Adichie posits her ideological leaning as being truly African feminist.

In tune with her iconoclastic identity, Aunty Ifeoma confronts patriarchy not only in the domestic sphere but also in the professional space. For instance, she assertively criticises the university's corrupt governing body. When Ifeoma is notified by her colleague about a list of lecturers herself included, who have been labelled as "disloyal" to the school authorities and stand the risk of losing their jobs, she is totally unperturbed and simply retorts: "I am not paid to be loyal. When I speak the truth it becomes disloyalty" (Adichie, 2004:223). In that scene, Kambili notes that "Aunty Ifeoma's voice was raised. But the blaze in her eyes was not focused on the woman; she was angry at something bigger than the woman before her" (Adichie, 2004:223). Apparently, Ifeoma is angry not just at the university's authority but also towards the corrupt government and the entire patriarchal and masculinist socio-cultural setting that strives to muffle into silence the voices of women like her who dare to question the norm. As Aunty Ifeoma already suspected, the University relieves her of her duties for questioning the unjust system just before she relocates with her children to the United States where she keeps two jobs, one as a teacher at a community college and the other at a drugstore (Adichie, 2004:300).

Just like Aunty Ifeoma, Obinze's mother is also an academic, a professor of literatures in English, a widow, and the single mother to her only son, Obinze. Like Aunty Ifeoma she defies the patriarchal strictures imposed on widows in the Igbo society to assert her individuality.

Though it is expected of her, she refuses to remarry and solely raises her son. Obinze's mother is represented as a strong, outspoken, and independent woman. On her initial meeting with Obinze's mother, Ifemelu is mesmerised by her beauty and poise. She is not only "a full-nosed, full-lipped beauty" with "faultless complexion the deep brown of cocoa" (Adichie, 2013:68) but she also exudes a charming air of sophistication. Given her elegance and magnetic aura, which is at variance with her own parents' mediocrity, Ifemelu notes that in Mrs Maduewesi's presence "her father would seem crass, with his unnecessary big words, and her mother provincial and small" (Adichie, 2013:70). Ifemelu feels "undeserving" and out of place with Obinze's mother and confesses that "there was something about the woman that made her want to say intelligent things, but her mind was blank" (Adichie, 2013:69). Mama Obinze's style of parenting, much like Aunty Ifeoma's, is liberal. For example, Ifemelu is surprised by the "fluid, bantering rapport" between her and Obinze, which makes her a tad uncomfortable. Her discomfiture stems from the fact that the affinity between mother and son is "free of restraint, free of the fear of consequences; it did not take the familiar shape of a relationship with a parent" (Adichie, 2013:69) and it differs from the relationship she has with her own mother.

Just like Aunty Ifeoma, Obinze's mother has to stand up against patriarchal injustice in the corridors of academia. As a member of a committee at the university, on discovering that her colleague, a male professor, had misused some funds Obinze's mother openly confronts him at a meeting. In retaliation, the professor angrily slaps her, saying that he could not take a woman talking to him in the manner she did. In response, Obinze's mother locks the door of the conference room, puts the key in her bra, and insists that "because he was stronger than her" she would not dare slap him back but that, most certainly, "he would have to apologize to her publicly, in front of all the people who had seen him slap her. So he did" (Adichie, 2013:59). Because the professor grudgingly offers the apology in a feministic revolutionary twist, she kicks up a bit of activism by writing circulars and articles about the incident. She goes ahead further to involve the student union in her action (Adichie, 2013:59). Moreover, when people begin to

sympathise with her experience saying that the professor should not have slapped her because she is a widow, Mrs Maduewesi finds it infuriating. She then proceeds to clear the air by asserting that she “should not have been slapped because she is a full human being, not because she doesn’t have a husband to speak for her. So some her female students went and printed ‘Full Human Being’ on T-shirts” (Adichie, 2013:59)! Through that episode, Obinze’s mother raises an active feminist consciousness in all the students. She refuses to be demeaned because of her sex, neither does she accept her status as a widow as a ground for either victimisation or unnecessary sympathy. Rather she proffers the notion that all women, irrespective of their age, marital status, and social standing deserve respect and dignity primarily for their humanity. In fact, this episode encapsulates one of the focal points of Adichie’s feminist ideals which is her emphasis on the recognition of women as full human beings and not just the one-sided bellicose championing of women’s rights.

In a similar fashion of feminist inspiration, Obinze’s mother positively influences Ifemelu’s life. As Ifemelu’s relationship with Obinze progresses, she draws her into the enclaves of her motherly warmth and advises her on reproductive health and sexual responsibility. The practical approach Obinze’s mother uses to broach the discussion with Ifemelu, coupled with the absence of shame replaced by a warm feeling of mutual knowledge, bolsters a newfound confidence in Ifemelu, especially because it deviates from Mama Ifemelu’s usual silence on such issues or bible-quoting hypocrisy. As a result, Ifemelu develops a strong bond with Obinze’s mother, and sees in her a female role model she could actually aspire to. Obinze’s mother also empowers her niece, Nneoma, by fully sponsoring her education, thereby enabling her to gain financial independence and the ability to assert her identity. Together with Aunty Ifeoma, Obinze’s mother fills the place of Adichie’s paradigm of African feminist excellence.

The next female game changers in Adichie’s fiction are the Ozobia twin sisters, Kainene and Olanna, who are the main female characters in *Half of a yellow sun*. The twin sisters are

portrayed as very strong, educated and remarkable women. On his first meeting with Olanna, Ugwu is amazed by Olanna's radiant beauty, which he likens to that of a water pebble "rubbed smooth by years and years of sparkling water" (Adichie, 2006:25). Due to her captivating beauty, Ugwu suggests that Olanna "should be in a glass case like the one in Master's study, where people could admire her curvy, fleshy body, where she would be preserved untainted" (Adichie, 2006:23). However, Olanna is not only beautiful, she is also extremely intelligent and just like her twin, Kainene, she possesses both Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the London University (Adichie, 2006:40).

The Ozobia twin-sisters defy societal expectations especially with regard to relationships and motherhood, as neither of them nurses the "fabled female longing to give birth" (Adichie, 2006:104). Pertaining to marriage, the sisters shun all the wealthy suitors foisted upon them for marriage by their morally incorrigible father who sees them as goods and chattels for his financial aggrandisement. Rather they choose their partners themselves and go into their various relationships on their own terms and not in accordance to stipulated societal rules. For example, Olanna refuses to "marry Igwe Okagbue's son, and later, Chief Okaro's son" (Adichie, 2006:35) who are some of the suitors handpicked by their father. Irrespective of her parents' dislike of Odenigbo, a professor of Mathematics at the University of Nigeria, Olanna moves from the family's mansion in Lagos to Nsukka to live with him. Even then, she purposely rejects Odenigbo's marriage proposals because they "were too happy, precariously so, and she wanted to guard that bond; she feared that marriage would flatten it to a prosaic partnership" (Adichie, 2006:52). Similarly, Kainene is also unconventional in her choice of partners. Olanna reveals that she has always been averse to "Kainene's boyfriends and never liked that Kainene dated so many white men in England" because "their thinly veiled condescension, their false validations irritated her" (Adichie, 2006:36). The objections from her twin and her parents notwithstanding, Kainene chooses to date Richard Churchill, a British writer and expatriate living in Nigeria, over the wealthy old men projected by her father. The twin sisters' defiance and assertion of their

choices against their father's chauvinistic prescriptions signifies their non-conformity to societal dictates and this in turn qualifies them as game changers.

Both sisters are well educated, independent, industrious, and successful in their chosen careers. While Olanna lectures sociology at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Kainene takes to business. Kainene displays an impressive managerial acumen and entrepreneurial prowess. She takes over the running of their father's businesses in Port Harcourt with a determination to make the conglomerate excel under her auspices more than ever before (Adichie, 2006:78). Therefore, Kainene single-handedly undertakes all the risks characteristic of the male-dominated business sphere, from negotiating deals with companies to negotiating bribes with government officials and sourcing for possible contracts and executing them perfectly. Although Kainene is not beautiful in the traditional sense, she exudes a "supreme confidence" and sharp honesty (Adichie, 2006:218). Kainene's ability to succeed in steering the affairs of a significant business enterprise in the male-dominated oil business world and how quickly she adapts to her new career in Port Harcourt is not only impressive, but epitomises positive female strength. This trait is also in stark contrast to the financial dependence on men which is a common trait among the border-liners. In this regard, her ability to stand on her own and make a make in her field reinforces her position as a game changer.

Contrarily, despite her remarkable beauty and confidence, Olanna sometimes tends to be a people pleaser. For example, she finds herself talking more when Miss Adebayo is around, "desperately giving opinions with a need to impress" but because she keeps ignoring her, Olanna suspects that there is "a glaze of unoriginality to all her ideas" (Adichie, 2006:51). Her occasional lack of self-assuredness leaves Olanna constantly yearning for "somebody she could lean against" (Adichie, 2006:103). At the same time she wishes to be self-sufficient and different "the sort of person who did not need to lean on others, like Kainene" (Adichie, 2006:103). Olanna is also highly opinionated. As a young secondary student, she chooses a "two weeks'

suspension rather than apologize to her Heathgrove form mistress for insisting that the lessons on Pax Britannica were contradictory” and in demonstration of her political activism, she joins the “Students’ Movement for Independence at Ibadan” (Adichie, 2006:35). During the war Olanna’s love for meritocracy leaves her feeling discomfited, “uncomfortable and blemished” (Adichie, 2006:268), when she has to go and stand in queues at the relief centres for free hand-outs. She feels “as if she were doing something improper, unethical: expecting to get food in exchange for nothing” (Adichie, 2006:267). However, she surprises herself by “how easily she joined in the inward rush of the crowd, how she moved nimbly from line to line, dodged the swinging canes of the militia, and pushed back when somebody pushed her” (Adichie, 2013:272). Olanna’s ability to adapt to the changes in circumstance and adjust her outlook to life is an evidence of her intelligence and resilient spirit. In addition, later on, as the war continues, Olanna resorts to survivalist measures and exhibits an impressive measure of resourcefulness by learning alternative culinary skills and making soap (Adichie, 2006:280). Likewise, she sets up free lessons for children with Mrs Muokelu and Ugwu, as her co-teachers teaching them Mathematics, English and Civics on a daily basis (Adichie, 2006:291). What differentiates female game changers from other women is their ability to utilise whatever resources that are available to them at every given point in time to make a difference in not just their personal lives but in the lives of those around them. Game changers, unlike border-liners or stoic women; strive to attain positive change no matter their circumstances, this is exactly what Olanna, Kainene and Mrs Muokelu exhibit. They refuse to cower under the strain of their circumstances: instead they demonstrate resilience and intelligent adaptability. Despite the hopelessness of the war, they devote their time and resources to empowering children by giving them the invaluable gift of education.

In a similar vein, when the war begins, instead of fleeing the country like many others, Kainene decides to stay and contribute her quota to the efforts to win the war. Richard feels a fierce pride for Kainene for staying in the country and affirms that “she’s an extraordinary woman” (Adichie,

2006:310). Kainene takes up the job of sourcing for and supplying the refugee camps with food and necessary materials. Expressing her enthusiasm about her plans for the refugee camps, she tells Richard “there’s a man from Enugu who has a fantastic talent for making baskets and lamps. I’ll have him teach others. We can create income here. We can make a difference! And I’ll ask the Red Cross to send us a doctor every week” (Adichie, 2006:318). Richard remarks that there is a “manic vibrancy” (Adichie, 2006:318) about the way Kainene goes about ensuring that her goals are met. Instead of wallowing in psychological misery, Kainene launches a *Plant Our Own Food Movement*. When she joins the other refugees in making ridges on the farm, Olanna wonders “where she had learned to hold a hoe” (Adichie, 2006:389). Her dynamism and adaptability prove to be some of her impressive traits. Kainene positively devotes her energies into humanitarian channels such as catering to the medical and nutritive needs of the countless women and children in the camps, empowering the women through craft making and educating the children in camps while the war lasts. In addition, Kainene reveals her feminist streak in the way she stands up against the sexual harassment of young girls at the refugee camp by Reverend Fathers Marcel and Jude, and the nurturing manner with which she cares for the women and children in the camp. This proactive approach Kainene takes in this matter by sending the priests away differs from the inert attitude exhibited by border-liners like Beatrice in the physical violence her daughter faces from father. This again underscores Adichie’s feminist message that no woman should treat issues of feminist concern with inaction; women must speak up when they should and however they can against gender injustices.

Rather than sink beneath the weight of adversities, the twin sisters strategically cope with the vicissitudes of life. Olanna demonstrates a strong sense of resilience and courage after the traumatic experience of witnessing the slaughter of her uncle’s family in Kano (Adichie, 2006:147). She works doggedly towards her self-recovery and vehemently refuses to remain incapacitated by the post-traumatic stress disorder she suffers. And as the war progresses, she is forced to solely bear the entire financial burden of her family after Odenigbo resorts to drinking

due to the trauma of his mother's death. Likewise, her sister, Kainene, shows bravery and inner strength in the face of the uncertainties brought about by the war and the psychological trauma triggered by witnessing the horrific death of her steward. Richard is in sheer awe at her ruggedness and he struggles to comprehend how Kainene summons the fortitude to forge ahead without breaking down. He wishes "he were as calm as she is that his hands would not shake as he washed them" (Adichie, 2006:316). Kainene further exhibits an unrivalled fearlessness by putting her life at risk and deciding to trade across enemy lines in order to provide resources and food for the many refugees who depend on her for their sustenance. Kainene demonstrates her ability to make decisions independently with the resolution to see them through in the manner she declares her mission "with that finality to her tone that Richard knew well" (Adichie, 2006:403). Moreover, although Richard tries to dissuade her by emphasising that it is a dangerous thing to do, he realises that arguing with Kainene is a pointless venture. What propels Kainene to go on the risky venture of trading across the enemy lines is her humanist personality. This humanism fuses with feminism in the sense that although there are male refugees at the camps she directs, majority of them are women and children.

When Kainene does not return from "Afia attack" (Adichie, 2006:432) or trading at the enemy's boundaries as scheduled, Olanna strives to deal with the possible loss of her sister. The "moments of solid hope, when she was certain that Kainene would come back, were followed by stretches of raw pain, and then a surge of faith would make her hum under her breath, until the downward slide came and she would be crumpled on the floor, weeping and weeping" (Adichie, 2006:431). Remarkably, in spite of the psychological trauma and emotional stress she faces, Olanna refuses to succumb to the circumstantial pressures. Although Olanna is distraught about the negative outcome of the search for her twin, she remains strong through the ordeal. As bleak as the hope of finding Kainene alive seems, Olanna remains optimistic that Kainene would return and does not give in to mourning her as dead.

Like the Ozobia sisters, the central female character of Adichie's *Americanah*, Ifemelu, is portrayed as a vividly honest, assertive, ambitious, hardworking, and fearlessly voluble woman. She is also brilliant and possesses a magnetic personality. For example, despite growing up in an average middle-class family and attending a primary school with children like herself "who took the bus and did not have drivers" (Adichie, 2013:66), Ifemelu succeeds in getting into an upper-class secondary school. This she achieves by intelligently excelling in "the entrance examination" (Adichie, 2013:66). From a young age, Ifemelu exhibits a strong sense of assertiveness, audibility and contrariness, which is misunderstood as rudeness. For instance, as a teenager Ifemelu boldly declines an order to make garlands for an occasion organised by the Church to celebrate one of its wealthy members, Chief Omenka, who is a well-known fraudster (Adichie, 2013:51). While reprimanding Ifemelu for the act of insubordination, Mama Ifemelu queries, "why must this girl be a troublemaker? I have been saying it since, that it would be better if she was a boy, behaving like this" (Adichie, 2013:52). Her forthrightness and ability to repudiate what she feels averse to at such a young age is a laudable feminist trait, this is because being female in a patriarchal society means to be an inaudible, and almost invisible being whose opinions are neither acknowledged or sought after. Therefore, self-awareness and self-assertion are valuable traits for feminist consciousness. Moreover, her mother's idea that assertiveness and the propensity to question ideas and challenge the norm are qualities unapproved of in females further positions Ifemelu's character a positive feminist model.

Ifemelu demonstrates a constant urge to go against the societal grain and interrogate the norm. Obinze attests that her questions always "came out before she could restrain herself, so used was she to sharpening her words" (Adichie, 2013:57). In affirmation of Ifemelu's non-conformity to societal conventions, during an argument with Obinze, he tells her "you think you're the norm but you're not" (Adichie, 2013:92). In response, Ifemelu admits that she likes the "image of herself as too much trouble, as different, and she sometimes thought of it as a carapace that kept

her safe” (Adichie, 2013:60). She also exudes amazing confidence that stems from her complete sense of self-worth and serves as a psychological defence mechanism.

Ifemelu portrays her strength of character when she moves to the United States to get a university education. As a fresh immigrant, she struggles against the odds of socio-cultural difference, financial incapacitation, racism, and depression to survive and accomplish her goals. Ifemelu demonstrates an indestructible strength of will and independence of spirit by doggedly pursuing and attaining the peak of her academic career in the United States. She successfully acquires her degree at Philadelphia, finishes a postgraduate fellowship at Princeton, gains acclaim as a race blogger with thousands of visitors monthly, and earns well for public speaking too. Throughout the novel, Ifemelu displays a definite sense of self-purpose. She cherishes her self-autonomy and refuses to have anyone define the terms of her life besides herself. Obinze describes Ifemelu as “the kind of woman who would make a man easily uproot his life, the kind who, because she did not expect or ask for certainty, made a certain kind of sureness become possible” (Adichie, 2013:32).

In spite of her many strengths, Ifemelu is not without flaws and foibles. She proves to have a self-indulgent angle to her personality and she exhibits a tendency to judge others harshly. Therefore, it takes an equally acerbic character like Doris, an American returnee with foreign degrees like herself and the editor of the magazine company where Ifemelu works, to curb her excesses. Doris matter-of-factly tells Ifemelu to her face “you are such a judgmental bitch!” (Adichie, 2013:419). Ifemelu’s self-exonerating censoriousness is exemplified when she writes a post on her blog with indirect reference to Ranyinudo about the many young women in Lagos with unknown sources of wealth who live lives they cannot afford. Ranyinudo does not take it lightly and sees it as an outlet to vent her accumulating displeasure with Ifemelu’s hypercritical attitude. She bluntly asks her, “and who are you to pass judgment? How is it different from you and the rich white guy in America? Would you have your U.S. citizenship today if not for him?”

How did you get your job in America? You need to stop this nonsense. Stop feeling so superior!” (Adichie, 2013:422). Ifemelu refuses to engage self-reflexively in her criticism of others, thereby she becomes a hypocritical reflection of the very issues she abhors and excoriates. For instance, although she castigates Aunty Uju and Ranyinudo for using men to attain their goals, she is not entirely innocent of the same charges. This is because she too has accrued material favours from her relationships especially with Curt, including her American citizenship, her job in America (Adichie, 2006:202), globetrotting experiences (Adichie, 2006:196), and a life of luxury and tasteful living (Adichie, 2006:200). She also enjoys being Obinze’s mistress albeit shortly and eventually contributes to the dissolution of his marriage to his wife, Kosi.

Despite these flaws, and to an extent in terms of them since they make her human, Ifemelu remains a strong and positive simulacrum of what a modern African woman should be. In her relationships, she prioritises her sense of independence. For example, the moment she begins to naturalise into the status of the ‘other woman’ in Obinze’s life, her rebellious side surfaces. She feels uneasy not only with playing the second fiddle but also with finding herself being alienated from his personal life. Most importantly, she resents the pretence between herself and Obinze about the normalness of their relationship because in spite of their shared silence towards it, “his marriage hung above them, unspoken, unprobed” and when they were together, “his wife became a dark spectral presence in the room” (Adichie, 2013:450). Rather than cheating on his wife and using her as a spare wheel, Ifemelu stands her ground, demands that Obinze either defines his relationship with her or returns to his wife. By doing this, Ifemelu redeems herself from being a second option; she refuses to be in a marginal position, and an object for the satisfaction of Obinze’s desires. Although she makes her mistakes, she does not wallow in them and she accepts them as flaws that mark her humanity, then she changes her life’s trajectory by moving on. Adichie portrays this firm sense of purpose as an admirable feminine trait that is worthy of emulation.

Kambili in *Purple hibiscus* portrays another positive female character in Adichie's fiction. Growing up as a fifteen-year-old girl in a home rife with the anxiety of anticipated violence, Kambili finds herself in a sequestered position. She lacks the ability to express herself due to years of abuse and suppression under her father's sadistic authority "I cleared my throat, and willed the words to come. I knew them, thought them. But they would not come" she says (Adichie, 2004:48). Although Kambili is silenced, she is an extremely perceptive and intelligent young girl with an amazing sense of observation as is seen in her detailed narration of the story. While Kambili's teacher writes in her report card that she is "intelligent beyond her years, quiet and responsible" her school principal describes her as "a brilliant, obedient student and a daughter to be proud of" (Adichie, 2004:39). However, despite the amazing commendations she receives from her teachers, her father is never impressed. Instead, he punishes her for not taking the first position. Because she is restricted to a level of suffocation by her father's savage parenting, Kambili grows up living an imbalanced teenage life experiencing a ubiquitous feeling of entrapment. Furthermore, she occupies a liminal position, because at home she feels like an outcast due to the stifling lack of liberty, and at school, she is ostracised by other students and labelled a "back-yard snob" (Adichie, 2004:52) due to her silence, unsociable behaviour, and fearfulness which her peers unfortunately misinterpret as arrogance.

While on holiday at Nsukka at Auntie Ifeoma's home, Kambili experiences a different, more liberal family setting and outlook on life and thereby she metamorphoses. For instance, when Amaka bursts out at Kambili confronting her for her inability to cook, Auntie Ifeoma encourages Kambili not to keep silent, but to rather defend herself (Adichie, 2004:170). Kambili surprises herself for the first time by admitting that she could not cook and calmly asking Amaka to teach her rather than hackle at her. An even more surprised Amaka replies, "so your voice can be this loud, Kambili?" (Adichie, 2004:170). After that incident, Kambili learns to stand up for herself and from that point onwards she begins to assert her voice. Not only does her journey to self-redefinition and independence begin at Nsukka, Kambili also gains a new sense of self-

autonomy and confidence there. She comes to develop keen admiration for Aunty Ifeoma and instinctively aspires to be like her, saying: “I watched every move she made; I could not tear my eyes away. It was the fearlessness about her, about the way she gestured as she spoke, the way she smiled to show that wide gap” (Adichie, 2004:76). Because she represents all the admirable attributes her own mother does not possess, Aunty Ifeoma becomes a positive role model for Kambili.

Similarly, Father Amadi observes that beneath Kambili’s coyness lies an intelligent but suppressed young woman waiting to blossom. Father Amadi also recognises her extreme low self-esteem, and consistently bolsters her confidence and self-worth. For instance, he encourages Kambili to engage in sports and tells her that she has “good legs for running” (Adichie, 2004:205). Similarly, he persuades her to participate in the Nativity play at the church in order to get her to socialise. Through his constant positive prodding, Father Amadi rouses Kambili to a better appreciation of her capabilities.

Eventually, Kambili transforms from being an inarticulate, timid, and bridled teenager into an independent, spirited, and assertive young woman. Back home in Enugu, she becomes more sociable at school and even joins the volleyball team. Similarly, she begins to question her father’s supremacy. She attests that: “perhaps it was what we wanted to happen, Jaja and I, without being aware of it. Perhaps we all changed after Nsukka – even Papa – and things were destined to not be the same, to not be in their original order” (Adichie, 2004:209). Hence, Kambili begins to find ways of expressing her long-suppressed voice and non-existent identity without remaining bound by the chains of stoic subjugation that Beatrice has inculcated in her.

After Eugene’s death, she establishes her identity as a truly independent and dependable young woman by ensuring that the family’s vast empire remains well organised. She takes up the responsibility of making decisions for the family while her brother’s incarceration (Adichie, 2004:300) and her mother’s debilitating mental instability last (Adichie, 2004:306). After all her

travails as a growing child, Kambili emerges not as a victim but as an assertive, intelligent, strong, and independent young woman.

Amongst the two young feminine conscious characters in Adichie's novels, it is Kambili's cousin, Amaka, who stands out as the strongest. Amaka is confident, intelligent, and bold. Kambili describes her as "a thinner, teenage copy of her mother. She walked and talked even faster and with more purpose than Auntie Ifeoma did" (Adichie, 2004:78). Growing under the tutelage of her feminist mother, Auntie Ifeoma, Amaka emulates and exhibits strong feminine characteristics. She is outspoken and strongly resists every form of prejudice. Amaka refuses to be silenced or intimidated, not even by the Reverend Father. Unlike Kambili whose father suppresses her female agency with his extremist Christian convictions, Amaka is free-spirited and refuses to be a passive recipient of all ideologies thrown her way. Just like Ifemelu, she questions and queries all ideas before accepting them. As Kambili affirms, she has "quizzical eyes, eyes that asked many questions and did not accept many answers" (Adichie, 2004:79). For instance, when Father Amadi, apparently tired of Amaka's argumentative and interrogative nature, tries to curb her audaciousness by asking her if her usual momentary "streak of madness has returned" Amaka retorts "when people challenge you, you label them mad" (Adichie, 2004:173). She is aware that the patriarchal setting of the society detests assertive women and usually disparages them either by labelling them as sluts or lunatics. She is also intelligent enough to understand that religion is a structure that encourages the subjugation of women and as such and she does not hesitate in expressing her opinions even when they are dissenting from Father Amadi's Catholic views.

Amaka displays a streak of revolutionary iconoclasm when she defiantly refuses to take up an English name for her confirmation arguing persistently that her Igbo name "Chiamaka" means "God is beautiful" and therefore it glorifies God as much as "Peter, Paul or Simon or any other English name" (Adichie, 2004:272). By refusing to take the English name, Amaka deviates from

the institutionalised norms, affirms her cultural identity, and carves a niche for herself. Amaka is also ambitious and certain from a very young age about her aspirations to become a renowned activist (Adichie, 2004:130) and in the pursuit of her career goals she doggedly fights for social justice. Even after relocating to the United States, Amaka does not relent on her agitation for social change and other issues she finds disturbing in the Nigerian society. She continues to “write to the office of the Head of State, even the Nigerian Ambassador in America, to complain about the poor state of Nigeria’s justice system” and although nobody acknowledges the letters, Amaka opines that “still it was important to her that she do something” (Adichie, 2004:300). The enthusiasm she reflects in her political consciousness in spite of the neglecting of her voice and her persistence in the pursuit for truth and justice sets her apart as a young feminist iconoclast. Amaka represents the younger generation of assertive and intellectually sharpened African women who dare to express their right to audibility in society, even if society chooses to act mute to their voice.

In contrast to Kambili whose father alienates her from interacting with her heathen grandfather, Amaka has had the advantage of developing a warm relationship with Papa Nnukwu. Under his patronage, Amaka learns to be very conscious and proud of her cultural heritage, enough to segregate and reject the aspects of culture that are unfavourable to her dignity as a woman. Unlike most young people that unselectively follow and imbibe American pop culture, Amaka genuinely prefers indigenous African musicians to American pop-music because she finds them to be “culturally conscious” and as having “something real to say” (Adichie, 2004:118). She also influences Kambili into developing a love for culturally conscious music and art. Amaka has a more versatile upbringing and more developed social grounding than Kambili. In addition to being fluent in the English language, she also speaks her native Igbo language. Kambili notes that she “hardly peppered her speech with English words when she spoke to Papa- Nnukwu, as the rest of us inadvertently did” (Adichie, 2004:172). Amaka equally demonstrates efficiency in culinary and housekeeping skills, making her more adaptable to diverse circumstances. Besides

being academically brilliant she has a gift for the arts and she does her best to keep her artistic talents aglow. She is also jovial, always cheerful and of a consistent personality. Her exuberant nature is highlighted by Kambili, who affirms that even in the letters that Amaka writes to Jaja while he is in prison, her tone is “chatty and matter-of-fact” (Adichie, 2004:300) in nature. Amaka’s personality and her characteristic forthrightness remain constant irrespective of her change of milieu and her family’s socio-economic enhancement. In conjunction with Auntie Ifeoma and Father Amadi, Amaka positively contributes to the remoulding of Kambili’s character because she inspires Kambili to eschew her coyness and establish her sense of personal autonomy, and she keeps at it until Kambili eventually asserts her individuality. Therefore, together with the feminist-inclined Kambili, Adichie posits Amaka as young female characters worthy of emulation to young female readers.

In consonance with her portrayal of female characters that are able to evolve and redefine their identities positively, Adichie represents Auntie Uju as one of the most developed female characters not only in *Americanah*, but also in her entire fictional oeuvre. Although Auntie Uju starts out as a “village girl” who on her arrival to Lagos so many years ago “Ifemelu’s mother mildly complained was so parochial she kept touching the walls” (Adichie, 2013:74). She transcends diverse unpleasant experiences and challenges and ultimately emerges as one of Adichie’s strongest and most remarkable female characters.

Even though Auntie Uju is inherently an independent woman, her love affair with the general diminishes her sense of individualism and self-assuredness. In spite of her medical degree she succumbs to the stereotypical role of the subservient mistress. She puts in so much effort altering herself to suit his tastes and unquestionably catering to his whims and caprices, from toning (bleaching) her already fair skin to shaving her privates because he says “it disturbs him!” (Adichie, 2013:81). Additionally, due to the affair, Auntie Uju gives up her power of financial autonomy, her liberty, and chances of engaging in relationships that are more promising. Ifemelu

is resentful of the affair. She sees it as wrong, “a waste” (Adichie, 2013:80), and expresses the fact that Aunt Uju is doing herself a disservice.

During an emergency financial situation, Ifemelu is amazed to realise that in spite of the flamboyant lifestyle Aunt Uju leads, she does not have any savings in her bank account because the general only offers her provisions in aliquot measures to keep her inextricably dependent on him. In that moment, looking at Aunt Uju, Ifemelu she feels frightened for her and notes that “she looked suddenly small and bewildered among the detritus of her new life” (Adichie, 2013:77). As is expected, Ifemelu’s intuitive objections to the affair are confirmed when the general is suddenly killed in a coup. Aunt Uju’s life halts and she has nothing left but her son, Dike, who is a product of her affair with the general. The realisation of her unfortunate situation dawns on Aunt Uju who bemoans her situation: “I have nothing. Everything is in his name. Where will I take my son to now?” (Adichie, 2013:83). Because none of the properties are in her name, the general’s relatives forcefully evict her from the duplex and dispossess her of all the properties.

Consequently, Aunt Uju relocates to the United States and has to jolt out of the life of false luxury and financial dependence as a mistress to re-establish her life on her own terms. Initially, she struggles to fulfil her goals, juggling between parenting, studying, working three jobs, doing retail at the mall, doing a research assistantship, and putting in some hours at Burger King. However, she does not allow the pressures and difficulties she faces to weigh her down, she resiliently continues in her pursuit for fulfilment.

All in all, her major undoing proves to be her bad choices of men for relationships. Due to the pressure she faces she falls into settling for men that are available rather than those who are best suited to her and who complement her vivacious nature. These include the chauvinistic Bartholomew, who she dates temporarily in America, and who regardless of being “jarringly unsuited for, and unworthy of, Aunt Uju” (Adichie, 2013:116), tries to relegate her to a state of

retrogressive subjugation. However, despite the mistakes Auntie Uju makes in her love life and the many hurdles she faces as an immigrant, she demonstrates a strong sense of willpower and determination. In spite of her initial failures, she works doggedly and finally passes the *United States Medical Licensing Examination* qualifying as an American family physician. She also takes back the reins of her love life, redefines her essence, and refuses to be Bartholomew's doormat by ending their relationship. She infuses her life and career with passion and in tune with her newly revamped confidence; she joins *African Doctors for Africa* and begins to volunteer on medical missions. Soon afterwards, she meets and falls in love with "Kweku, a divorced Ghanaian doctor" (Adichie, 2013:299), a bespectacled gentleman, who Ifemelu admires because he loves Auntie Uju and her son, Dike, unreservedly. Auntie Uju's ability to recover phoenix-like from her mistakes and positively redefine and recreate her identity and sense of worth is remarkable and admirable and asserts her as feminist model. Auntie Uju proves that to be a feminist model, a woman does not have to be perfect. Rather she has to be self-aware, to admit her mistakes and make conscious efforts towards being a better woman and an influencer of positive change as much as her circumstance allows.

Apart from the major female characters already discussed, there are a few others who are not prominent in the texts but exist in the plot to serve agents that posit Adichie's feminist goals. One of these agented characters in *Half of a yellow sun* is Miss Lara Adebayo, a lecturer and friend of Odenigbo, whom Olanna describes as having the compact body of "a questioner whom one dared not question back" (Adichie, 2006:49). Miss Adebayo represents an absolute opposite of what Ugwu expects an educated woman to be, he "imagined quietness, delicacy, the kind of woman whose sneeze, whose laugh and talk, would be soft as the under feathers closest to a chicken's skin" (Adichie, 2006:19). Contrary to his stereotypical expectations, not only does Miss Adebayo drink brandy like his master, Odenigbo, she is neither fragile nor delicate like "stalks of grass"; in fact, she is the "loudest" (Adichie, 2006:19) of the women he has met. Miss Lara Adebayo is intelligent and conversant with numerous issues and topics and she actively

engages with the other lecturers who converge for drinks and chats in the evenings at Odenigbo's house. She asserts her voice during conversations and laughs without restraint. Ugwu is startled not only by Miss Adebayo's audaciousness and by her vibrancy in the midst of her male colleagues but even more by her constant confrontational and argumentative stance towards his master. For instance, on one occasion she calls Odenigbo a "hopeless tribalist" and laughing heartily gets up from her seat, moves "over to Master and pressed his lips close together" (Adichie, 2006:21). Adichie is not interested in depicting women who are frail and delicate like Ugwu's expression of societal assumptions suggest. Therefore, Miss Adebayo's defiance of the gendered stereotypical perceptions of what an educated woman should be serves the author's deliberate purpose.

In *Americanah*, Shan, Blaine's sister, portrays another of Adichie's agented characters. Shan is beautiful, with a body which is "a collection of graceful small curves, her buttocks, her breasts, her calves, and there was in her movement the entitlement of the chosen" (Adichie, 2013:318). Shan also exudes an air of authoritative poise, one that drips "a subtle and devastating" kind of power (Adichie, 2013:319). Shan demonstrates a strong hatred for the hyper-sexualisation of the black female in America (Adichie, 2013:320,321). In addition, she uses her voice and position as an established writer as a vehicle to pass a strong feminist message by vehemently criticising the sexual objectification of the black female body and refusing to have her white editor use a black female torso as her book's cover.

Interestingly, not all of Adichie's strong women characters are educated and enlightened. For instance, in *Half of a yellow sun*, she depicts Mrs Muokelu as a barely-educated primary school teacher. Ugwu notes that "she calculated simple divisions with uncertainty, spoke in a low mumble when she read, as though she was afraid of the sentences, and scolded her pupils for getting something wrong without telling them what the correct thing was" (Adichie, 2006:292). However, she refuses to limit herself based on her educational background, as what she lacks in

terms of academic acuity, she makes up for in her resourcefulness, versatility, and sensibleness. Even though they share no commonalities, Olanna is attracted to Mrs Muokelu because she “exudes fearlessness, a fearlessness that reminded Olanna of Kainene” (Adichie, 2006:265). Mrs Muokelu is also scantily intellectually equipped. Additionally, although Ugwu initially expresses scepticism about Mrs Muokelu’s traditional methods of doing things, he soon recognises her ingenuity and impressive creativity. Mrs Moukelu teaches Olanna new things and survivalist strategies, from baking on a stove-top to making homemade soap to using dried yolk as an alternative source of protein and how to navigate her way around the relief centres (Adichie, 2006:283). After her husband returns from the war with an amputated leg and war shock, she takes over the running of the family and informs Olanna that she has “twelve people to feed”, that is, without counting her “husband’s relatives who have just come from Abakiliki” (Adichie, 2006:293). As the war intensifies and the supplies at the relief centres dwindle, Mrs Muokelu demonstrates resolute strength as she bravely decides to start merchandising across enemy territories to cater for her large family (Adichie, 2006:293).

Another example of a female character that projects a strong assertive voice and feminist ideals irrespective of her lack of education is Aunty Ifeka in *Half of a yellow sun*. During Olanna’s fight with Odenigbo for impregnating a village girl, she turns to Aunty Ifeka for solace. The intelligent piece of advice Aunty Ifeka gives Olanna remains one of the most important feminist maxims in Adichie’s fiction. Aunty Ifeka tells Olanna that in the early days of her own marriage she too had experiences and issues of insecurities with her husband. However, with time she learnt to reclaim her identity and redefine her self-worth by acknowledging that nothing her husband does will make her life change, and that the only changes that will occur in her life are those she allows. Aunty Ifeka emphatically advises Olanna to take responsibility for her own self-worth and happiness: “you must never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Your life belongs to you and you alone” (Adichie, 2006:226). The fact that her uneducated Aunt gives the sophisticated Olanna such an empowering piece of advice is Adichie’s way of signifying that

regardless of their social standing and educational qualifications women can have a positive voice and bring about change in their own lives and the lives of other women around them. The idea that Adichie poses through these characters is that although education opens up avenues of self-actualisation for women, self-definition and feminist activism are not always the products of formal education. Rather, it serves only to accentuate those innate qualities.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, 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 marginalised, 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 (*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 Uju 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.

Adichie also dismisses the prototypical perceptions of the feminine ideal by juxtaposing frailty and beauty as the optimum characteristic for women and swapping them instead with intellectual mettle and existential capabilities. For example, unlike Kainene and Ifemelu who are not regarded as being beautiful in the traditional sense in which female beauty is assessed, characters like Kosi and Mrs Ozobia whose beauty are over-emphasised are not practically portrayed as strong and remarkable women. This is crucial because the emphasis on female beauty, fragility and domesticity as the constituents of feminine perfection in patriarchy constitutes a means through which women are kept on the periphery of socio-political participation. Similarly, Adichie denounces the patriarchal obsession with domesticity as a marker for female empowerment. Instead, the qualifying principle for female empowerment in these texts is the women's ability to maintain their dignity in the face of difficulties and challenges that seek to undermine their humanity and the expression thereof.

In this regard, the major characters depicted in the three novels unapologetically exhibit a sense of positive non-derogatory assertiveness and intelligently navigate the spheres of patriarchal restraints without defeminising themselves. They are able to stand firmly on their feet and exert their individuality. They also interact equally with their male counterparts and they assert their rights as human beings without being antagonistic to the men.

In consonance with the African feminist literary characterisation, which advocates authenticity, Adichie balances the portrayal of the more vibrant female characters with some weaker ones, thereby diversifying her depiction of African women's reality. This serves the important purpose of making her representation of female identities plausible. At the same time, it is evident that those weak female characters are not to be emulated as the progressive ones are posited as models of what contemporary African womanhood should be. Ultimately, we can unarguably assert that one of Adichie's major literary feminist strong points is her remarkable female characterisation.

As I have mentioned earlier in chapter one, African feminist analysis focuses on the representation of positive female characters and the examination of issues of feminist concerns as are found in the texts. Since this chapter has engaged in an in-depth analysis of the portrayal of women in Adichie's fiction, the next chapter explores how she debunks patriarchy and sexist attitudes towards women that keep both women and men from self-actualisation in the three novels under study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DEBUNKING PATRIARCHY AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION TOWARDS WOMEN IN ADICHIE'S NOVELS

#### 3.1 Introduction

Patriarchy remains the fundamental root cause of most problems faced by women in societies where it holds sway, resulting in the marginalisation, discrimination, and subjugation of women, and perpetration of violence against women. For instance, it is also the patriarchal structure of the society and its deep-rootedness that gives rise to masculinist beliefs and attitudes, which are detrimental to the female gender. Therefore, the deconstruction of patriarchy is a pertinent preoccupation of African feminist writers. This chapter examines the manner in which Adichie as an African feminist writer challenges and debunks patriarchy and other related socio-cultural gender-constructs that militate against women, as found in *Purple hibiscus*, *Half of a yellow sun*, and *Americanah*. These include thematic issues of feminine concern such as the romanticising of marriage, the valorisation of motherhood, male-child preference syndrome, discriminatory and sexist attitudes towards women, and violence against women. It also explores Adichie's proposition of education and female bonding as strategies for women empowerment in the three novels.

#### 3.2 The patriarchal romanticising of marriage

In patriarchal societies, a high priority is placed on women's marital status. In fact, marriage and childbearing are perceived as the fulcrum of a woman's existence. Therefore, no matter the level of a woman's life accomplishments, she neither has worth nor honour outside marriage because, as Beatrice aptly puts it in *Purple hibiscus*, "a husband crowns a woman's life" (Adichie, 2004:75). This obsessive positioning of marriage as the pinnacle of female achievement in patriarchal societies is what I refer to in this section as the romanticising of marriage and is

inimical to the actualisation of women's full potentials. Under patriarchy, a woman's identity is validated only in association to a male-figure. From birth until adolescence, her identity is subsumed under her father, and after marriage she is accorded recognition in association to her husband. As a result, throughout the span of her life, the woman exists primarily as an accessory to the male figures in her life. The consequence of this patriarchal romanticising of marriage is that it makes the worry for a spouse and aspiring towards marriage the female's sole pursuit in life thereby limiting her self-actualisation. So that rather than inspiring young women and girls to pursue an education, master a skill or learn a trade in order to attain self-reliance and financial independence, they are forced into early marriages, pushed by societal expectations into making terrible choices, and even burdened with a feeling of insufficiency when they fail to get hitched.

Adichie severally criticises the pressure exerted on young women to aspire towards marriage in patriarchal societies in her three novels. For example, in *Americanah*, as soon as Ifemelu's mother learns that she is in an affair she begins to pester her asking "when will he come to introduce himself? You can plan it so that we do everything at the same time—door-knocking, bride price, and wine-carrying—it will cut costs and that way he does not have to keep coming and going. America is far" (Adichie, 2013:315). Ifemelu curbs the pressure by dismissively telling her "Mummy, please, we are taking things slowly for now" (Adichie, 2013:315). In a similar manner, Ifemelu's colleague and fellow America returnee, Doris, suffers the societal pressure of marriage. She laments the fact that she had to desert her great job in New York and move back to Nigeria due to "family pressure to settle down" (Adichie, 2013:403). In *Purple hibiscus*, Auntie Ifeoma in similar vein bemoans the eager manner in which many of her female students abandon their studies to embrace marriage only to become trapped in a life of domesticity. When one of such female students comes to inform her that she is getting married, while speaking of her husband-to-be, Kambili observes that the female student does not "call him by his name; she called him 'dim,' 'my husband,' with the proud tone of someone who had

won a prize” (Adichie, 2004:234). In response to Auntie Ifeoma’s inquisition about her plans to return to school, she proudly replies with a high girlish laugh: “I am not sure I will come back to school when we reopen. I want to have a baby first. I don’t want *dim* to think that he married me to have an empty home” (Adichie, 2004:234). The female student in the passage is a typical product of patriarchal enculturation. She no longer calls her husband by his name. Rather she refers to him in the possessive term—“*dim*” (which is Igbo for ‘My husband’ with the emphasis on ‘my’). This is because culturally, by virtue of becoming his wife, the payment of the bride price signifies a transfer of her identity to him; therefore, his identity supplants hers. In addition, socio-culturally, she has indeed won the ultimate prize in the patriarchal race of womanhood, which is marriage. Furthermore, by revealing that she wants to have a baby before returning to school, the female student affirms the stereotypical feminine expectations whereby motherhood concretises a woman’s place in marriage. Therefore, she does not want to be seen as being incapable of bearing children and stand the risk of being replaced by another wife, as is the norm.

When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, during reunions with old friends she is surprised by how “marriage was always the preferred topic” and how quickly the conversations if digressed always switched back to the “subject of marriage” with “a waspish tone in the voices of the unmarried, smugness in those of the married” (Adichie, 2013:398). She also observes that while the married friends beamed with pride and triumph about their marital status, the unmarried friends coalesced into a “self-pity party of the single” (Adichie, 2013:398). The societal emphasis on marriage for women leaves the unmarried clamouring for marriage while the married clutch to their marriages desperately despite their dysfunctional state. For example, in *Purple hibiscus*, Beatrice worries that another woman might usurp her position as Eugene’s wife because of her inability to bear him more sons. She asks Auntie Ifeoma, “do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even,

and not to bother to paying a bride price?” (Adichie, 2004:250). This preposterous suggestion that any woman would consider foisting her daughter on an already married man and even forgoing the cultural payment of dowry, shows the extent of the desperation women exhibit in navigating the confines of patriarchy by resorting to marriage. In stark contrast with Beatrice’s fear of losing her marriage, Auntie Ifeoma actually refuses to remarry after her husband’s death. When Papa Nnukwu tells her, “my spirit will intercede for you, so that Chukwu will send a good man to take care of you and the children”, she quickly interjects, “let your spirit ask Chukwu to hasten my promotion to senior lecturer, that is all I ask” (Adichie, 2005:83). By dispelling her father’s prayers for a husband and asking him to pray for her professional advancement instead, Auntie Ifeoma rejects the traditional female aspiration towards marriage and fixation on marital status and posits a “modern shift in perspective on gender issues” (Stobie, 2010:424).

An even worse aspect of the patriarchal romanticisation of marriage as the apex of a woman’s life accomplishment is the erroneous attachment of a time tag to a woman’s value – something similar to a marriageable shelf life. This feminist issue is expressed in *Half of a yellow sun* by Arize who tells Olanna that it is only educated women who can afford to delay marriage because young girls like herself who are illiterate would “expire” (Adichie, 2006:41) and lose their value in the marriage market if they wait too long. Similarly, in *Americanah*, after persistently evading her mother’s nudging towards marriage, Ifemelu’s mother takes her time to remind her: “you should also keep your eyes open. Remember that a woman is like a flower. Our time passes quickly” (Adichie, 2013:301). The problem with this glamorisation of marriage as the fulcrum of women’s existence and its associative time tagging of a woman’s biological clock, which sadly also applies to motherhood, is that it forces women into making terrible choices. This is because more often than not, women settle for men not because they are compatible or complementary, but because the men are available, and they perceive themselves as losing out on the social constructs of a woman’s essence (namely marriage and relatively, motherhood).

Conversely, even though marriage is highly prioritised, divorce is abhorred. A woman is expected to endure whatever circumstances she faces in her marriage and she is saddled with the sole responsibility of keeping the marriage functional. In the event of the breakdown of a marital union, society absolves the man of any consequence and the woman bears all the blame. A divorced woman is considered a failure, treated as a social pariah, and disparaged as a scarlet woman. As a result of these social realities many women are forced to remain in very toxic marriages as they have neither the law nor religious nor socio-cultural institutions on their side. Therefore, in *Purple hibiscus*, when Ifeoma encourages Beatrice to leave Eugene after a near-death episode of domestic violence, she helplessly asks “where would I go if I leave Eugene’s house? Tell me, where would I go?” (Adichie, 2004:250). Beatrice’s remark vibrantly articulates the actuality and helplessness of the average traditional African woman. Incapacitated by a lack of education, the knowledge of their rights, and/or economic viability, many women like Beatrice have limited choices in asphyxiating marital situations.

As in the case of divorce, patriarchal African societies frown upon courtship and cohabitation before marriage. This cultural placing of boundaries in relationships is complicit to a certain degree in the regulation of women into marriages without sufficient knowledge of their partners. Mama Odenigbo expresses this idea when she corrects Ugwu for referring to Olanna as his ‘madam’, warningly correcting him by saying that “she is not your madam, my child. She is just a woman who is living with a man who has not paid her bride price” (Adichie, 2006:212).

In order to begin the very necessary work of deconstructing such restrictive cultural boundaries regarding courtship, marriage, and relationships, Adichie craftily allows her female characters to thrive in healthy relationships that are not specifically marriages. For example, Olanna and Kainene both enjoy healthy and happy relationships while cohabiting with their partners without conforming to the cultural fixation with marriage. In fact, Olanna frequently declines Odenigbo’s marriage proposals because “they were too happy, precariously so, and she wanted to guard that

bond; she feared that marriage would flatten it to a prosaic partnership” (Adichie, 2006:52). It is only towards the end of the novel at the peak of the Biafra war that Olanna agrees that they solemnise their union. Similarly, although Kainene receives a monstrous edifice as a gift from her father “as a bit of dowry” and “enticement for the right sort of man to marry his unattractive daughter” (Adichie, 2006:69) she defies his expectations and chooses instead to live with her lover, Richard, in the mansion. Adichie’s assertion here is that marriage should be a pragmatic well-thought-out choice, not a burden to thrust upon unready or unwilling partners. By rejecting the wealthy suitors selected for them by their parents, the twin sisters demystify the patriarchal norm of imposed and arranged marriages that continue to thrive even in this day and age within large parts of Nigeria and Africa.

Adichie also examines the intricate and complex perspectives of women’s experiences and realities within marriage contexts. This is because as much as marriage is valorised as a patriarchal institution, it serves the dual purpose of dignifying a woman’s identity and at the same time depersonalising and annihilating her into disillusionment. It is a site for female exploitation, marginalisation, relegation, and victimisation. For instance, in *Americanah*, the erosion of Ojiugo’s strong identity since her marriage to his cousin, Nicholas, puzzles Obinze. When he confronts her about her newly assumed sense of self-abandonment, Ojiugo mutters in response that “marriage changes things” (Adichie, 2013:240). Her reply leaves Obinze pondering if she did not “mourn all the things she could have been” outside of marriage. He further contemplates whether it is “a quality inherent in women” or whether they just learn “to shield their personal regrets, to suspend their lives, and subsume themselves in child care” (Adichie, 2013:243).

Although marriage is an admirable institution and a worthy essential part of human living, Adichie suggests that marriage should neither be mandatory nor be held up as the prerequisite for a fulfilled life for women since women can achieve their life’s goals and aspirations without

being coerced into marriage if it is their personal choice. In addition, marriage should not constitute limitations to women's ambitions since they can still have independent identities and live successful lives outside marriage, especially dysfunctional and abusive marriages. Adichie's critique of patriarchy thus subtly and powerfully engages the matter of marriage and how patriarchy has established itself within this institution to the advantage of men and the detriment of women. Given the extent to which the previously mentioned patriarchal prejudices and cruelties still thrive within some African marriages, her artistic fictional provocation of the *status quo* should be given all its historical significance in terms of an African feminism.

### **3.3 The valorisation of motherhood and male-child preference syndrome**

After marriage, the next pivotal criterion in the appraisal of a woman's worth in patriarchal societies is her ability not just to bear children, but many children, and preferably male children. Although motherhood and nurturing are pertinent to African womanhood it is also a patriarchal institution of female subjugation. This is especially true for women who are either unable to have children or who choose for diverse reasons not to. In patriarchy, the woman's body is hardly hers, her reproductive capabilities and biological functions are subject to constant scrutiny and appropriation for patriarchal gains. Hence, one of the worst fates that can ever befall a woman in patriarchal society is the inability to bear children. Childless women suffer unbearable vilification and endure various accusations including witchcraft, sexual recklessness, and serial performance of abortions. They are derided and labelled as failures of womanhood, and their femininity is questioned. Adichie portrays the harsh reality women face in marriages, specifically in circumstances of childlessness, through Olanna's cousin, Arize, who undergoes torturous psychological stress in the first three years of her marriage while struggling to conceive. During that period, her mother-in-law visited them too often, "poking at Arize's belly and urging her to confess to how many abortions she had had before marriage" (Adichie, 2006:130). Fortunately, Arize's husband, Nnakwanze, stands up to his mother, asks her to stop

visiting and to stop “bringing foul-smelling concoctions for Arize to drink in bitter gulps” (Adichie, 2006:130).

Arize’s unfortunate experience highlights the kind of subjugation women face in marriages due to childlessness. Similarly, Mama Odenigbo fiercely objects to her son’s relationship with Olanna because “girls that go to university follow men around until their bodies are useless” - based on her perception of the promiscuous lifestyle of educated girls, she further asserts that “nobody knows if [Olanna] can have children” (Adichie, 2006:98). The experience of these female characters reflects the patriarchal tendency to associate every reproductive anomaly with the female body. The woman bears the brunt of childlessness no matter the cause and under the same circumstance while her partner, who might well be equally responsible for the biological and social process of childbearing, is left out of the insinuations. His potential role is not even so much as mentioned.

Mama Odenigbo is made an object of ridicule among her fellow women because of her son’s inability to bear her grandchildren “while his mates are counting how many children they have” (Adichie, 2006:97). When she learns of the success of her scheme to get Amala impregnated by her son, Mama Odenigbo is ecstatic about the pregnancy and proudly tells Ugwu “when this baby boy comes, I will have somebody to keep me company and my fellow women will no longer call me the mother of an impotent son” (Adichie, 2006:238). But her anxiety and desire for an heir is not quelled by the pregnancy. Mama Odenigbo remains apprehensive and convinced that her “enemies want to harm the pregnancy” because “they do not want somebody to carry on [their] family name” (Adichie, 2006:239). Therefore, she takes precautionary measures by sending Amala to her son’s house for medical attention. Intensely ironically and cruelly, after the baby is born and turns out to be a girl-child Mama Odenigbo abandons the baby because “she wanted a boy” (Adichie, 2006:247). Adichie demonstrates that the privileging of motherhood as the paradigmatic identity of African women is flawed and problematic because it

subliminally reinforces existing norms and perceptions, which reduce the entirety of a woman's existence to stereotypical traditional roles.

Contradictorily, the obsession with motherhood in patriarchal societies is fraught with ambiguity because in spite of the socio-cultural exaltation of the motherhood status, society abominates single motherhood or childbearing outside customary marriage contexts. Just like their childless married sisters unmarried mothers are shamed, stigmatised, and victimised, and their children suffer unwarranted derogation. For example, while visiting her Uncle Mbaezi, and his family at Kano, he tells Olanna about some unmarried daughters of their relatives who on falling pregnant have to be whisked far away from home, sometimes staying with his family till their delivery time arrives in order to “avoid the malice of the village” (Adichie, 2006:38).

In a similar vein, in *Americanah*, Adichie uses Auntie Uju and her son, Dike, as a case in point to highlight the discrimination that single mothers and their children face in patriarchal social contexts. Dike suffers rejection from Auntie Uju's fiancé, Bartholomew, who was not interested in “the son of the woman he was courting, and did not bother to pretend that he was” (Adichie, 2013:115). In *Purple hibiscus*, Beatrice aptly expresses the patriarchal social conditioning surrounding single motherhood when she asks Ifeoma the following question: “a woman with children and no husband, what is that? How can a woman live like that?” (Adichie, 2004:75). The irony lies in the fact that although a woman is expected to bear children and is despised for not having children, women who have children outside marriage or take to single motherhood for other reasons like divorce are denigrated. Likewise, their offspring are despised by society and regarded as baggage by potential suitors.

In contrast to this, attracting important attention to these difficult and vital feminist issues, Adichie renegotiates the traditional fixation with biological motherhood and validates other mothering alternatives for women like adoption, foster parenting, and wet nursing in place of breastfeeding. Especially for women who cannot birth a child or nurse for either cosmetic

reasons or are unable to do both for medical reasons without being stigmatised and accused of witchcraft. For instance, just like her sister, Kainene, Olanna does not express the “fabled female longing to give birth” (Adichie, 2006:104). Moreover, because Odenigbo equally opines that bringing a child “into this unjust world was an act of a blasé bourgeoisie” (Adichie, 2006:104), she is unperturbed by the idea of childbearing. However, after the confrontation with Odenigbo’s mother, Olanna is left with a “sudden and searing and new” desire, a strong “longing in the lower part of her belly” that signified that she needed “the solid weight of a child, his child, in her body” (Adichie, 2006:104). Mama Odenigbo’s accusatory altercation ruffles Olanna’s perspective on childbearing. Consequently, Olanna suddenly realises that “she wanted certainty. She longed for a sign, a rainbow, to signify security” (Adichie, 2006:105). Therefore, this much-needed security would be the conception and birth of a child to solidify her relationship with Odenigbo. So, when Odenigbo tells her “let’s have a child. A little girl just like you, and we will call her Obianuju because she will complete us” (Adichie, 20006:106), she decides to try for a child. Unfortunately, despite their concerted efforts at conception, Olanna does not fall pregnant. When she visits the Kensington gynaecologist he assures her that “there was nothing wrong with her and she had only to—he had winked—work harder” (Adichie, 2006:217). Her inability to conceive diminishes every “glow of possibility” Olanna previously harbours and she begins to accept how “useless she was” (Adichie, 2006:232), at least with regard to her fertility. This feeling of uselessness and sense of desolation that consumes childless women like Olanna in patriarchal societies due to the valorisation of pregnancy is the exact issue Adichie attempts to interrogate. Therefore, on the contrary, rather than wallow in self-pity, Olanna comes to terms with the fact that she is “incapable of getting pregnant” (Adichie, 2006:249). Providentially, after Amala delivers and abandons her daughter, she decides to keep the baby because “holding that tiny, warm body, she had felt a conscious serendipity; a sense that this may not have been planned but had become, the minute it happened, what was meant to be” (Adichie, 2006:251). By adopting Amala’s child, Olanna subverts the traditional fixation on biological motherhood

and gains the joys of motherhood without necessarily experiencing the travails of pregnancy and childbirth.

Likewise, Adichie proposes a deconstruction of the obsession and taboos associated with other mothering practises like breastfeeding. For example, in *Half of a yellow sun*, Olanna and Kainene were breastfed by their aunt, Aunty Ifeka, “when their mother’s [breasts] dried up soon after they were born” (Adichie, 2006:39). Although Kainene thinks that “their mother’s breasts did not dry up at all” but that she “had given them to a nursing aunt only to save her own breasts from drooping” (Adichie, 2006:39), their mother’s choice is not criticised in the novel. Privy to that piece of information, Mama Odenigbo primitively accuses Olanna of witchcraft and asks “what woman brings another person to breastfeed her own children when she herself is alive and well? Is that normal, *gbo?*” (Adichie, 2006:98). Mama Odenigbo’s question typically mirrors the mind-set of most people in patriarchal societies, so as a way of subverting such ideological thinking, Adichie answers her questions by placing Amala, from who she demands the normalcy of wet nursing, in the position of giving up her child to be breastfed by another woman. This is because after the birth of her daughter Amala “refused to touch her” and the nurses had to utilise the services of “a wet nurse” (Adichie, 2006:249). Adichie suggests that women do not have to suffer unnecessary victimisation or be imposed with motherhood and mothering even when they are not ready to or are incapacitated to do so due to numerous possible reasons. In the African context that she skilfully creates in her fiction, these viewpoints are much needed for the enlightenment of men and women and the cessation of patriarchy. That Adichie manages to raise them in a balanced and not caustic manner makes it all the more likely that adherents of patriarchal behaviour might actually take note.

Another salient issue of concern among women that is intricately woven into the tapestry of patriarchal mechanism and is intertwined with the themes of motherhood and marriage is that of male-child preference syndrome. Within most patriarchal settings, like the Igbo society,

motherhood and the childbearing process are culturally selective with the scale tilting in favour of male children. Sons are valued far more than daughters as they are groomed to be heirs and propagators of the lineage, while girls are only trained in domesticity in preparation for marriage and childbirth. On the one hand, the birth of a male child is heralded with pomp and the woman who bears male children is revered and adored by her husband. A woman who bears female children, on the other hand, is made to feel inadequate and faces considerable problems since her husband might proceed to engage in polygamy in order to get the much-desired male children.

The societal construct of male-child preference places undue psychological anxiety on women. It is also responsible for the feeling of feminine inadequacy expressed by women like Kosi, in *Americanah*, who, fresh from birthing her first child, turns to her husband, Obinze, and apologetically tells him “Darling, we’ll have a boy next time” (Adichie, 2013:458) not knowing that he is indifferent about the gender of their child. Similarly, Anulika, Ugwu’s younger sister, aptly expresses the traditional notion of male-child preference syndrome. Soon after she gets married, she tells Ugwu: ‘I want to have a baby boy first, because it will place my feet firmly in Onyeka’s house’ (Adichie, 2006:119). Her anxious desire for a male child is not baseless. Rather it stems not only from the societal expectation but also from the experience of another young girl named Onunna, from Ezeugwu’s family, who “had a baby girl first, and her husband’s people went to see a *dibia* to find out why!” (Adichie, 2006:119). The fact that the family consults with a *dibia*, which is the Igbo word for a soothsayer, to ascertain why their daughter-in-law bore a female child first instead of the traditionally preferred first fruit of a son goes to show how female children are undesired and practically devalued in patriarchal societies.

In *Purple hibiscus*, Eugene is pressurised by his *umunna* (clan) who consistently persuade him to marry a second wife to bear him more sons. Firstly, because of his enormous wealth and social standing as a titled man given his position as the *Omelora*, the one who supplies for the community. Secondly, they urge him thus due to his position as an only son, having only one son

places his family's lineage under the risk of possible extinction and places Eugene at the liberty of taking a second wife. This is to ensure that he bears more sons to succeed him as the patriarchal head and propagate his lineage. However, Eugene refuses to contemplate the option of marrying a second wife. His decision leaves Beatrice feeling tremendously grateful and indebted to him. She reckons that a second wife "might have borne many sons and taken over our home and driven us out, like Mr Ezendu's second wife did" (Adichie, 2004:20). It is also for this reason that Beatrice decides to condone Eugene's abuse and suffer in silence to avoid the fate of being displaced from her home by a new wife. This patriarchal norm of male child preference constitutes a form of violence against women, particularly the girl-child, because it instils an inferiority complex into the psyche of the girl who grows up in such a setting. It also entrenches the notion of male superiority and indispensability and puts women under severe and unnecessary pressure in the contexts of marriage and childbearing.

Adichie brilliantly subverts this unfair dehumanisation of the girl child in patriarchal African societies in the form of male-child preference syndrome through characters such as the Ozobia twins, Olanna and Kainene in *Half of a yellow sun*, and Auntie Ifeoma in *Purple hibiscus* who assume socially stipulated masculine roles. For example, after Eugene insists on withdrawing his support to Papa Nnukwu, despite her lean resources Auntie Ifeoma takes up the role of catering for their father and even gives him a befitting burial at his death. This is remarkable because in patriarchy, very little is often expected of female children with regard to having grand ambitions and aspirations therefore girls are preparatorily groomed for marriage and childbearing. On the other hand, male children are upheld as being more advantageous than female children and are believed to be the forerunners and propagators of the family lineage after their fathers. Hence, they are groomed in preparation for taking over the reins of leadership in the family, maintaining the family's legacy, and ensuring that their parents are buried in a dignified manner. So, when Eugene reneges on that very responsibility, Auntie Ifeoma boldly plays the supposed male roles by not only taking care of her ailing father, but by also burying him according to traditional

rites. By doing so, Adichie uses Auntie Ifeoma to demystify the traditional devaluation of female children and compartmentalisation of women's roles in the Igbo society.

Similarly, in the case of the Ozobia twins, traditionally, considering their father's wealth and social standing, he ought to seek male children to propagate his legacy, since his only children are girls. However, although the twins are female, they defy all societal expectations and role limitations placed on female children in the Igbo society. For example, during his visit to the Ozobias', the finance minister, Chief Okonji, while eulogising Kainene's business and managerial prowess, sarcastically tells Chief Ozobia: "whoever said you lost out by having twin daughters is a liar" (Adichie, 2006:31). Aware of the imbedded sarcasm in the minister's comment, Chief Ozobia proudly replies: "Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two" (Adichie, 2006:31). By giving the Minister that assertive and rebutting reply Adichie destabilises cultural constructs that debase such as male-child preference. The diplomatic yet efficient approach Adichie uses in this instance epitomises her general way of tackling patriarchal issues with an air of straightforwardness and remarkable ease, rightly suggesting that far more power has rested all along in female nature than patriarchy would openly acknowledge. In addition to these patriarchal ways of subjugating womanhood, Adichie also addresses the issue of violence against women. This feminist issue will be discussed in the following section.

### **3.4 Violence against women: domestic violence and widowhood practices**

Violence against women is an outcome of the patriarchal social structure and is one of the crucial mechanisms through which women are forced into a perpetual state of subjugation. Violence against women exists in both the private and public spheres of society in a myriad of forms and is entrenched by socio-cultural, religious, and traditional structures. Adichie expresses the pervasive nature of violence against women in patriarchal societies in *Americanah* through Obinze's girlfriend named Tendai, who "the first time he cleaned her flat and cooked jollof rice for her" stares at him in shock. It is not just the fact that Obinze performs the traditionally-

prescribed feminine duty of cleaning up her flat and cooking the intricate rice dish which requires some culinary expertise to perfect that startles Tendai. Obinze reveals that she “was so unused to being treated well by a man that she watched him endlessly, anxiously, her eyes veiled, as though holding her breath and waiting for the abuse to emerge” (Adichie, 2013:258). Tendai’s reaction stems from the prevalence of gender-based abuse in patriarchal-type-relationships where it has become a kind of normalcy. Because of this social normalisation of domestic violence, many women, especially previous victims, often meet a man’s candid humility with suspicion and an anticipation of possible attitudinal change to violence.

Adichie extensively explores the theme of domestic violence in *Purple hibiscus*. She highlights the negative effects of violence on victims such as the members of the Achike family. Eugene Achike is the patriarch of the Achike family around whom the narrative of *Purple hibiscus* revolves. In spite of having received awards for his solicitations for human rights by “Amnesty World” (Adichie, 2004:5), behind the closed doors of his familial space human rights are neither respected nor observed. Ironically, while the community respects Eugene for his magnanimous philanthropy and kindness, within the confines of his home he is the epitome of patriarchal monstrosity who physically and psychologically violates his wife and children. Eugene’s highhandedness stifles his family into a state of non-existence and leaves the members of the household in constant fright and subjugated acquiescence to his dictates. He alienates his children from their peers, deprives them of socio-psychological development, sets unrealistic standards and expectations for them, and meets the slightest deviation from these standards on their part with savage consequences. For instance, he brutally chops off Jaja’s finger at the tender age of ten for failing two questions on his Catechism test and failing to be the best in his First Holy Communion class. Kambili narrates that Papa took Jaja upstairs and locked the door and moments later “Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with his right, and Papa drove him to St. Agnes Hospital. Later, Jaja told me that Papa had avoided his right hand because it is the hand he writes with” (Adichie, 2004:145). Similarly, Eugene tortures Kambili for spending

time with her pagan grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu. He brutally scorches her feet in a bath with boiling water while calmly reminding Kambili “this is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet” (Adichie, 2004:194). Due to Eugene’s demand of absolute perfection and fear of provoking his unpredictable rage and cruel punishments, the Achikes live in a cocoon.

In his warped extreme Catholic convictions he believes that violence is a necessary tool for disciplining his wife and children into becoming heaven-bound Christians and better personalities. After scalding Kambili’s feet, he goes back to her room not to sympathise with her but to narrate how he had been punished in a similar manner by his guardian, a white Reverend Father, for masturbating: “he asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it. [...] I never committed a sin against my own body again. The good father did that for my own good” (Adichie: 2004:196). Because Eugene believes that his guardian saved him from sin by abusing him, he also believes he is saving Kambili from the wrath incurred by her association with his heathen father. Based on the recounting of his experience, it can be argued that Eugene is a victim of abuse himself, and as such, he involuntarily re-enacts the cycle of violence. This re-enactment of violent behaviour poses a feminist concern because without breaking such a cycle of domestic violence, it continues unabated.

Just like his young children, his wife, Beatrice, is not spared from Eugene’s brutality. In fact, she suffers the most from his abuse and violence. Within the narrative of the novel, Beatrice loses two more pregnancies at the brutality of Eugene’s hands. The first incident of wife battering occurs after she supposedly resists his authority by pleading to stay back in the car instead of joining the rest of the family to pay the Reverend Father a visit after mass. Kambili recounts that during her siesta, shortly after hearing “swift heavy thuds” on her parents’ hand-carved bedroom door, she and Jaja watched Papa descend the stairs while “Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme border” (Adichie,

2004:33). Eugene batters Beatrice so badly that she miscarries. This is the terrifying extent of patriarchy, the reality of which Adichie does not hide, while words fail to efficiently capture its inhumanity.

The second episode of battering involves Eugene breaking a coffee table on Beatrice's pregnant bump thereby aborting her six-week pregnancy. After she is discharged from the hospital, Beatrice flees to her sister-in-law for emotional support. While narrating the incident, she distraughtly tells Aunty Ifeoma "my blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it" (Adichie, 2004:213).

Because of the domestic violence they experience the members of the Achike family continually live in extreme bodily pain and psychological anguish. For example, Beatrice is aware of her own depreciating psychological and mental instability when she unashamedly confesses to Aunty Ifeoma that she does not know if her head is still correct (Adichie, 2002:248). Similarly, Kambili suffers flashes of posttraumatic disorder which, as she explains, feels "like balancing a sack of gravel on my head every day at school and not being allowed to steady it with my hand. I still saw the print in my textbooks as a red blur; still saw my baby brother's spirit strung together by narrow lines of blood" (Adichie, 2004:52). The vision of her mother's blood after each occasion of battering from Papa floods her psyche so much that she sees blood on the prints on her book instead of ink.

Because of living in constant fear, silence becomes a mode of living in the household. As Pauline Ada Uwakweh (1998:75) rightly observes,

Silencing comprises all imposed restrictions on women's social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or muted female structure.

Therefore, in their efforts to negotiate the interstices of their imposed silence and voicelessness, Kambili, her brother, and their mother develop a form of telepathic communication through

which by a mere interlocking of their eyes each could read what the other has in their mind and transfer information without speaking out. This non-verbal mode of communication called “*asusu anya*, a language of the eyes” (Adichie, 2004: 305), is especially perfected by Kambili and Jaja as their only mechanism for surviving the silence in their home. Since Eugene imposes silence on them as an agent of oppression, they adopt it surreptitiously as a resistive mode of countering his brutality and navigating their patriarchal circumstance. What Adiche does here is that she highlights the complexities and contradictions of silence as both a tool of patriarchal violence used by the abuser to keep the abused subjugated, and also a form of resistance when employed by the voiceless. Although silence is usually perceived as docility on the part of the silenced, it may also depict the purposeful usurpation of voices and agency and the extent to which patriarchal abuse dehumanises women and children.

Regardless of the negative effects of the violence she endures in her marriage, like most women in abusive relationships Beatrice remains shackled to Eugene, not only by her own lack of self-worth, but also due the negative norms foisted into her psyche by years of internalising the attitudinal forms of patriarchal suppression and abuse against women inherent in society. When Aunty Ifeoma pleads with Beatrice to leave Eugene to save her own life and that of her children in the face of constant brutality they suffer from him, she refuses to leave (Adichie, 2004:250). Instead, she resorts to making excuses for his abusive behaviour, clinging to the conviction that her marriage is her only way of existence. She repeatedly excuses Eugene’s violence telling Aunty Ifeoma that “it has never happened like this before” (Adichie, 2004:214).

But what makes Adichie’s writing here even more unbearable and important as we enter a full fictional empathy with the character of Beatrice is that the novel shows that, in spite of the flimsy excuses Beatrice makes on Eugene’s behalf, deep within herself she knows that his behaviour is inexcusable (Adichie, 2003:255). The reality is that she is only incapable of taking action due to her economic reliance on Eugene, thus showing the extent of the grip that

patriarchy has over powerless human beings, especially women. However, after the last string of battering in which she loses her second pregnancy and Kambili suffers unconsciousness for days, Beatrice decides to put an end to their quagmire by silently poisoning Eugene to death signalling that the extremities of patriarchy in the male world such as that of Eugene leads to extremities on the side of the female world embodied in this instance by Beatrice's desperate act of putting an end to an unbearable situation.

Adichie's fiction embraces the whole gamut of patriarchal violence in African society. She shows how the observance of widowhood practices is another prevalent form of gender-based violence against women in patriarchal cultures like the Nigerian society as is represented in *Purple hibiscus*. The period of widowhood can be described as a time of great emotional and psychological stress for women. Faced with the devastating tragedy of losing a loved one, the widow is further traumatised by being placed at the receiving end of discriminatory cultural and traditional practices that are degrading, harmful, and dehumanising. In many instances, the widow is believed to be the prime suspect in her husband's death. Thus, the widow is forced to endure severe, humiliating, and painful punishments as a way of atoning for her 'sins'. She also risks being dispossessed of her husband's properties and being remarried to his brother to keep her in the family against her choice. In some places in Nigeria, for example, the widow is compelled to go through rituals of oath taking in order to exonerate her from any involvement in her husband's death. In other places, these anachronistic practices are performed not because the widow is a suspect, but to prove her love and respect for her husband even in death. Widowhood practices are gender-biased: whereas widows are subjected to the torment of incessant funeral rites men are free of such treatment under similar circumstances. Adiche describes the phenomenon in *Purple hibiscus*. Like most widows in patriarchal settings, Ifeoma suffers the fate of the widow at the hands of her late husband's family when she tells of how the people in this *umunna*

said he left money somewhere and I have been hiding it. Last Christmas, one of the women from their compound even told me I had killed him. I wanted to stuff sand in her mouth. Then I thought that I should sit her down, eh, and explain that you do not orchestrate a car accident in which a trailer rams into your husband's car, but again, why waste my time? They all have brains of guinea fowls (Adichie, 2004:74).

However, due to her strong will, Auntie Ifeoma remains unperturbed in the face of the accusations and maltreatment from her in-laws. Most importantly, because of her education and the knowledge of her rights, she is sufficiently equipped to navigate the situation and to resist further dehumanisation from her in-laws. For example, she escapes being subjected to swearing ritual oaths to prove her innocence and having to hand over all her late husband's property over to his family as is often the case.

While feminists challenge patriarchal issues such as widowhood practices it is important to note that it is women, like the one from Auntie Ifeoma's husband-Ifediora's compound, who started accusing Ifeoma of killing her husband in the above passage that the men instigate to perpetuate such prejudices against their fellow women. So, while the patriarchal male leadership of the clan known as the *umunna* institutionalises the rules for women, it is women, either as mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, elderly women, or members of women's groups (such as the *umuada*-the women of the clan) who blindly ensure that the rules are met. Therefore, in most cases, women are as much the perpetrators as they are sufferers of their own victimisation. This issue will be discussed further in chapter five.

To avoid undergoing the kind of humiliation experienced by her sister-in-law on her husband's demise, after the death of Eugene, Beatrice boldly decides to defy the traditional mourning rites. Kambili recounts that Mama ensures that the gates to their compound remains locked and asks the gateman, Adamu, "not to open the gates to all the people who wanted to throng in for *mgbalu*, to commiserate with us. Even members of our *Umunna* who had come from Abba were turned away. Adamu said it was unheard of, to turn sympathizers away. But Mama told him, we wished to mourn privately" (Adichie, 2004:296). Beatrice also denounces the customary widowhood rites by "not cutting her hair", refusing to wear the mandatory "all black or white for

a year” and failing to attend “the first- and second- year memorial Masses” (Adichie, 2004:296). Beatrice’s deviation from the traditional mourning practices is Adichie’s way of protesting against the anachronistic widowhood practices, which have long-lasting psychological, emotional, and economic effects on women. Since these patriarchal social codes of behaviour are deeply ingrained in the psyche of both men, and women, in order to effect positive transformation, it is pertinent for sexist attitudes towards women be highlighted and criticised. Therefore, the next section examines how Adichie addresses sexism in her novels.

### **3.5 Deconstructing sexism and implementing resocialisation**

Adichie, in the eleventh suggestion of her recent essay entitled “Dear Ijeawele, or a feminist manifesto in fifteen suggestions”, published on her Facebook page, contends that biology should never be accepted “as justification for any social norm because social norms are created by human beings, and there is no social norm that cannot be changed” (2016). This is quite true because no new-born child is aware of gender as a social construct. Each person’s behaviour is modified through socialisation to conform to the expectations held by members of the group to which he or she belongs. Through socialisation, girls in patriarchal societies grow up internalising the social norms around femininity and automatically metamorphosing into patriarchal products while men assume a sense of supremacy and entitlement. Moreover, without a re-socialisation of the ingrained ideas, girls replicate and inadvertently reinforce and perpetuate the same ideas that they ought to oppose. For example, in *Half of a yellow sun*, Ugwu recollects how, while growing up, his mother used to smack the bottom of his sister, Anulika, for not bending properly to sweep while yelling at her “did you eat mushrooms? Sweep like a woman!” (Adichie, 2006:92). Contrarily, when Ugwu offers to make Mama Odenigbo a meal during her visit to Nsukka, she vehemently refuses and tells Ugwu “I know you try, but you are only a boy. What does a boy know about real cooking? [...] A boy does not belong in the kitchen” (Adichie, 2006:95). Even though Ugwu has a flair for cooking, he consequently hardly mentions it to

anyone and especially not his sister, Anulika, who “had already told him he spent too much time around women cooking, and he might never grow a beard if he kept doing that” (Adichie, 2006:12). The manner of socialisation that Anulika has received on the differential gender roles leads to her perpetuation of stereotyped roles. It is also such internalisation and regurgitation of patriarchal ideas that explains why Kosi sees the cooking that her husband, Obinze, engages in as an “indictment of her” (Adichie, 2013:450), that is, an undermining of her domestic prowess. So, while the girl child is taught to habituate herself to a life of domesticity marked by wifedom and motherhood, boys are inculcated with life-navigation skills such as financial independency and self-reliance.

The preferential treatment accorded male children coupled with the cultural masculinisation of boys result in raising men who grow into adulthood with an enforced sense of entitlement and superiority. This norm is entrenched by the collective conspiracy of men whose duty it is to instil the ideas of male hegemony and to caution deviants as is exemplified in *Half of a yellow sun*. For instance, on the day Ugwu is abruptly conscripted along with other young boys, when one of the frightened teenagers starts sobbing in the military van he is harshly reprimanded by an officer who yells at him “aren’t you a man?” and goes further to ask “*I bu nwanyi?* Why are you behaving like a woman?” (Adichie, 2006:359). Such stereotypical association of crying or any open show of emotion as weakness and a trait attributable only to women is deleterious to the emotional and psychological health of men, because to avoid being perceived as emasculated, many men turn to violent behaviour as a way of dealing with feelings of fear, anger and loss.

Similarly, in *Half of a yellow sun*, during the sexual violation of the bar girl, Ugwu is coerced into participating in the rape by his fellow soldiers who question his manliness. When Ugwu first walks into the room he is repulsed and quickly backs away from the door. The other soldiers cajole him and accuse him of being afraid and therefore weak and then they verbally attack him. Ugwu disdainfully denies being afraid and replies “I just like to eat before others, that is all”

(Adichie, 2006:365). However, after his colleagues derisively ask him “Target Destroyer, aren’t you a man? *I bukwa nwoke?*” (Adichie, 2006:365) Ugwu summonses the apparent courage to mount and rape the bargirl in an attempt to salvage his ego.

Although there is no justification for his participation in the perpetration of the gang rape, Adichie uses the dialogue in the rape scene to highlight two pertinent issues. The first is the devaluation of women through institutionalised patriarchal ideals where qualities such as weakness with negative connotation are associated with womanhood. Secondly, Adichie points out the consequences of the pressures foisted on men through flawed constructs of masculinity that consider aggression as a ‘manly’ trait. In this view being rational leads to the questioning of one’s manliness and from this perspective Ugwu becomes as much a victim of patriarchy as he is a perpetrator.

Like most patriarchal societies, the misogyny and sexist attitudes towards women in Nigerian society are reflected in both the grand and minute details of everyday life. An instance of the latter is the highly “regressive” portrayal of women in the movie industry which is described as being “more misogynistic than the society” (Adichie, 2013:409). The inferior status of women is also evident even in the subtlest of human relations. For example, in *Half of a yellow sun*, Olanna notes that the beggars outside the gates of Mohammed’s family home do not attempt to present their begging bowls to her as she approaches them as they usually would. So, although she initially “wanted to put some money in their bowls” she decides not to because “if she were a man, they would have called out to her and extended their begging bowls” (Adichie, 2006:43). In *Purple hibiscus* Adichie uses Eugene’s aged father, Papa Nnukwu, as a mirror through which she highlights the chauvinistic attitudes towards women embedded in the Igbo traditional cultural activities, such as the masquerades which, besides its ritualistic elements, offers social entertainment during festivities: masquerades in various costumes parade the streets in a carnival-like manner. For example, during a tour of the village with his grandchildren, he points

out to the children that “this is a woman spirit, and the women *mmuo* are harmless. They do not even go near the big ones at the festival” (Adichie, 2004:85). Apparently the “big ones” (masquerades) referred to by Papa Nnukwu are the male masked-spirits: the fact that the female masquerades are described as weak and harmless reinforces the notion that anything that has to do with the female gender is characteristically feeble. Similarly, the fact that they do not co-appear with their male superiors goes a long way in revealing the gender disparity institutionalised in the Igbo traditions and socio-cultural worldview. Additionally, when his grandson, Jaja, makes an inquiry about the masquerades that Papa Nnukwu considers flimsy, he snaps at Jaja and warns him not to “speak like a woman!” (Adichie, 2004:87). Adichie criticises this systematic devaluation of women, which is an outcome of patriarchal beliefs and attitudes where the woman is seen as an inferior being to be ridiculed and referred to in derogatory terms.

Papa-Nnukwu’s perceptions of women’s role and status in society dramatically epitomises the traditional patriarchal ideas of womanhood. He believes that women are inferior to men and he unabashedly reiterates those ideologies. For instance, when Papa Nnukwu laments Eugene’s nonchalant attitude towards his welfare Aunty Ifeoma warmly assures him that she would always cater for him. Surprisingly, Papa Nnukwu blatantly dismisses her offer saying “but you are a woman. You do not count” (Adichie, 2004:83). As fallacious as this statement is, it succinctly exhibits the deep-seated bigoted impressions held of the female gender in patriarchal societies. Culturally, the woman’s opinions rarely count, and her capabilities are undermined. When Ifeoma contests his statement, Papa Nnukwu tries to cover up by saying “I joke with you *Nwam*. Where would I be today if my *Chi* had not given me a daughter?” (Adichie, 2004:83). Although Papa Nnukwu tries to lighten the significance of his comment by dismissing it as a joke, he indeed meant every word of what he said and his utterance vividly epitomises how women are perceived in patriarchal societies—the insignificant other. Ironically, as I have mentioned earlier, despite being a supposedly weak woman and one whose opinion does not count, it is Aunty Ifeoma and not his son, Eugene, who gives him an honourable burial after his death. By doing

so, she proves that a woman is equally important and can take on vital roles such as the financial sustenance of the family, the maintenance of the family's legacy and the honourable burial of one's parents, which forms a crucial aspect of the Igbo culture. In fact, by stepping in to assume the traditional roles expected of the patriarch of the family, Aunty Ifeoma reverses the norms: she asserts that no responsibility is gender-specific and demonstrates that the foundations on which patriarchal roles are instituted are indeed flawed. Ifeoma's action further reinforces the feminist argument that if given the chance, women can take up roles of responsibility just like men within both domestic and public spheres.

Similarly, in *Americanah*, Adichie portrays Bartholomew as an embodiment of patriarchal behaviour and negative masculinity, as he embodies most of the chauvinist ideas which the author intends to excoriate in the novel. Bartholomew maintains an online presence under the moniker "Igbo Massachusetts Accountant", and profusely writes "sour-toned and strident" comments and pursues "airless arguments" (Adichie, 2013:117) that are sexist in nature. For example, Bartholomew attributes the high divorce rates among Nigerians residing in America in comparison to the low rates among Nigerians living in Nigeria to the fact that "Nigerian women came to America and became wild" (Adichie, 2013:117). In response, another online user named Delta Mermaid corrects him stating that "women simply had laws protecting them in America and the divorce rates would be just as high if those laws were in Nigeria" (Adichie, 2013:117). Bartholomew's description of women in the diaspora who utilise the available legal structures in America and exercise their human rights as "wild" shows how bigoted his sentiments are. Adichie also uses the online dialogue as a subtle censure aimed at the Nigerian patriarchal legal system that has no regard for the rights of women.

True to his chauvinistic nature, instead of viewing Aunty Uju as an equal partner and treating her as one, Bartholomew "behaved grandiosely, like a special prize that Aunty Uju was fortunate to have" (Adichie, 2013:116). In addition to his bloated egoistic behaviour, he brazenly

examines whether or not Aunt Uju is “a good cook, and therefore a good wife” (Adichie, 2013:116), limiting her wifely suitability to culinary abilities and an unquestioning submissive demeanour. Aunt Uju complains to Ifemelu that even though they both have busy work schedules and get home at the same time, Bartholomew insensitively leaves her with the entire burden of domesticity. He simply “sits in the living room and turns on the TV and asks me what we are eating for dinner” (Adichie, 2013:217). Bartholomew also exploits Aunt Uju financially and arrogates to himself the power to make her financial decisions, restricting and regulating the use of her salary to his own selfish gain. For instance, he bars Aunt Uju from sending money home to her “Brother without his permission” (Adichie, 2013:217) and insists that they make the payments for his car solely from her salary. Similarly, although “his own children went to private schools in California”, Bartholomew objects to Aunt Uju’s decision to send her son, Dike, to a private school, with the excuse that “it is too expensive” (Adichie, 2013:217). Fed up with Bartholomew’s misogynistic dominance Aunt Uju expresses her frustrations to Ifemelu rhetorically asking “why should I give him my salary? Did he pay my fees in medical school? [...] He keeps wanting to make my work decisions for me. What does an accountant know about medicine?” (Adichie, 2013:218). In true patriarchal nature, Bartholomew rationalises his unjust dominance and chauvinistic attitude with the assertion that “he is the head of the family” (Adichie, 2013:217). The notion of ‘the head’ is an outcome of the traditional configuration of women as mere appendages to men, while men are revered as the unquestionable figures of power and authority. Such patriarchal conceptions of gender imbalance prove pernicious to womanhood.

Generally, women are not expected to be too ambitious, as a successful woman is often perceived as a threat to men. Society expects the compulsory dignifying of manhood by reducing the role of women in the same space. The notion that the man is unquestionably the head leaves men with fragile egos in constant need of soothing. Consequently, men expect women to nurse their already over-bloated patriarchal excesses. For example, in *Americanah*, during a dinner

with Kosi's friend, Isioma, and her husband, Jonathan, Obinze finds Isioma intellectually interesting because "the few things she allowed herself to say were thoughtful" (Adichie, 2013:373). However, he notices that Isioma mostly remains silent "shrinking herself, pretending not to be as intelligent as she was, to salve Jonathan's ego" (Adichie, 2013:373). While Isioma forfeits her autonomy and shrivels into inaudibility, Jonathan dominates the evening "with long-winded stories about his dealings with estate agents in Switzerland, the Nigerian governors he had advised, and the various companies he had saved from collapse" (Adichie, 2013:373). Sadly, this erroneous exaltation of patriarchal male privileges instils the ideas of superiority in men. Women like Isioma shrink their intellectual capabilities in order not to bruise their husbands' egos while they unapologetically revel in the spotlight as the autocratic 'head of the family'. Adichie criticises such masculinist suppression of women's capabilities because it is a major impediment to women's development and political-cum social advancement including women's participation in sustaining the illusion.

Given the highly patriarchal disposition of the Nigerian society with the numerous issues impeding gender equality in the country, one would expect cogent action on the part of the government to ameliorate the injustices of gender. However, this is not the case. Therefore, Adichie criticises the insensitivity of the government in tackling gender issues in *Americanah*. While watching the NTA (Nigerian Television Authority) channel, Ifemelu dishearteningly notes that the first lady is televised "addressing a rally of women, and crawling across the screen were the words 'The First Lady is Empowering Women with Mosquito Nets'" (Adichie, 2013:388). Although malaria is a common health threat in the country, the first lady's laughable campaign on "empowering women with mosquito nets" is an apparent trivialisation of the more pertinent feminist issues that threaten the humanity of women in the country and an absolute demonstration of disregard for women's issues. This is rather disheartening because there are multiple issues plaguing women in Nigeria in both the rural and urban areas that the First lady could use the influence of her office to address other than mosquito nets. These include pertinent

feminist issues such as women's reproductive and sexual health issues, maternal and infant mortality, the kidnapping of young girls by militants (like the case of the Chibok girls), underage and forced marriages, female circumcision and the attendant consequences of Vesicovaginal fistula(VVF), to mention a few. The inaction on the part of the government and specifically women in the corridors of power towards feminist activism is worrying and Adichie subtly highlights this crucial issue. If the government chooses to turn a blind an eye to women's issues, then women have no choice to change their own circumstances, and the most vital step towards the achievement of this goal remains education as will be discussed in the next section.

### **3.6 Exploring education and female bonding as avenues into female empowerment**

Adichie advocates education and female solidarity or female bonding as ways through which women can successfully navigate the strictures of patriarchy. The importance of female education is mostly elucidated in her novels through the representation of well-educated female protagonists able to transcend the confines of patriarchy with education as their weapon. For women in patriarchal settings, as Odenigbo rightly asserts in *Half of a yellow sun*, "education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tools to understand exploitation?" (Adichie, 2006:11). The role of education as the tool for resisting exploitation and oppression cannot be overemphasised. It is for this reason that during the "In Case of War" seminar (Adichie, 2006:168) organised by the University Women's Association, the pertinence of women's education and the value to their educational certificates is reiterated. The female speaker at the podium repeatedly shouts: "wrap your certificates in waterproof bags and make sure those are the first things you take if we have to evacuate" (Adichie, 2006:169).

Besides being intellectually equipped, Adichie portrays female solidarity as another means through which women can achieve their common goals, especially in the socio-political structure of the society. Petty rivalries and the institutionalisation of differences between women in terms of social status, educational qualifications, and class distinction have been a bane of women's

unity. Therefore, Adichie condemns petty rivalries amongst women exemplified in *Americanah* through the simmering hatred and competition between Auntie Onenu and the Glass magazine publisher, a rivalry that, contrary to Ifemelu's previous suspicion that it is business-related, turns out to be due to "man trouble" (Adichie, 2013:393). To achieve their goals of deconstructing patriarchal structures of oppression, women must form bonds either as individuals or towards collective action.

Adichie extensively demonstrates the importance of female solidarity or bonding in *Half of a yellow sun*. For example, during the Biafran war the women, irrespective of their educational backgrounds or social standing before the onset of the war, congregated to form allegiances such as the "Women's Voluntary Services meetings" (Adichie, 2006:265). In addition, when Olanna joins one of the women sewing groups in the town hall, sewing singlets and towels for the soldiers (Adichie, 2006:185), the collective determinate sense of purpose and optimism displayed by the women makes a considerable impression on her. Rather than wallowing in the grievance of their losses, Olanna observes that "nobody talked about the things left behind instead they talked about the win-the-war effort" (Adichie, 2006:135). These small women unions allowed them to interact, assist one another, and deal collectively with the trauma of the war. On a more individual level of female bonding, during the imbroglio that breaks out between Odenigbo and Olanna due to his infidelity, Olanna seeks emotional support from her Aunt, Auntie Ifeka. She narrates her own experiences to Olanna and encourages her not to rely on any man for self-fulfilment but rather to live life on her own terms. Likewise, Olanna "cultivated a friendship with her black American neighbour, Edna Whaler" who tells her about the man "who had left her a week before their wedding in Montgomery" and prods Olanna to "reclaim herself" (229). Similarly, during the war, Olanna creates a female bond with Alice. They talk about their life experiences drawing strength from one another and when they exchange snippets of intimate feminine information they sense between them "a vulgar and delicious female bond" (Adichie, 2006:335). Adichie proposes these female interactions and inter-conversations that

transcend into women bonding as a viable means through which women can learn and share mutual knowledge and therefore successfully break through patriarchal boundaries. With the double energies of education and female bonding patriarchy can be deconstructed as women would be more capable to make informed decisions concerning their lives as individuals through the power that education affords them. As in collective cohesive units, women can build economic, political and social synergies through which they can instigate feminist reforms.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

In summation, this chapter has sought to illustrate how Adichie's overt polemic against patriarchy and its diverse sub-constructs are embodied in her three novels. The intertwined institutions of marriage, motherhood, and male child preference and the negative effects they have on women were explored. It is evident from the analysis of the issues of feminist concern in the novels that Adichie's literary oeuvre examines and satirises those aspects of patriarchal culture that undermine the wellbeing and emancipation of women and, relatively speaking, men.

The foregoing discussions show that Adichie challenges the valorisation of the institutions of motherhood and marriage as are fostered by patriarchy for the sole purpose of subjugating women. However, it is important to emphasise that she does not just reject these institutions, as they are central to the African way of living. Rather, her argument is that women's identity should not be validated only through their motherhood or their marital status. She further interrogates the gendered assumptions that impose oppressive feminine roles on women and the stigmatisation of women based on their abilities (whether by choice or circumstance) to assume such roles. One can arguably assert that through her excoriation of a multiplicity of issues facing women in the patriarchal African society, Adichie exhibits her commitment to African feminist conscientisation and women empowerment, and establishes herself as an authentic female voice in contemporary African fiction. This chapter explored the debunking of patriarchy and sexist attitudes in Adichie's novels, the following chapter continues to examine her feminist

commitment towards the redefinition of African woman but in a slightly different direction. The next chapter engages in the criticism of patriarchal strictures that subjugate and victimise women: however, the emphasis is on the demystification of female sexuality and relationships in Adichie's novels.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DEMYSTIFYING FEMALE SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS IN ADICHIE'S FICTION

#### 4.1 Introduction

In African literature, female sexuality is often explored in relation to women's role in fertility, procreation, and hetero-normativity. Little or no attention is paid to the female character as a human with genuine natural sexual and sensual needs and rights which are equally worthy of being fulfilled and respected in their own terms. Sex is viewed as a taboo subject and issues surrounding female sexuality are often shrouded in silence, secrecy, shame, and guilt. The female body is culturally a subjective site for her oppression and a patriarchal means of power control. In rare instances where female sexuality is represented, the female is given agency only as a sexual object for male gratification. For example, Udumukwu rightly observes that whereas the male emerges as "the superior active being, the female is predominantly passive; patriarchy inhibits the free expression of female sexuality. Whereas male sexuality is openly expressed and even required, various cultural forms are used to police and suppress female sexuality" (2011:23). Examples of the diverse forms used in traditional African societies to suppress and police female sexuality include female genital circumcision (which involves the excision of parts of the labia and clitoris to curb the female libido), virginity testing, under-age marriages, slut shaming, discriminatory menstrual practices, dry sex practices, and breast ironing. These unspeakable practices embody the physical extremity of the lengths of cruelty that patriarchy will go to in order to suppress female sexuality.

A primary aim of African feminist writers is therefore to change the stereotypical representation of female sexuality in African literature. According to Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, the female

writer is, amongst other things, faced with the challenge of depicting true womanhood in her works. And in doing so, she must

tell us about being a woman in the real complex sense of the term. On the biological level, she must tell us about being a woman: what the facts of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause contribute to the woman's personality and the way she feels and knows her world. Do women's bodies affect their senses, their use of imagery, and their personal writing styles? [...] Male writers have also had their own 'phallic' or 'phallogratique' contributions to make. We need to know the African female writers' views more directly. Male African writers have, from time to time, given their artistic reactions to female experiences such as menstruation, sexual love and childbirth among others, but a female writer's view would be more authentic (1994:61).

The very existence of this citation shows that the customary vilification and mystification of female sexuality is no longer acceptable and African women writers are beginning to rewrite their sexuality and redefine their humanness. In response to her critics concerning her lucid portrayal of female sexuality, in an essay entitled "African authenticity and the Biafran experience", Adichie says

I was also determined to make my novel about what I like to think of as the grittiness of being human. A book about relationships, about people who have sex and eat food and laugh, about people who are fierce consumers of life. I was concerned with certain questions about what it means to be human (Adichie, 2012:50-51).

This is her formulation of the view that sexuality is part of humanity and that, concomitantly, shrouding women's sexuality in shame and secrecy translates to silencing their humanity. It is little wonder, therefore, that *Purple hibiscus*, *Half of a yellow sun*, and *Americanah* vibrantly break the myths and taboos shrouding African female sexuality which inadvertently propagate the subjugation of and sexism towards women. These novels employ graphic description of female sexual desires and detailed portrayal of sex scenes in a celebratory manner. Adichie reverses the roles of women as inactive recipients in sexual relationships and instead creates ideal relationship situations where the female characters take the lead in their choice of partners and in initiating sexual advances. Adichie unapologetically gives hints of how voracious and healthy female sexuality can be and by doing so debunks the erroneous shaming of African women who dare to express their sexuality as promiscuous women. Similarly, traditionally

unspoken issues like sexual fetishes, interracial relationships, sexual violence, and other sexually related biological issues such as genital name-calling, menstruation, and sexual identity are issues that Adichie openly discusses in the three novels under study. The following section examines the feminist issue of discrimination against female sexuality and sexual suppression as treated in the novels. After that, this chapter explores how Adichie defies sexual norms and conventions in her novels. This is followed by an evaluation of the representation of sexual abuse, objectification, and hyper-sexualisation of women and finally, the reversal of female sexual roles and prioritisation of female sexuality as addressed in the novels.

#### **4.2 Sexual suppression and discrimination of female sexuality**

*Purple hibiscus* addresses the strict confinement of Kambili, a young teenage girl on the verge of sexual awakening by Eugene her extremist Catholic father who has been mentioned in connection with his violent behaviour towards his family in chapter three. Her father imposes physical restrictions to prevent her from social interactions. In order to inhibit any form of self-agency she may exhibit, Eugene sends Kambili off to a convent school. At home she is imprisoned as though living in a “generic Gothic castle” that is “imbued with a sense of entrapment” (Mabura, 2008:208) by “compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires” (Adichie, 2004:9). These are so high that the rest of the world is shut off. Her school replicates this sense of entrapment as high walls that are “topped by jagged pieces of green glass with sharp edges jutting out” to shelter it (Adichie, 2004:45). In addition to physically restricting Kambili, Eugene exercises bodily control over her and stifles her femininity. He does this in several ways ranging from cutting her nails to “a chafing shortness” (Adichie, 2004:154) to ensuring she wears only long skirts that go past her knees.

Eugene’s obsessive suppression of female sexuality is not limited to his teenage daughter; he also practices it on his wife. Besides the physical abuse Beatrice suffers from her husband as mentioned in chapter three, she is also emotionally unfulfilled and sexually repressed. With the

exception of procreative purposes, Eugene takes no cognisance of Beatrice's sexual needs, he has no intimacy with her and this leaves her constantly depressed. Kambili notes that it is clearly inconceivable to envisage any form of physical amorous show of affection between her parents. "I could not even think of her and Papa together, on the bed they shared, custom-made and wider than the conventional King-size. When I thought of affection between them, I thought of them exchanging the sign of peace at Mass", she says (Adichie, 2004:21). Eugene's disrespect for Beatrice and Kambili's sexual and reproductive rights in conjunction with his physical and psychological abuse are the tools he uses to maintain a patriarchal hold on their female sexuality and to keep them under his patriarchal control. For Kambili and her brother, their aunt, Auntie Ifeoma's home at Nsukka, just like the experimental purple hibiscus she grew in her garden, represents a "the undertones of freedom. A different kind of freedom [...] A freedom to be, to do" (Adichie, 2004:16). Therefore, it is there that Kambili experiences first-hand the freedom of individuality and self-expression is which she is denied by Eugene's draconian patriarchal rule. Prior to her holidays at Nsukka, Kambili is therefore unattuned to her femininity. Although she later comes to realise that she is beautiful, she is yet to explore and appreciate her bodily aesthetics because at home she looks into a mirror "just long enough to make sure [her] buttons were done right" (Adichie, 2004:174). So the very first time she puts on a pair of shorts, she blushes at her own feminine form but fears that Eugene would be "scandalised" by her attire if he were to find out because just like he made her believe, "it was sinful for a woman to wear trousers" (Adichie, 2004:80). When Father Amadi admires her long athletic legs, in line with her father's negative enculturation, she soliloquises that appreciating her body would be a vainly act and "vanity was a sin" (Adichie, 2006:174). Kambili is so imbued in the psycho-religious indoctrination instilled into her psyche by her father and conditioned by restrictions that her sense of self-awareness is subsumed.

Because of Eugene's religious-extremist socialisation, in which he attributes everything that has to do with human sexuality as a deadly sin that leads one to hell, the first time Kambili sees her cousin Amaka undressing she reveals "I quickly averted my gaze. I had never seen anyone undress; it was sinful to look upon another person's nakedness" (Adichie, 2004: 117). However, a few weeks later, after being re-socialised by her aunt and cousin and while watching Papa-Nnukwu perform his morning libations, his wrapper mistakenly slips off his waist leaving him naked. Rather than shudder in guilt, Kambili confesses "I did not look away, although it was sinful to look upon another person's nakedness" (Adichie 2004:168). On the contrary, she finds her aging grandfather's masculine nudity fascinating and even describes it as follows: "between his legs hung a limp cocoon that seemed smoother, free of the wrinkles that crisscrossed the rest of his body like mosquito netting. [...] His nipples were like dark raisins nestled among the sparse gray tufts of hair on his chest" (Adichie 2004:168-169). Kambili's questioning and re-evaluation of her father's ideals blossoms in the liberal atmosphere at Nsukka and subsequently leads to her gradual but affirming self-agency.

In stark contrast to this important progress that Kambili is able to make, the sole aim of Eugene's actions is to police and suppress his daughter's blossoming sexual agency. He conscientiously enforces codes of chastity and docility into Kambili's mind so that she becomes fearful of herself. However, his daughter Kambili is not his only victim. He severely punishes his son Jaja for asking for the keys to room for privacy he assumes that he needs the privacy to masturbate and queries him, "what do you want privacy for? To commit a sin against your own body? Is that what you want to do, masturbate?" (Adichie, 2006:98). In this instance, by narrating Eugene's extension of his sexual suppressive attitude to his son, Adichie highlights a crucial point about the far-reaching negative consequence of patriarchy with regard to the policing of sexuality, in that, it is not only women who are affected but also men. This, in turn, resonates with the African

feminist notion that the sexual victimisation of one gender indirectly or directly represents the victimisation of all.

In the context of sexual suppression, it is also important to recall an instance of violence previously mentioned in chapter three whereby in Eugene's warped Christian commitment to prevent Kambili from sinning against her body, he scorches her feet in hot water. This act of scorching her feet in hot water is not simply a matter of domestic violence, intolerably violent as it, but is also an attempt at suppressing her budding sexuality. Corinne Sandwith aptly identifies Eugene's actions as "profound somatophobia" (2016:98) which according to her:

centers on the disciplined body trained into the postures of religious observance and stilled in the habitus of contrition, obeisance, and modesty. In the world of the novel, these prohibitions are suggested in the importance of head coverings, restrictions on physical movement, prohibitions on nakedness, and the elimination of affect (Sandwith, 2016:98).

It is therefore in the bid to eliminate the consequences of the "unruly body", which he perceives as "the source of sin", that Eugene unleashes "corporeal repression and punishment" (Sandwith, 2016:99) on the members of his family. After he horrendously scars Kambili physically and psychologically, he gives her a sermon about "sinning against one's body" and further narrates how as a child he received a similar punishment from his guardian, a British priest, for masturbating. Stemming from his explanation, the violence Eugene unleashes on his family arguably "becomes a sign of the self-hatred of the colonised mimic, a weak and essentially hollow self" (Hewett, 2005:46), a replication of bodily anguish depicting doctrinaire misunderstanding. In this way, Adichie attempts to highlight the interconnectedness of religious extremity and neo-colonialism with the salient issue of female sexual repression and violence through Eugene's character and his violent actions towards his wife and daughter.

In the same feminist fashion, Adichie criticises the institutionalised misogynist shaming and victimisation of women due to biological configurations such as menstruation, pregnancy related health issues, hormonal imbalance, and the denigration of the female genitalia. For instance,

*Purple hibiscus* explores the patriarchal insensitivity to and irritability towards female biological differences in addition to the conscious instilling of a sense of guilt and shame in women for issues relating to their femininity. For example, as mentioned in chapter two, Eugene physically abuses his wife Beatrice for excusing herself from the family's customary Sunday visits to the parish house due to her pregnancy-induced morning sickness. He batters her so badly that she miscarries. Kambili and her brother have to clean up the blood "which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red watercolour all the way downstairs" (Adichie, 2004:33). After her miscarriage, Beatrice undergoes a dilation and evacuation procedure to expunge the dead foetus from her womb. When she returns home, instead of showing empathy for her condition, which he brought upon her by brutal violence, Eugene vilifies her. He goes further to shame her and enjoins the children to do the same by accusing her of murder and asking that they pray Novenas to gain penance on her behalf.

On another occasion he brutally beats Kambili to the point of unconsciousness for breaking the Eucharistic fast by eating some breakfast before taking painkillers to quell a bout of dysmenorrhea. He walks into the room and, without any empathy for Kambili's reproductive health concerns, unleashes violence on her. He keeps shouting "'has the devil asked you all to go on errands for him?' [...] as he swung the belt at Mama, Jaja, and [Kambili], muttering that the devil would not win" (Adichie, 2004:102).

Adichie uses these extreme examples to illustrate that the cruelty towards women that goes along with patriarchy knows no bounds. Such irrational acts of injustice towards women based on circumstances beyond their control are despicable. They validate the relevance of Chielozona's projection of the idea of feminist empathy, which he defines as "the ability to feel oneself into the experience of a woman in undeserved suffering", a mode of empathy that "comes to fruition when we switch perspective with a woman experiencing unfairness, injustice, or oppression because of her gender" (2015:2). Switching perspective in this manner is what Adichie ensures

without shying away from presenting some of the most horrifically violent and oppressive situations that women may face in patriarchal societies that condone, hide, or even elicit such behaviour as that of Eugene.

But Adichie goes further, showing an alternative and more acceptable approach to handling feminine biological issues like menstruation. In *Americanah* for instance, besides teaching Ifemelu basic beauty and feminine grooming tips, Auntie Uju also “talked her through her first menstrual period, supplementing her mother’s lecture that was full of biblical quotes about virtue but lacked useful details about cramps and pads” (Adichie, 2013:53). By validating the existence of exclusively feminine health issues like dysmenorrhoea for which Kambili is severely brutalised and highlighting its absolute normalcy Adichie makes a valid feminist point.

Similarly, Adichie decries the patriarchal profanation of female sexuality, especially the association of womanhood epitomised by the female genitalia with repulsion. This is exemplified in *Half of a yellow sun* when during a fight between children playing in the yard at Kano, in their exchange of insults Olanna hears a child scream at another in Igbo, “your mother’s pussy!” (Adichie, 2006:40). As cringeworthy as this vulgarism may sound, especially coming from young children, it only goes to show the level of misogyny inherent in the socio-cultural setting pertaining to female sexuality which makes this word qualify as a valid expletive and an object of ridicule and scorn.

Furthermore, Adichie erases the taboo surrounding female reproductive issues by speaking about the effect of hormonal imbalance in women like the case of Pee whose unusual irate attitude and over-indulgent eating at Marcia’s party surprises her friends. So that, when Marcia asks the question “are we hormonal, Pauly?” (Adichie, 2013:328), Paula replies in affirmation.

Another important issue Adichie touches upon is the consequence of stress on the female menstrual cycle. As the Biafra war progresses in *Half of a yellow sun*, Olanna bears not only the

emotional and psychological burdens brought about by the war, but also the attendant effects on her biological disposition “like how her periods were now sparse and no longer red but a muddy brown” (Adichie, 2006:389). By discussing these issues of women’s sexual concern, Adichie dispels the secrecy and shame attributed to women’s biological construction. Instead, she calls for a better enlightenment about women’s sexual and reproductive health issues and for feminist empathy and understanding on the part of men who do not undergo these issues and therefore can never fully comprehend them.

Whilst advancing the positive prioritisation of female sexual agency, Adichie also recapitulates the importance of sex education and responsible relationship advice to young girls and boys alike. Of particular concern is the exigency of teaching young adults the ethics of responsible sexuality rather than painting it in a very negative light or shrouding issues of sexuality in secrecy just to keep them disinterested. This is because when teenagers and young adults are educated about sexuality and safe sexual practices they are more informed and better equipped to make safer choices. For instance, in *Americanah*, when Ifemelu first meets Obinze and confides in Aunt Uju that she is in love with him, Aunt Uju advises her “to let him kiss and touch but not to let him put it inside” (Adichie, 2013:53). Although Aunt Uju’s piece of advice is sketchy to say the least, it does not demonise the young Ifemelu’s budding sexuality and it successfully prevents her from a hasty involvement in sex at that point in time. However, Obinze’s mother later offers a more practicable piece of advice to the pair of young lovers. The instant she notices the signs of erotic attraction between Ifemelu and her son, Obinze’s mother invites Ifemelu into her room and tells her:

if anything happens between you and Obinze, you are both responsible. But Nature is unfair to women. An act is done by two people, but if there are any consequences, one person carries it alone. 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. [...] wait until you own yourself a little more. Do you understand? Convince him. Both of you should agree to wait so that there is no pressure (Adichie, 2013:72).

While receiving the sex and sexual responsibility advice from her, Ifemelu admits that in spite of the seemingly awkward nature of having such a conversation with her boyfriend's mother "she felt the absence of shame. Perhaps it was Obinze's mother's tone, the evenness of it, the normalness of it" (Adichie, 2013:72). This is a far cry from the experience she has with her own mother who, rather than talk openly about the normalcy of sexuality and the importance of safe sex, scuffles it under the carpet of religious silence and offers her passive admonishments of chastity coloured with biblical quotes.

Adichie further addresses the shaming of expressive female sexuality either under the guise of religious morality or cultural conservatism as found for instance in *Americanah* during the incident of Ifemelu and Obinze's mistaken pregnancy scare, which turns out to be a case of an inflamed appendicitis. When Ifemelu goes for a pregnancy test, the laboratory technician "smirking and humming insouciantly" says in a morally judgmental tone, "people should respect themselves and live like Christians to avoid trouble" (Adichie, 2013:95). In reaction to the situation, Ifemelu's mother assumes a hypocritically dismissive stance and disingenuously expresses hope for the possibility of marriage, saying "he has good home training and their hometown is not far from us" (Adichie, 2013:97).

Contrary to plying this sanctimonious route, then, Obinze's mother addresses the situation in a more realistic manner by giving it the attention it deserves. She constructively reprimands Ifemelu and Obinze for their laxity in being sexually responsible and advises them that people make mistakes:

but some mistakes can be avoided. You must always use a condom. If you want to be irresponsible, then wait until you are no longer in my care [...] if you make the choice to be sexually active, then you must make the choice to protect yourself. Obinze, you should take your pocket money and buy condoms. Ifemelu, you too. It is not my concern if you are embarrassed. You should go into the pharmacy and buy them. You should never ever let the boy be in charge of your own protection. If he does not want to use it, then he does not care enough about you and you should not be there. Obinze, you may not be the person who will get pregnant, but if it happens, it will change your entire life and you

cannot undo it. And please, both of you keep it between both of you. Diseases are everywhere. AIDS is real (Adichie, 2013:97).

Mrs Maduewesi thereby advances the idea that although both individuals are accountable to an extent for each other's safety; the responsibility for one's sexual safety does not solely lie with their partner. Whether male or female, people should take positive action towards safeguarding their own sexual and reproductive health. Again one finds that Adichie's fiction enjoys a certain informative even-handedness that straddles rightful critique of patriarchal suppression and positive depiction of its opposite, namely greater and more realistic openness about female sexuality. As I will show in the next section, Adichie goes even further to unshroud the most covert aspects of female sexuality and the ways in which socially-tabooed areas of human sexuality affects both men and women negatively.

#### **4.3 Defying sexual norms and conventions**

Another previously tabooed aspect of female sexuality that Adichie addresses in her works, most specifically in *Americanah*, is the issue of paraphilias, and I focus on it separately here because it is of particular importance to Adichie's fictional context. Even though it is not the female characters who directly explore the tendencies towards some of these sexual oddities, based on the African feminist notion of complementarity that demands fairness and transparency in relationships, these issues are discussed because the sexual behaviours of one invariably affects both partners. Because society frowns at certain non-normative sexual practices, people with such preferences succumb to classical conservatism and hypocritical dissimulation in order to conform to societal expectations. In *Americanah*, Adichie breaks the boundaries of customary sexual rectitude and subtly highlights these paraphilias.

For example, with reference to urolagnia (or urophilia), Ifemelu wonders if the sports coach "was one of those white men she had read about, with strange tastes, who wanted women to drag a feather over their back or urinate on them" (Adichie, 2013:153). Similarly, Obinze's cousin

Ojiugo and her boyfriend Nicholas portray exhibitionist tendencies. Apart from the fact that they “used to fuck in public” (Adichie, 2013:240) the duo also go about flashing their nudity. For example, once they were seen “at a beer parlor, Ojiugo wearing Nicholas’s large white shirt and nothing below, and Nicholas wearing a pair of jeans and nothing above” ( Adichie, 2013:238). Also in *Americanah*, Shan points out that “there’s the niche of white men in this country who will only date black women, but that’s a kind of fetish and it is nasty” (Adichie, 2013:320). In this case the fetish has to do with the obsession with the black female body.

Furthermore, Adichie highlights adipophilia or fat fetish in the case of Olu who badgers his wife, Morenike, about losing weight to keep him sexually attracted and interested in her. Ironically, “during their divorce, she discovered a cache of pornographic pictures on the home computer, all of obese women, with arms and bellies in rolls of fat” (Adichie, 2013:468). While Morenike is quick to categorise his sexual interest as a “spiritual problem”, Obinze differs and asks “why does everything have to be a spiritual problem? The man just has a fetish” (Adichie, 2013:468).

The feminist implication of this episode lies in the fact, not only that Olu asserts bodily control over his wife by forcing her to alter her physique to please him sexually, but also that he subjects her to compulsory insecurities about her body size as a way of hiding his own preferences while living a lie. Adichie opposes the tendency that instead of acknowledging the diverse nature of sexual interests and preferences, people resort to couching them in religious and traditional ethics. That is the reason why someone like Olu would rather punish his spouse by demoralising and body shaming her (then to fulfil his erotic fantasies in secrecy) than own up to his sexual preference and iron out the issues of sexual difference with his spouse.

Apart from adipophilia, Adichie also points out panty fetish in *Americanah* by highlighting Obinze’s fascination with Ifemelu’s underwear, which he notes are all plain black boy-shorts because girly underwear amused her. Obinze muses on picking up Ifemelu’s boy-shorts from the floor where he had flung them during sex and looking “at the milky crust on the crotch”,

probably wanting to sniff at it before Ifemelu interrupts him, inserting “ah, you want to smell it? I’ve never understood that whole business of smelling underwear” (Adichie, 2013:457). It is important to note that, although Ifemelu does not understand how or why Obinze could be attracted to the residue of her vaginal secretions, she desists from criticising him. Her non-judgemental approach in this instance is perhaps Adichie’s way of invalidating the stigmatisation of sexual preferences that do not infringe on the sexual and reproductive health, rights and sexual autonomy of others, specifically women.

A further intriguing instance of Adichie’s playing with “deviant” sexuality is that, while dating, Curt and Ifemelu engage in role-play, which is also an unusual sexual practice. Curt always initiates the role-plays by suggesting they act out impersonations with Ifemelu acting the role, Foxy Brown. Although the sexual excitement Curt derives from role-playing puzzles Ifemelu, “she played along, humoring him, pleased by his pleasure” (Adichie, 2013:195). Just like with Obinze’s panty fetish, Ifemelu finds role-play absurd, but due to the transparency exhibited both partners’ in sharing their fantasies with her, she appreciates their honesty and non-judgementally indulges them. This of course differs from Olu’s method of hypocrisy and secrecy pertaining to his adipophilia. The fact that these sexual behaviours transgress the normative boundaries of accepted sexual practices and are viewed with disdain and treated with secrecy does not invalidate their existence as people’s sexual reality. Therefore, they deserve to be subjects of literary discourse especially as they affect female sexuality. Specifically because, the shrouding, secrecy, and stigmatisation associated with non-normative sexual preferences affects female sexuality in the sense that the boundaries of sexual responsibility are more likely to be crossed when shame is linked to the sexual act. Hence, there is an increased chance of the transmission and spread of diseases than in less convoluted and secretive instances like in the case of Olu.

In a similar vein, Adichie defies the literary code of sexual silence by addressing the fluidity of sexual identity and non-heteronormative sexuality, which is a very sensitive issue, especially in

Africa, as it is considered “unAfrican” and is criminalised in most African countries, including Nigeria. For example, under the terms of the Nigerian Anti-gay law which is entitled the *Same-sex marriage prohibition Act 2013*, “anyone who enters into a same-sex marriage or civil union can be sentenced to 14 years in prison while any such partnerships entered into abroad are deemed ‘void’”. Furthermore, the new law warns that “anyone who registers, operates or participates in gay clubs, societies and organisations or who directly or indirectly makes a public show of a same-sex relationship will break the law. Punishment is up to 10 years in prison” (Aljazeera, 2014). In *Americanah*, Adichie recognises the existence and validity of the diverse nature of human sexuality cutting across genders. In order to strike a balance of representation she highlights queer sexuality not only in the female but also in the male characters. This is because, regardless of gender, in situations where one partner is queer and surreptitious about their non-heteronormativity it affects the other partner adversely, especially in circumstances where there is unsafe sex in the mix.

At a party in London, Obinze observes how his friend, Emenike, spends the evening in what seems to be “a continuous flirtatiousness with Phillip”, his wife’s legal colleague, after he compliments his good looks at the beginning of the party (Adichie, 2013:270). Obviously surprised by Emenike’s open bi-sexual flirtation with Philip, Obinze reminisces about a boy in their all boys secondary school back in Nigeria named Hadome. He recollects how Hadome “was said to pay junior students to suck his dick” and how the boys at the school, including Emenike, had joined in lynching Hadome to a pulp until his eyes were swollen and grotesque the size of a big purple eggplant while others kept taunting and goading him shouting “Homo! Homo!” (Adichie, 2013:270). Apparently, because of the homophobic culture in Nigeria, Emenike, who is bi-sexual, is unable to express his sexuality and while living in pretence, joins in gay-bashing Hadome in a show of hypocritical morality.

Another character, Mekkus, talks about his friend's driver who he describes as an "economic homosexual" because he "follows men who give him money; meanwhile he has a wife and children at home" (Adichie, 2013:472). Cases of closet-non-heteronormative sexuality like this abound in many African societies. It proves problematic not because of the sexual orientation of the driver (for example) but because of the fact that he is being unfair to his wife who is probably oblivious of his sexuality, and more importantly, because his extramarital homosexual affairs pose a risk of sexually transmitted diseases to both of them.

Adichie further represents the diversity of sexual orientation through the portrayal of a lesbian couple: "the beautiful and utterly original Maribelle and her girlfriend Joan" (Adichie, 2013:334), who are guests at Shan's soiree. Another example is Blaine's ex, Paula, who cheats on him with a woman also named Paula (Pee). Speaking about Paula, Blaine tells Ifemelu, "our relationship had been in trouble for a while. She said she was just experimenting with Pee but I could tell it was much more, and I was right because they're still together" (Adichie, 2013:324). Unlike Maribelle and Joan who are distinctively lesbians, Paula engages in some sexual experimentation to explore and then establish her sexual preference, which results in her leaving Blaine to be with her girlfriend Paula. When Blaine's liberating and non-prescriptive approach to Paula's sexual preference and orientation is compared with the case of the other male closet-non-heteronormative characters discussed above, then Adichie's fictional take on the suppression of not female sexuality but sexuality as a whole is better understood.

Queer sexuality is often proclaimed a Western import, and untruly so, but Adichie finds the postulations about the "unAfricanness" of non-heteronormative sexuality "truly insidious" (2014). She asserts that it is a non-racial, human phenomenon. In this regard it is evident, as Eromosele Femi (2013:110) aptly observes, that Adichie "does not believe in succumbing to the restrictions placed by society on sexual expression, and thus homosexuality and lesbianism are portrayed as simply human characteristics, and not as 'unAfrican' codes of behaviour". The

increasing acknowledgement of non-normative sexual preferences and practices in the writings of African women writers like Chimamanda Adichie, Uzoma Azuah, Lola Shoneyin, Chinelo Okparanta, and Calixthe Beyala to name a few, despite the stiff opposition in that regard on the continent where someone caught in gay sex can be imprisoned for ten years, is remarkable. As much as people choose to moralise the issue of sexual preferences, the criminalisation of non-heteronormative sexuality which is not only a feminist issue but a gender-inclusive one has dire negative consequences for public health in Nigeria and all other societies where it holds sway. This is because, as Navi Pillay aptly notes in her opening speech during her visit to Nigeria

by driving LGBT persons underground and deterring them from signing up for HIV educational programmes, prevention treatment and care services. Given that Nigeria currently has the second largest HIV epidemic in the world, this would be a heavy blow to the efforts to combat HIV (2014).

The feminist implication of the repression of non-heteronormative sexuality in this case is that in the issues of HIV and AIDS pandemic, and other sexual reproductive health issues like pelvic cancer which is sexually related women and children bear the greatest brunt. Additionally, this points to the pertinence of an African feminist strand that caters to the voice of women who fall within the non-heteronormative spectrum and thereby suffer exclusion from mainstream African feminist discourse. It points, in other words, to the magnanimity of Adichie's fictional stance on the suppression of not only female sexuality but also all sexuality.

#### **4.4 Intercultural and interracial love relationships**

As far as intercultural and interracial love relationships go, there is always a general complication and discomfort from the side of each of the partners in the relationship. This assertion is true of cross-cultural relationships all over the world because such relationships are fraught with the fear or distrust of the "other" due to the differences in socio-cultural, religious, or ideological backgrounds and views. Adichie brings the issues of intercultural and interracial love relationships to the fore in *Half of a yellow sun* and *Americanah*.

For example, concerning intercultural but same-race relationships, in *Americanah* Ranyinudo's mother nearly has a heart attack when she discovers that her daughter is in a relationship with a Hausa-Moslem named Ibrahim. In her desperation to end the relationship she resorts to praying, "seriously saying novenas to end [the] relationship" (Adichie, 2013:387). Likewise, Ifemelu's parents question her choice of having a relationship with an African-American. Although she could easily lie to her parents about her decision to be moved from Baltimore to New Haven to live with Blaine, she boldly chooses to inform them that they are dating. When Ifemelu reveals that Blaine is an American, her father asks "but why a Negro? Is there a substantive scarcity of Nigerians there?" (Adichie, 2013:314). Instead of giving him a direct response Ifemelu ignores his question and digresses from the conversation. By ignoring him and even being up front enough to tell her father that she was moving in with a man to whom she is not married (Adichie, 2013:314) Ifemelu breaks away from the traditional expectations for women regarding relationships and marriages. She admits that it "was something she could do only because she lived in America" where "the rules had shifted, fallen into the cracks of distance and foreignness" (Adichie, 2013:314). Ifemelu's father is clearly biased and unsupportive of her choice of a foreign partner, but also of her decision to cohabit with him. By employing characters like this, who defy traditional conventions Adichie debunks the rules placed on relationships especially in terms of cohabitation without formal marriage, which African societies such as the Igbo culture abhor.

Another example of an oppositional attitude to intercultural relationships is found in *Half of a yellow sun* when Olanna's ex-boyfriend Mohammed's mother disapproves of his choice of an Igbo woman as his prospective wife because she would "taint the lineage with her infidel blood" (Adichie, 2006:46). Similarly, when Olanna suggests to her cousin, Arize, that she could set her up on a date with one of Mohammed's cousins, she negates the idea saying "Papa would kill me first of all if he knew I was even looking at a Hausa man like that" (Adichie, 2006:42). In

reinforcement of Arize's disapproval, her mother also interjects "unless your father will kill a corpse, because I will start with you first" (Adichie, 2006:42). The difference in ethnicity and most importantly the diverse religious beliefs of the characters are the divisive factors that lead to the disapproval and discontinuation of the love affair between Olanna and Mohammed. The feminist implication of the discontinuity of their relationship is that it impinges on Olanna's autonomy to choose who she wants to be in a relationship with, and love them uninhibited without having to pander to socio-cultural differences and dictates. This explains why, when she meets Odenigbo despite the disapproval from her family, she refuses to end the relationship. She regains her sexual autonomy and lives her life on her own terms. This freedom for women to exist as full humans and live and love uninhibited is exactly what African feminism advocates.

The possibility of wholesome interracial love relationships is another feminist thematic concern that is explored in *Half of a yellow sun* and *Americanah*. Adichie succinctly captures the difficulties experienced by women of colour in interracial relationships through Ifemelu who comes to a harsh realisation of her inferior status as a black woman in America soon after her migration. For instance, when Curt announces to his sister, Kimberly, and her family that he is dating Ifemelu, his niece, Morgan, becomes visibly livid looking "genuinely disgusted", blurting out "that's disgusting" (Adichie, 2013:194). On the other hand, his brother-in-law, Don, thinks Ifemelu is attractive and interesting. However, he finds the idea of "both of them, together, entangled in the delicate threads of romance" (Adichie, 2013:195) inconceivable.

As their relationship progresses, Ifemelu is faced with more conflicting attitudes from Curt's family. For instance, although Curt's mother does not openly object to their relationship she noncommittally shoots an occasional eyebrow-raise of accusation at Ifemelu "as though to say she knew very well who had turned her son into a pathetic race warrior" (Adichie, 2013:293). Unlike his mother, Ifemelu senses that Curt's aunt, Claire, desperately dramatises the need to over-assure her that she likes black people. When she points this out to Curt, he replies that "it

was not about race, it was just that his aunt was hyper-aware of difference, any difference” (Adichie, 2013:293). Being hyper-aware of difference in this case invariably translates to the aversion of difference, specifically racial difference.

Ifemelu nonetheless learns to come to terms with the discriminatory glares from strangers, most of whom are ironically women. Whenever she goes out with Curt “they looked at her with surprise, a surprise that some of them shielded and some of them did not, and in their expressions was the question ‘Why her?’” (Adichie, 2013:292). However, Ifemelu is of the opinion that the severe scrutiny their relationship receives is because Curt is from an upper class white American family and is equally a young, extremely handsome, and a wealthy man. Therefore, it makes their prejudicial looks those “of people confronting a great tribal loss. [...] And it did not help that although she might be a pretty black girl, she was not the kind of black that they could, with an effort, imagine him with: she was not light-skinned, she was not biracial” (Adichie, 2013:292-293). Ifemelu thinks that if Curt were ordinary and from the lower rung of the American white class, their racial difference would probably be less prominent.

In contrast to those who give her the questioning look, Ifemelu realises that some others choose to belittle her or simply treat her as if she were invisible. One outstanding example is the proprietor at a bed and breakfast in Montreal who refuses to acknowledge her with “a steadfast refusal, smiling, and looking only at Curt” (Adichie, 2013:294). Even though Ifemelu is incensed by the demeaning subtle racism she faces in this way she desists from complaining to Curt about how she felt because he would either tell her “she was overreacting or tired or both” (Adichie, 2013:294). The fact that some people are unapologetic about their racial prejudice while others are more diplomatic in concealing theirs does not make the issues of racial and cultural difference they experience in their relationship go away.

We therefore see the emergence in Adichie’s fiction of a complex, incisive critique of suppression of women through race in the particular sense that it focuses on just how

uncomfortable and hypocritical the skirting around this topic can become. In refuting a Haitian woman's attempts at downplaying issues of race in interracial relationships at the dinner party in Manhattan, Ifemelu epitomises this when she argues that people either pretend about or wish issues of race away:

the only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it's a lie [...] when you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it. We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we're worried they will say we're overreacting, or we're being too sensitive. [...] [W]e say that race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. It's true. I speak from experience (Adichie, 2013:290-291).

Irrespective of the hurdles they face in their relationship, Curt truthfully appreciates Ifemelu and finds her irresistibly attractive. He professes that "he had never been so attracted to a woman before, had never seen a body so beautiful, her perfect breasts, her perfect butt" (Adichie, 2013:195). Additionally, he constantly demonstrates an eagerness to satisfy Ifemelu sexually and expresses a constant "need to hear her affirmation again and again" (Adichie, 2013:207). Curt also genuinely showers her with love. She confesses that "with Curt, she became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares, a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth" (Adichie, 2013:196). We find Adichie balancing the suffering they undergo in the social realm with the triumph of their intimacy, the actual human fibres of their relationship. Despite the contempt they face, Ifemelu and Curt's relationship thus defies the stereotypical myths about interracial relationships. Not only is their union based on a mutually reciprocal love commitment, Curt absolutely appreciates Ifemelu for her humanity. In fact she confirms that "a sense of contentment overwhelmed her. That was what Curt had given her, this gift of contentment, of ease" (Adichie, 2013:200). This goes against the stereotyping of and generalisations made about interracial relationships, which only projects a monolithic representation of reality. Adichie uses Curt and Ifemelu's relationship as an avenue to demystify the danger of that single narrative.

In a similar fashion Adichie uses the relationship between Richard and Kainene in *Half of a yellow sun*, to highlight the dual nature of discriminatory attitudes regarding interracial relationships and to provide a balanced view of this human phenomenon. The discriminatory attitude towards the possibility and sustenance of interracial relationships is also exemplified in *Half of a yellow sun* when Richard's previous girlfriend, Susan Grenville Pitts, who is obsessively possessive of him, flares up in a glass-breaking fit of jealous rage each time he accords other women attention. For instance, she strongly protests against his acquaintance with Clovis Bancroft, Julia March and fellow female expatriates and smashes a couple of glasses to express her displeasure (Adichie, 2006:55). However, Richard surprisingly observes that the day he has a chat with a female Yoruba lecturer at a party, Susan remains calm and unperturbed. Eventually Richard realises that "black women were not threatening to her, were not equal rivals" (Adichie, 2006:55). In her assumption of a sense of superiority Susan deludedly undermines the equal humanity of women of all races and in an ironic twist she loses Richard's love to Kainene. When Susan learns of Richard and Kainene's affair, in her usual condescending manner she asks him "always to use a rubber" saying that "one must be careful, even with the most educated of these people" (Adichie, 2006:236). Through her insensitive utterances Susan reinforces the discriminatory stereotyping of African women as primitive, sexually unrestrained, and disease-ridden, lesser human beings.

On the flipside of the coin Adichie illustrates that the fear and disparagement of that which is unfamiliar transcends both divides and cuts either way and so, as much as Susan discriminatorily criticises Richard's affair with Kainene, she is not the one guilty of racist division. For example, during Major Udodi's visit to Kainene's apartment, seeing that she and Richard are lovers, he talks about the sexual exploitation of poor black women by white men who are usually fascinated with their exotic bodies. He points out that white men are allured to black women because of their "fantastically desirable bottoms" (Adichie, 2006:80). He further argues that they

only appreciate black women as specimens of sexual experimentation, saying “the white men will poke and poke and poke our women in the dark but they will never marry them” (Adichie, 2006:80). Kainene remains quiet while he speaks but when Major Udodi makes an assumedly insolent remark about Richard in Igbo, she angrily retorts “my choice of lovers is none of your business” (Adichie, 2006:80).

This unsolicited and upsetting casting of aspersions on ‘the other’ is not uncommon in interracial relationships. However, the fact that Kainene shuts him down epitomises Adichie’s liberal stance on the issue. Although friends and family members on either side of the divide frown upon these relationships, Adichie posits, through the fulfilment enjoyed by the characters in these relationships that love triumphs over racism and socio-cultural difference.

Due to Susan’s negative castigations of Nigerians, especially the womenfolk, Richard is awestruck during his first sexual encounter with Kainene:

he had not permitted himself to hope for too much. Perhaps it was why an erection eluded him: the gelding mix of surprise and desire. They undressed quickly. His naked body was pressed to hers and yet he was limp. He explored the angles of her collarbones and her hips, all the time willing his body and his mind to work better together, willing his desire to bypass his anxiety. But he did not become hard. He could feel the flaccid weight between his legs (Adichie, 2006:63).

Apparently, Kainene exceeds his expectations of black female sexuality. Richard’s subsequent attempts at getting intimate with Kainene are crippled by awkwardness, characterised by his manhood either taking on “an involuntary tremble” (Adichie, 2006:64) or “being uselessly limp” (Adichie, 2006:68). Richard feels utterly embarrassed by these momentary episodes of erectile dysfunction especially because “his sex life with Susan was satisfactory, though perfunctory” (Adichie, 2006:64). In the absence of a sexual connection between them, Kainene remains supportive of Richard, demonstrates the idea of complementarity and urges him to “give it time” and assures him that “there are other ways” (Adichie, 2006:68). Richard is pleased by her versed knowledge of sexuality and with time, she succeeds in dispelling Richard’s discomfiture.

After the initial sexual hurdles their relationship enjoys an intense mutual bond. In spite of Kainene's unexcited emotional character, Richard is able to soften her up. Considering that she is not attuned to verbalising her feelings, during his trip to Kano, he is pleasantly amazed to find a note in his briefcase in which she asks: "is love this misguided need to have you beside me most of the time? Is love this safety I feel in your silences? Is it this belonging, this completeness?" (Adichie, 2006:150). Regardless of the antagonism from both sides of their racial divides as illustrated by Susan and Major Udodi, just like Curt and Ifemelu, Richard and Kainene enjoy a wholesome relationship irrespective of their cultural and racial differences and difficulties. Through the representation of these relationships, Adichie posits that it is reprehensible and narrow-minded to create artificial boundaries between people because of their cultural diversity or myopic assumptions of racial superiority instead of focusing on the common factor of their humanity. More importantly, Adichie advances the neutralisation of racial discrimination against African women in interracial relationships and vice-versa, since this interracial and intercultural divisiveness with regard to relationships creates boundaries and barriers for women and inhibits their choices and possibilities to emotional and sexual fulfilment and this is unacceptable in the context of African women's empowerment. As indicated before, Adichie's fictional take on the matter of female suppression is comprehensive. It includes not only the repression of female sexuality but it also balances the narrative by highlighting aspects of male sexual behaviour that adversely diminish women's full enjoyment of their sexuality and love relationships. If feminism is about the acknowledgement and actualisation of women's full humanity, then there is no gainsaying that sexual autonomy and freedom of love and sexual relationships is as crucial to women as it is to men. Therefore, any form of divisiveness that impedes the actualisation of women's sexual fulfilment must be disallowed, and at the same time women must not be subjected to any form of abuse or discrimination based on their sexuality. In this regard, the next section addresses the crucial issues of female sexual abuse, objectification and the hyper-sexualisation of women highlighted in Adichie's novels.

#### 4.5 Sexual abuse, objectification, and hyper-sexualisation of women

The hyper-sexualisation and sexual objectification of women is a recurrent theme in African feminist discourse. The acknowledgement of a woman's identity and existence only in relation to her physical aesthetics and her sexuality reduces her to a mere sexual object and diminishes her full humanity. In *Half of a yellow sun*, Adichie challenges the western hyper-sexualisation of the black female body. During a lecturers' get-together at Nsukka, Odenigbo expresses disgust at the distortion of garden eggs to make the canapés that they are served. He draws an analogy between the evisceration and re-stuffing of the garden eggs and the treatment meted out against black females in the past, rhetorically asking "you know the Europeans took out the insides of an African woman and then stuffed and exhibited her all over Europe?" (Adichie, 2006:108). Through that random conversation, Adichie alludes to the story of Sarah [Saartjie] Baartman, a Khoisan woman who left South Africa in 1810 first to England and later Europe where various raconteurs who sought to exploit her physical feminine features commodified and caricatured her as the "Hottentot Venus" (Crais & Scully, 2009:2). Saartjie was displayed as a freak show and became the subject of numerous scientific experiments that used her as specimen to explore the black female sexual physique (Gordon-Chipembere, 2009:301). Adichie's allusion to Sarah Baartman highlights a crucial part of black female sexuality history because she represents a construct and racial stereotype of the black female body and she serves as the benchmark for the hyper-sexualisation of the black female body especially in the West.

In *Americanah*, Adichie reiterates her criticism of the sexual objectification of black women, whereby white women view them as lesser female species and white men only find them appealing as objects either for experimental sex, to fulfil their curiosities about black female sexuality, or as sexual fetishes. For instance, when Ifemelu states that she has been lucky in her biracial relationships, Shan asserts that white men only appreciate Ifemelu for her "exotic

credential, the whole Authentic African thing” (Adichie, 2013:320). Shan fiercely rails against this hyper-sexualisation and objectification of the black female body in America and the West. Concerning the publication of her book, she firmly disagrees with her editor, David, about putting up the “sexualized image, of a black torso, on her cover” (Adichie, 2013:321). Through Shan, Adichie excoriates the western attraction to the black female body solely as an inquisition into savage sexuality or as a means to satisfying the age-long curiosity about the sexual configuration of the black female that is viewed differently and regarded as an epitome of exoticism.

Adichie further addresses the sexual objectification of women in *Half of a yellow sun* through the portrayal of Chief Ozobia. Not only does he unabashedly and unscrupulously proffer his twin daughters Olanna and Kainene as chattels to be handed over to the highest bidder in marriage, Chief Ozobia also poses Olanna as “sex bait” (Adichie, 2006:35) to the finance minister in exchange for his selfish financial aggrandisement. Feeling disappointed by her father’s sexually exploitative tendencies and her mother’s complicity, Olanna wonders how her parents had promised Chief Okonji an affair with her “in exchange for the contract. Had they stated it verbally, plainly, or had it been implied?” (Adichie, 2006:32). Chief Ozobia’s attitude is deplorable, but even worse is the fact that his wife does nothing to correct the degradation of the reduction of their daughters to his sexual tools.

In order to gain her sexual attention, Chief Okonji offers to get Olanna a job at the ministry, an appointment to any board she chooses, and to furnish a flat for her at her location of choice. She gently declines his material offers and amorous advances. In the true patriarchal manner, he exerts an unequivocal sense of absolute male privilege whereby men perceive every woman as being sexually available and in need of phallic redemption. He rudely intrudes on her bodily space by pulling her to himself. For a while, the dumbstruck Olanna does nothing because “she was used to this, being grabbed by men who walked around in a cloud of cologne-drenched

entitlement, with the presumption that, because they were powerful and found her beautiful, they belonged together” (Adichie, 2006:33). However, it is such sense of entitlement and male privilege that Chief Okonji exhibits that make men presume authority over female sexuality, and in turn perpetuates the sexual subjugation of women as mere objects of male desire and satisfaction. So by enacting the reductionist implications of this encroachment of Olanna’s bodily space, Adichie fiercely brings home this important recognition. In furtherance of Adichie’s feminist criticism of all forms of female sexual abuse, Kainene expresses her resentment about the sexual objectification she and her twin sister experience from men to Richard. She likens herself and Olanna to “slabs of meat” displayed on the butchers’ tables at Balogun market, meat that men were “supposed to grope and feel and then decide which [they] want” (Adichie, 2006:59). She concludes by boldly telling him: “my sister and I are meat. We are here so that suitable bachelors will make their kill” (Adichie, 2006:59). This is disheartening because, despite Kainene and Olanna’s educational qualifications and industriousness, they are given commendation more for their physicality and sexuality than for their achievements. In a similar vein, Eberechi’s parents offer her as a sexual token to a Colonel by literally “pushing her into the army officer’s room” (Adichie, 2006:294) in exchange for her brother’s employment into the essential services department of the army. By highlighting these practices Adichie repudiates the societal evaluation of women solely as objects of male desire. She suggests instead that they deserve respect for their humanity and appreciation for much more than their sexuality.

Another crucial feminist issue that constitutes a common occurrence in times of war and conflict in Africa is that of sexual violence against women including rape, forced incest, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution of women and girls. Adichie captures the moral degeneration and inhumane acts of sexual violence towards women in war and conflict situations in *Half of a yellow sun*. During the Biafra war enemy-soldiers “choose the best houses and force people’s

wives and daughters to spread their legs for them and after cook for them” (Adichie, 2006:285). Similarly, the enemy-soldiers “raped pregnant women before they cut them up!” (Adichie, 2006:191). Unfortunately, women bear the brunt of the war on their sexuality from both sides. Not only do the soldiers from the adversarial side sexually and violently assault young girls and women, military officers on the defending side who ought to be responsible for their safety also capitalise on their vulnerability to sexually exploit and abuse them. For example, some Biafra military personnel, like Odenigbo’s friend, Special Julius, takes sexual advantage of the economic needs of “young-young girls that crawl around looking for sugar daddies” and “takes up to five of them into his bedroom at the same time” (Adichie, 2006:278). Some others, like Okeoma’s commander, the white-man mercenary, publicly “throws girls on their backs in the open where the other men can see him and does them, all the time holding his bag of money in one hand” (Adichie, 2006:323). His bag of money therefore becomes bait with which he ensnares the war-depraved girls to his exhibitionist sexual debauchery.

While Olanna and Odenigbo’s houseboy, Ugwu, is conscripted to the army, he observes how indigent young women often enter “the commander’s quarters and emerged with sheepish smiles” (Adichie, 2006:360). Dishearteningly, not all the sexually exploited females receive adequate compensation. In addition to being victims of sexual abuse, some also undergo physical assaults. On a particular occasion, Ugwu notices that “two village women came and were taken in to the commander’s quarters; much later, and the soldiers threw stones at them as they left” (Adichie, 2006:366). Such an atrocious and dehumanising act against women makes female sexuality a burden rather than blessing. It becomes even more depressing to note that Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, is not absolved of allegations of sexual abuse during the war. Kainene alleges that Ojukwu labels his opponents as saboteurs and incarcerates “the men whose wives he wants” (Adichie, 2006:313). The dire consequences of the Biafra war on women and young girls ranging, as earlier discussed, from rape and sexual predation to the violation and evisceration of

pregnant women, is thereby exaggerated by the implication of the Biafra leader in similar sexual war crimes.

Father Marcel, a priest who sexually molests the starving young girls at the refugee camp perpetrates the most hypocritical incident of sexual abuse in the novel. Father Marcel “fucks most of them before he gives them crayfish” (Adichie, 2006:398) and ends up impregnating one of the young girls named Urenwa. Enraged by Father Marcel’s despicable actions, Kainene attacks him and his colleague, Father Jude, who is apparently an accessory in his deeds, and asks them “how could you stay here and let him spread the legs of starving girls? How will you account for this to your God?” (Adichie, 2006:398). The sexual abuse of under-age girls by the priest is more devastating because in such times of conflict faith becomes the only source of hope, and people hold onto it as a means of grappling with their realities. Therefore, Father Marcel and his likes who renege on their roles of spiritual guidance and sexually exploit young girls strip them not only of their human dignity but also of their faith in God and humanity.

In furtherance of her feminist excoriation of sexual violence, Adichie narrates the brutal gang rape of the bar girl by a group of soldiers, briefly touched upon in chapter three, in order to decry what Brenna Munro (2016:22) refers to “militarized masculinity”. This ‘militarized masculinity’ is embodied in the text by Ugwu who, having witnessed and repudiated sexual violence against women and the devastating effects on the victims in the past, turns around to become a perpetrator himself. Adichie’s depiction of the scene of the rape in graphic details intensely configures its grittiness in the mind of the reader:

the bar girl was lying on her back on the floor, her wrapper bunched up at her waist, her shoulders held down by a soldier, her legs wide, wide ajar. She was sobbing, ‘Please, please, biko.’ Her blouse was still on. Between her legs, High-Tech was moving. His thrusts were jerky, his small buttocks darker-colored than his legs. The soldiers were cheering. ‘High-Tech, enough! Discharge and retire!’ High-Tech groaned before he collapsed on top of her [...] the girl was still. Ugwu pulled his trousers down, surprised at the swiftness of his erection. She was dry and tense when he entered her. He did not look at her face, or at the man pinning her down, or at anything at all as he moved quickly and felt his own climax, the rush of fluids to the tips of himself: a self-loathing release. He

zipped up his trousers while some soldiers clapped. Finally he looked at the girl. She stared back at him with a calm hate (Adichie, 2006:365).

Besides the “self-loathing” seminal release at the end of his forced coital act, another immediate anti-climax Ugwu is confronted with is the piercing stare of “calm hate” from the girl, which, according to the gender and sexuality studies critic, Brenna Munro “provides a salutary reminder of the resistant subjectivity of the victimized women in these war dramas” (2016:130). Several months after the hideous act, Ugwu is haunted by nightmarish replays of the scene after which he wakes up “hating the image and hating himself” (Adichie, 2006:397) and continues to feel “stained and unworthy” (Adichie, 2006:398). He constantly fights the restless sense of apprehension brewing ceaselessly within him, one that keeps him wondering about what Kainene would say, what she would “do to him, feel about him, if she ever knew about the girl in the bar. She would loathe him. So would Olanna. And so would Eberechi” (Adichie, 2006:399). To emphasise her resentment of sexual violence, Adichie uses Ugwu as a microcosm for other perpetrators through a reversal of the gendered-violent situation. On returning home to his family after the war Ugwu learns that his younger sister Anulika was gang-raped just like his own victim by a group of five soldiers who upon her resistance “nearly beat her to death”(Adichie, 2006:421) leaving her blind in one eye. After the revelation of his sister’s brutal sexual violation, which left indelible scars on her mind and body, Ugwu is terribly heartbroken and overcome with grief. Adichie deliberately positions Ugwu at the receiving end of sexual assault and its accompanying trauma so that he feels the devastating effects of rape from the victim’s perspective and bears the full consequential brunt of his actions.

Whereas most cases of sexual violence and assault against women are clearly defined and easily identifiable by the presence of coercion and physical dominance, there are also instances in which there is an encroachment upon women’s sexual spaces without them being necessarily under physical pressure. In such situations, the crux of the matter lies between the blurry boundaries of consent and choice versus coercion and domination. As complicating as this may

seem, the complexities that border on the blurry lines between sexual desire, consent, and enjoyment on the one hand and sexual assault on the other form a prominent issue of feminist concern. Adichie touches on this sensitive issue of gray areas of consent and violation in *Americanah* through her depiction of events centring on the character of Ifemelu.

During her early days in Philadelphia, after several failed attempts at job seeking and in dire desperation for some sort of financial security, Ifemelu responds to an advertisement for a “female personal assistant for a busy sports coach in Ardmore” (Adichie, 2013:153). Unfortunately, Ifemelu finds herself in the volatile situation of having to offer non-penetrative sexually gratifying services to the coach. When Ifemelu avers that she can’t have sex with him he informs her that he doesn’t expect her to and assures her that he is only in need of warmth and “some human contact to relax” (Adichie, 2013:153). Ifemelu is unsure of what to do next as she also nurses the fear of what he would do if she were to resist or attempt to leave. Therefore, when he invites her into his bed she reveals that there was in his expression and tone

a complete assuredness; she felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted. She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened. He had not forced her. She had come here on her own. She had lain on his bed, and when he placed her hand between his legs, she had curled and moved her fingers. Now, even after she had washed her hands, holding the crisp, slender hundred-dollar bill he had given her, her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her (Adichie, 2013:154).

Due to the clear absence of forceful domination or coercion it is difficult to categorise Ifemelu’s encounter with the sports coach as coercive penetrative rape. However, her vulnerability under the circumstance and fact that “the power balance was tilted in his favor, had been tilted in his favor since she walked into his house” (Adichie, 2013:153), places her experience in the blurry zone of sexual violation. Arguably, consent without desire does not qualify as consent, especially when there is an underlying element of pressure, a sense of obligation, or power imbalance such as in Ifemelu’s case. Therefore, irrespective of her acquiescence in the situation, after her

encounter with the coach, Ifemelu suffers a deep sense of self-disillusionment. She feels violated, and consequently she disintegrates into a phase of depression. Years later, while narrating her experience to Obinze, she tells him: “I couldn’t believe that I got wet. I hated him, I hated myself. I really hated myself. I felt like I had, I don’t know, betrayed myself” (Adichie, 2013:439). Although some readers may argue against the logicity of Ifemelu’s self-loathing because she did not put up a strong resistance to the coach’s sexual suggestions, that would amount to plain rape apologism. The point remains that the non-assertion or exploration of female sexuality which is characterised by free-will and conscious consenting is not a problem; it only becomes a feminist issue when there is an imbalance of power or a characteristic blurriness of intention and psychological manipulation as in Ifemelu’s case. To fully foreground the difference between non-consensual female sexuality as has been discussed extensively in this section, the next section examines the prioritisation of wilful female sexual agency and autonomy by the women in Adichie’s novels.

#### **4.6 The reversal of female sexual roles and prioritisation of female sexuality**

The systematic silencing and shaming of expressive female sexuality is a patriarchal mechanism for keeping women in subjugation and an issue of feminist concern in Africa. In her novels, Adichie repudiates the traditional reticence and usual squeamishness surrounding the graphic representation and discussion of sex and female sexuality in African literature. She redefines female sexuality by portraying female characters who define their own erotic needs on their own terms and frame not only the pace of their sensuality but also the course of their love relationships. The female characters in the novels are assertive enough to express their sexual needs and own their sexual agency.

In *Purple hibiscus*, Adichie subtly expresses the young Kambili’s desire to consummate sexual intimacy with Father Amadi. Kambili finds the Reverend erotically attractive and yearns sexually for him. Watching him drink water from a bottle she fantasises that she is the water

“going into him, to be with him” (Adichie, 2004:227). She also boldly confesses that she could feel “liquid fire” (Adichie, 2004:174) raging inside her whenever she is in his presence. Unfortunately, the farthest Father Amadi can reciprocate is by touching her affectionately, running his fingers over her loosening braids in gentle, smoothing motions. Even then, Kambili notes that “he was looking right into my eyes. He was too close. His touch was so light I wanted to push my head toward him, to feel the pressure of his hand. I wanted to press his hand to my head, my belly, so he could feel the warmth that coursed through me” (Adichie, 2004:227). Father Amadi’s caresses only serve to heighten her desires. However, in spite of the erotic tension between them, they succeed in keeping their relationship platonic. Their sexual desires remain unrequited because of Father Amadi’s priestly oath of celibacy but most importantly because Kambili is only sixteen at the time and yet to attain the age of consent. As such, she lacks autonomy especially with regard to being sexually active.

Due to the intense emotional bond between Kambili and Father Amadi, her cousins refuse to believe that they are not having sex. Amaka refers to Kambili as “father Amadi’s sweetheart” and she jokingly suggests to Kambili “maybe when we are in the university you will join me in agitating for optional celibacy in the priesthood? Or maybe fornication should be permitted all priests once in a while. Say, once a month?” (Adichie, 2004:281). While Amaka’s suggestion is unrealistic at the least, Adichie accentuates the possibility of an emotionally fortified love relationship in which there is mutual respect and dignity but an absence of sex.

When Kambili audaciously confesses her love for Father Amadi he astutely replies “you are almost sixteen, Kambili. You are beautiful. You will find more love than you will need in a lifetime” (Adichie, 2004:276). Rather than take advantage of her, Father Amadi respects her, understands her state of juvenile sexual vulnerability and considers her under-age status. Instead, he convinces Kambili that she has her whole life ahead of her and she will find love when the time is right. Although he is unable to reciprocate Kambili’s sexual gestures she succeeds in

breaking out of her father's patriarchal mould, debunking his suppression of her sexuality and expressing her sexual agency.

In a similar manner, Olanna is the first to approach Odenigbo when they meet for the first time at the university theatre. Olanna instantly finds Odenigbo's objectiveness intriguing and she is attracted to him. So, rather than wait for him to woo her in the traditional boy-meets-girl fashion, she takes the initiative and introduces herself to him. Afterwards, she reveals that "it was the boldest thing she had ever done, and the first time she had demanded attention from a man" (Adichie, 2006:29). In addition, when she visits Odenigbo for the first time in his house in Nsukka, while eavesdropping at his master's bedroom door, Ugwu notes that Olanna "was moaning loudly, sounds that seemed so unlike her, so uncontrolled and stirring and throaty" (Adichie, 2006:25). Apart from Olanna's uninhibited expression of her sexual desire, she is confident enough to offer Odenigbo public displays of affection, which earn her the nickname of the "distracting Aphrodite" (Adichie, 2006:26). Similarly, on Ifemelu's first date with Obinze in *Americanah* she startles him by asking "aren't we going to kiss?" (Adichie, 2013:62). Afterwards, she admits to Obinze that the kiss "was enjoyable, almost heady; it was nothing like her ex-boyfriend Mofe, whose kisses she had thought too salivary, a salivary fumbling" (Adichie, 2013:62). The first time Ifemelu and Obinze are intimately involved and sexually sated she confesses to him "my eyes were open but I did not see the ceiling. This has never happened before" (Adichie, 2013:65). Obinze deems Ifemelu's forthrightness captivating and appreciates her assertive sexual agency. He confirms that she is different and unpretentious, unlike other girls who would have assumed hypocritical chastity and even pretend that they had never let another boy touch them. By representing female characters who are direct about their sexuality and openly express their sexual agency, Adichie overturns the traditional squeamishness and shame ascribed to African female sexuality.

Regarding the demystification of the silence and taboo associated with female sexual desire and enjoyment, in *Half of a yellow sun* and *Americanah* Adichie portrays the multi-faceted qualities of sex. She lucidly depicts sex, but not just for the sake of sex. Rather, it embodies a characteristic that varies in accordance with the role of the sexual act and the emotional disposition of the characters at the time of the act. In variance with the depiction of sex in male literature, the female characters are active desirers, givers, as well as receivers in Adichie's novels. For example, the therapeutic benefits of healthy female sexual activeness are exemplified in *Americanah* when Blaine and Paul remark about Marcia's youthful glow and agelessness and demand to know what her secret elixir is. In response, she and her husband Benny say "our secret is good sex" (Adichie, 2013:323). Apart from its power rejuvenation, Adichie explores the notion of sex as a therapeutic activity. For instance, after Olanna's horrific experience of the butchering of her uncle's family in Kano during the onset of the war, she suffers a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder and loses temporary use of legs. In a bid to facilitate her recovery, she resorts to sexual healing. The first day she regains the use of her legs Olanna feels a surge of sexual desire and pleads with Odenigbo to "touch her":

she knew he didn't want to, that he touched her breasts because he would do whatever she wanted, whatever would make her better and when he slid into her, she thought about Arize's pregnant belly, how easily it must have broken, skin stretched that taut. She started to cry. 'Nkem, don't cry.' Odenigbo had stopped; he was lying next to her and smoothing her forehead. Later, when he gave her more pills and some water, she took them dutifully and then lay back and waited for the strange stillness they brought (Adichie, 2006:160).

Although what is pictured in the above scene is the healing power of loving sex, Zoe Norridge rightly asserts that it is "related to the traumatic imaginary associated with sexual violence" (2012:27). This is because, as Norridge indicates, Olanna identifies with "Arize through the act of intercourse" (2012:27) and "through Odenigbo's tenderness she is able to access a sense of the sadness, the horror of her cousin's probable rape, mutilation, and death" (2012:28). The aftermath of the sexual intercourse is a resultant speedy recovery from the lived trauma.

Similarly, Richard and Kainene engage in frequent copulation as a way of coping with the psychological trauma of the war. Every evening they would go out to the veranda and “he would push the table aside and spread out the soft rug and lie on his naked back. When she climbed astride, he would hold her hips and stare up at the night sky and, for those moments, be sure of the meaning of bliss. It was their new ritual since the war started, the only reason he was grateful for the war” (Adichie, 2006:307). In this case, sex takes on a liberating character: it becomes not just sex for its own sake but “a haven, a space for joy in the midst of tragedy” (Norridge, 2012:28).

During Olanna’s brooding phase when she and Odenigbo are optimistic about the possibility of pregnancy, their lovemaking sessions assume a ritualistic quality. As a result, “each time, after he slipped out of her, she pressed her legs together, crossed them at her ankles, and took deep breaths, as if the movement of her lungs would urge conception on” (Adichie, 2006:107). After Odenigbo cheats on Olanna with Amala and she reciprocates by sleeping with Richard, they meet to reconcile their differences. Moved by Odenigbo’s defencelessness Olanna negotiates peace by offering him fellatio:

She knelt down before him and unbuttoned his shirt to suck the soft-firm flesh of his belly. She felt his intake of breath when she touched his trousers zipper. In her mouth, he was swollen stiff. The faint ache in her lower jaw, the pressure of his widespread hands on her head, excited her, and afterwards [...] they undressed silently and showered together, pressing against each other in the narrow bathroom and then clinging together in bed, their bodies still wet and their movements slow. She marveled at the comforting compactness of his weight on top of her (Adichie, 2006:246).

Besides the portrayal of sex as therapy, a means of strengthening emotional bonds, and an act of procreation, sex is also epitomised in Adichie’s novels as an act of pleasure. For example, Richard observes that the expatriates living in Nigeria “have sex with one another’s wives and husbands, illicit couplings that were more a way of passing heat-blanching time in the tropics than they were genuine expressions of passion” (Adichie, 2013:237). In this instance, sex is impassive and for the fulfilment of basic random erotic desires.

Contrary to portraying her female characters as passive givers and non-recipients of sexual pleasure, Adichie reverses the traditional subservient sexual roles assigned to women in relationships and validates the importance of mutual sexual gratification for women. She suggests that female orgasms are to be experienced and that they equally deserve to be subjects of research to enlighten people about female sexuality. In *Americanah* she introduces the character Hannah who “is completing her PhD on the female orgasm, or the Israeli female orgasm” (Adichie, 2013:269). Describing the power of female orgasms in *Half of a yellow sun*, Olanna says “she did not know that a man’s thrusts could suspend memory that it was possible to be poised in a place where she could not think or remember but only feel” (Adichie, 2006:29). In a similar illustration of women’s increasing ability to speak about their sexual desires and assertion of their right to sexual satisfaction, while having a girly chat, Olanna and Alice openly discuss their sexual relationships. Alice bemoans the sexual incompetence of her ex-lover saying that “he would jump on top of me, moan oh-oh-oh like a goat, and that was it” (Adichie, 2006:335). By describing how her ex, tactlessly and self-indulgently humps away on her without taking her desires and satisfaction into consideration, Alice underscores the typical disregard of female sexual desire in patriarchal relationships. To complete her displeasure towards the issue at hand, she raises her finger mockingly in demonstration to Olanna and says “with something this small. And afterwards he would smile happily without ever wondering if I had known when he started and stopped” (Adichie, 2006:335). Olanna on the other happily gushes “my husband knows how to do, and with something like this” (Adichie, 2006:335) and in illustration of the size of Odenigbo’s manhood, unlike the small finger which defines Alice’s ex, she raises a clenched fist. The absolute absence of shame between the two women discussing their sexual experiences elucidates Zoe Norridge’s assertion in her analysis of sex and violence in Adichie’s *Half of a yellow sun* and Aminatta Forna’s *Memory of love* that “there is no sense of shame in such descriptions. Instead, what is foregrounded is a matched desire, an equality of orgasm, reciprocity of sensation” (2012:28). In *Americanah*, Ifemelu affirms, for example, that “it was

indeed true that because of a male, your stomach could tighten up and refuse to unknot itself, your body's joints could unhinge, your limbs fail to move to music, and all effortless things suddenly become leaden" (Adichie, 2013:58). Adichie further represents the sex between Ifemelu and Obinze as a delightful experience that ends in feet tingling orgasms. For instance, although Ifemelu "always thought the expression 'making love' a little maudlin", lying next to Obinze after sex, "her body suffused with peace, she thought how apt it was", because "there was an awakening even in her nails, and in those parts of her body that had always been numb" (Adichie, 2013:447).

Clearly, Adichie refutes the idea of sex as something a woman gives a man for his satisfaction either as a duty or as an item of exchange. She redefines it as an act of mutual consent and gratification. Again in *Americanah*, sex assumes a complementary dynamic: it is a 'give and give' rather than a 'give and receive' activity for both participants. When Ifemelu comes clean to Curt about her infidelity with Rob and seeks his forgiveness, he angrily tells her off, saying "you gave him what he wanted" (Adichie, 2013:288). Amidst her feeling of guilt, Ifemelu finds it an odd thing for Curt to say: it was after all "the sort of thing Aunty Uju, who thought of sex as something a woman gave a man at a loss to herself, would say. In a sudden giddy fit of recklessness, she corrected Curt. 'I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental'" (Adichie, 2013:288). Ifemelu instantaneously challenges the notion of sex as an exclusively one-dimensional beneficial act with the woman at the losing end. Instead, she redefines this view by asserting sex as a mutually beneficial act between two consenting adult individuals.

In contrast to Adichie's other female characters, Obinze sadly observes that when Kosi snuggles close to him in sexual enticement it is usually not as "a statement of her desire, her caressing his chest and reaching down to take his penis in her hand, but a votive offering" (Adichie, 2013:461). Kosi views sex as nothing but a nuptial obligation she owes Obinze, and a means of

procreation. She deems the fulfilment of her personal sensual and emotional desires as inessential. In fact, she makes it clear that her primary reason for engaging in lovemaking with Obinze is solely that she wants to “start seriously trying for a son” (Adichie, 2013:461). Due to her myopic views and sexual inexpressiveness Kosi is insecure and fearful of other women who seem to be more sexually overt, such as her unmarried woman friends who she constantly suspects may snatch her husband. Consequently, despite his admission that is an unfair thing to do, after his reunion with Ifemelu, Obinze distinguishes between both women’s expression of their sexuality:

Ifemelu demanded of him. ‘No, don’t come yet, I’ll kill you if you come,’ she would say, or ‘No, baby, don’t move,’ then she would dig into his chest and move at her own rhythm, and when finally she arched her back and let out a sharp cry, he felt accomplished to have satisfied her. She expected to be satisfied, but Kosi did not. Kosi always met his touch with complaisance, and sometimes he would imagine her pastor telling her that a wife should have sex with her husband, even if she didn’t feel like it, otherwise the husband would find solace in a Jezebel (Adichie, 2013:462).

While Kosi remains stoic in her sexual ineptness, seeing sex only as a nuptial duty, she ironically accuses Obinze of wanting to leave her for Ifemelu because of the “acrobatic sex” (Adichie, 2013:464) they share. By mentioning the pastor’s doctrinal sermons of sex as a female duty to her husband, Adichie forthrightly criticises the subtle ways in which religious teachings contribute to the subjugation of women and the repression of female sexuality. Besides the restriction of female sexual expression under restrictive codes of virtuousness, she also denounces the demonization and labelling of sexually expressive women as jezebels.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

This chapter set out to examine the treatment of thematic issues of feminine sexual concerns in Adichie’s literary oeuvre and how she, as a feminist writer, overturns the taboos and shame associated with South African female sexuality and women’s biological configurations. As the African feminist critic Desiree Lewis rightly observes, “although much scholarship dwells on the misrepresentation of the African female, there is a relative paucity of work on the African

women's sexual pleasure: far fewer writers have constructed women's sexuality in relation to desire and sexual autonomy" (2011:206). In this regard, Adichie has succeeded in defying the norm by positively reversing the narrative through a conscious infusion of sexual autonomy in her female characters.

Despite the silence surrounding the overt representation of female sexuality in African literature, it constitutes part of female and human existence and Adichie demonstrates this in her novels. She disrupts the silence that surrounds female sexuality and female reproductive health issues by highlighting feminine issues like menstruation, hormonal imbalance and female orgasm in the novels. She further demystifies female sexual desire, and participation by investing female characters like Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Olanna in *Half of a yellow sun* with an assertive and expressive sexual agency. She does this by portraying female sexual pleasure and desire as natural aspects of humanity. In a similar vein, she also reverses the patriarchal distorted idealisation of female sexuality as a one-sided affair beneficial to men alone. Furthermore, as the novels show, Adichie repudiates the systematic suppression of female sexuality, demystifies tabooed subjects like paraphilias and non-heteronormative sexuality as an avenue for women to reclaim their own bodies and their rights to healthy and fulfilling sexual experiences.

This aspect of her feminist enterprise has been met with stiff objection by male critics like Abdulrazak Gurnah (2007) who argues that the "powerful thrust" of *Half of yellow sun* is "dissipated by a melodramatic domestic plot of half-hearted sexual transgressions" and indicates that "the book could have done with less souping-up". In contrast to this opinion the analyses above show that Norridge's observation is closer to the truth: that by asserting her female characters' "right to sexual pleasure alongside their right to refuse" (2012:35) and by juxtaposing the depictions of consensual desire and sex with episodes of female sexual violation, Adichie succinctly succeeds in pointing out that "the person who is violated in no way desires the violation, and is in no way complicit with her or his own rape" (2012:28). Since sexual violence

and the objectification of female sexuality remain issues of feminist concern, Adichie's treatment of these themes sensitises the reader and instils feminist empathy in them.

It is important with a view to the complexity of Adichie's achievement to note that the idea underscored in her fictional treatment of sex and female sexuality is not simply that of sexual defiance. Rather, it implicates the necessity for a disassociation of shame and secrecy from something as natural, human, and wholesome as sexuality, and challenges the patriarchal use of sexual morality and suppression as a tool of silencing female agency. This chapter concludes that by engaging in an overt yet subtle and non-didactic appraisal of sexuality and relationship issues as they affect the contemporary African woman, Adichie has opened up fertile ground for further literary excursions and conversations about African female sexuality.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN ADICHIE'S FICTION

#### 5.1 Introduction

The erroneous assumption that feminists are overly aggressive man-haters is a rather unfortunate view that estranges many men and women from fully understanding and participating in the true goal of feminism, which is gender equality. A true African feminist is someone who, irrespective of their gender, recognises the need for a change in the status of women and acknowledges that men, as much as women, are trapped by the patriarchal roles dictated by society.

For example, while patriarchy privileges men, it also stifles them by imposing upon them the false expectations of masculinity and power. These socio-cultural designations of roles and exaggeration of strength as a solely masculine characteristic make men as much victims of patriarchy as women. In her fiction, as has been amply illustrated in the preceding chapters of this dissertation, Adichie portrays a balanced array of male characters and she does not vilify the male figures in her novels. Rather, she presents them as being quintessentially human with flaws and strengths. Though characters such as Eugene in *Purple hibiscus* is an unrepentant abusive father and husband, and Chief Ozobia in *Half of a yellow sun* is a philandering husband who also objectifies his daughters as sex baits for money, Adichie does not antagonise the entire male population based on the foibles of a few. There are other gender-sensitive and sympathetic male characters like Obinze in *Americanah*, Odenigbo and Richard in *Half of a yellow sun*, and Father Amadi, Nnakwanze, Obiora and Jaja in *Purple hibiscus*. The final chapter examines how Adichie upholds gender complementarity in tune with the African feminist agenda as a tool for rebuilding the future of gender relations through the representation of mutual respect, love, and dignity between the male characters and their female counterparts. First, the chapter focuses on

the portrayal of gender-sensitive, male feminists in the three novels. Then the focus shifts to how Adichie posits resocialisation as a means to gender complementarity in her novels. Finally, it examines the balancing act of gender representation as is found in the three novels under the tripartite aspects of: how patriarchy burdens men as much as women, how women contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal structures. Lastly, the chapter closes with a practical exploration of Adichie's portrayal of gender complementarity in *Half of a yellow sun*.

## **5.2 Epitomising feminist empathy: male feminists in Adichie's fiction**

In her 2013 TEDTalk, Adichie argues that if the goals of gender equality are to be achieved then 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 a woman in undeserved suffering. It comes to fruition when we switch perspective with a woman experiencing unfairness, injustice, or oppression because of her gender” (2015:2). 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” (2015:9). 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. As the exponent of African womanism, Mary Kolawole, aptly observes concerning the depiction of men in African women’s literature:

the average African woman is not a hater of men; nor does she seek to build a wall around her gender across which she throws ideological missiles. She desires self-respect, an active role, dynamic participation in all areas of social development, and dignity alongside men (1997:36).

Adichie indeed also presents positive male characters who are exemplary models of alternative masculinity or what the 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 masculinist status quo.

In *Americanah*, the male protagonist Obinze is not only compassionate and accommodating, but he is a practical embodiment of the concept of feminist empathy. For example, when Ifemelu narrates her ordeal with the sports coach to Obinze, he listens to her silently and attentively. In response he embraces her and empathetically tells her: “I can’t imagine how bad you must have felt, and how alone. You should have told me. I so wish you had told me” (Adichie, 2013:326). Likewise, Obinze fumes with exasperation when Kosi angrily fires their newly hired maid having accused her of wanting to become a prostitute in her house after she discovers some

condoms in her luggage. This is in spite of the girl's piteous disclosure that her previous employer's husband used to always "force himself on her" (Adichie, 2013:34) and her explanation that she only has possession of the condoms as a precautionary measure. One would expect that, being a woman, Kosi would relate easily to the psychological and physical trauma of enduring successive sexual abuse as a domestic worker from one's employer. However, the reverse is the case. Whilst Kosi fails to empathise with the young girl's plight and commend her for taking initiative for the responsibility of her sexual and reproductive health it is Obinze, a man, who sincerely "felt sorry for the girl, and wondered how Kosi couldn't" (Adichie, 2013:34).

Obinze's defiance of sexist behaviour is quite commendable. In the early days of Obinze's relationship with Ifemelu, he is castigated by his friends for not upholding the patriarchal concept of male superiority in his relationship. Because of the mutual respect and complementary stance their relationship assumes his friends call him "woman wrapper" (Adichie, 2013:63). Once, as he and his friends talk about meeting after school to play football one of them asks: "has Ifemelu given you permission to come?" (Adichie, 2013:63).

In line with patriarchal socialisation, when a man is openly affectionate towards a woman and respects her opinions he is branded a woman's pawn or, as mentioned, "woman wrapper", as it is called in Nigerian social parlance. The mutual respect Obinze and Ifemelu share earns him the derogatory tag, which is meant as a slight and a way of redirecting him towards a more forceful assertion of masculinity. Here we have a demonstration of toxic masculinity.

Obinze also deviates from the normative construct of masculinity according to which men claim entitlement to polygynous relationships. He refuses to keep his wife in oblivion of his extramarital affair, as most men would, while stringing Ifemelu along as his mistress or side chick. Instead, he honestly tells Kosi about his long-enduring emotional detachment from their marriage, informs her about his decision to be with Ifemelu, opts for a divorce, and at the same

time takes full responsibility for the welfare of their child. Even then, in his usual conscientious and empathetic manner a multi-layered guilt “weighed him down, guilt not only for wanting to leave Kosi, but for having married her at all” (Adichie, 2013:464) and for contemplating to leave her after having a child together.

Similarly, while visiting his cousin, Nicholas, and his wife, Ojiugo, Obinze is appalled by how Nicholas speaks to his wife “in the same tone as he spoke to his children” reprimanding her with his children and shooing them out of his study in a collective swipe: “you people have scattered my study. Now please leave my study, all of you” (Adichie, 2013:239). Obinze is sensitive enough to recognise the weight that the drudgery of domesticity places on Ojiugo. He empathises with her and wholeheartedly assists her with some domestic chores (Adichie, 2013:243). He also offers her a listening ear when she decides to rant about her experiences with the children and her weight watching travails.

Unlike most men who are adherents of the patriarchal predilection for male children, while his wife expresses regret about birthing a girl-child, Obinze remains genuinely “indifferent about the gender of their child” (Adichie, 2013:458). In fact, Obinze is aware that the replication of gendered socialisation is the cause of a generative cycle of women like his wife, Kosi, who compliantly succumb to socio-cultural gender performativity. Therefore, it bothers him when his daughter, Buchi, following in her mother’s conformist steps, screams “Amen! with that delight, that gusto, Obinze feared she would grow up to be a woman who, with that word “amen,” would squash the questions she wanted to ask of the world” (Adichie, 2013:464). He fears that if his daughter continues to grow under his wife’s guidance she might turn out to be as uninspiring and passive as her mother.

Regardless of society’s criticism of men who are gender-sympathetic and their being labelled as emasculated or effeminate men, Obinze does not see his complementary attitude as being effeminate. Rather he prides himself as a paragon of new, equal coexistence between men and

women. In an interview with Synne Ruberg, Adichie affirms that Obinze is a representation of “what I think all men should be. He is kind, and he is thoughtful, and he is intelligent and he listens” (2014). Although there may exist in reality a number of feminist men like Obinze the above assertion by Adichie is a plea for more men, in fact all men, to be more empathetic and gender-sensitive.

Another male character in *Americanah* who exemplifies gender complementarity and feminist empathy is Boubacar, a Senegalese professor at Yale. Boubacar plays a vital role in shaping Ifemelu’s life through his motivations and genuine friendship. Although Ifemelu is passing through a psychological phase, when she meets Boubacar, he encourages her to further her academic career by applying for the “new fellowship at Princeton” (Adichie, 2013:340). In spite of her pessimism about the possibility of being considered for such a prestigious position, Boubacar persistently prods her on, saying that “they want people who are doing new things, pushing boundaries. You must apply, and please use me as reference. We need to get into these places, you know. It is the only way to change the conversation” (Adichie, 2013:340).

Additionally, he invites her to attend his seminars on contemporary African issues with the view of broadening her scope and possibly gathering materials to boost her blogs output. By showing genuine concern about her growth as an individual and actively propelling Ifemelu’s career advancement, Boubacar represents the new kind of masculinity, one that believes in the social, economic, and intellectual development of women. In a similar manner, Ifemelu’s father also picks particular interest in Aunty Uju as a young girl, even though she is his wife’s sister and not his direct sibling. He recognises that Aunty Uju is “different and too clever to waste away in the backwaters” (Adichie, 2013:53) and so he takes it upon himself to ensure that she reaches her potential by sponsoring her education until she graduates with a degree in medicine.

Ifemelu’s father also demonstrates feminist empathy in the manner in which he treats his wife’s extreme Pentecostalism. In spite of being “an agnostic respecter of religion” and the fact that he

perceives his wife's rowdy prayers as "delusional battles with imaginary traducers" (Adichie, 2013:42) he respects her right to be and her freedom of religion. In demonstration of his solidarity to her, he insists that Ifemelu wake up early to join her mother in prayers reminding her often that it keeps her mother happy (Adichie, 2013:44). Instead of harshly criticising Ifemelu's mother, or victimising her, Ifemelu's father stands by his wife's side showing her compassion and complementarity through her phases of ridiculous religious extremism.

In *Half of a yellow sun*, Adichie also contrasts the portrayal of the philandering and morally unconscionable Chief Ozobia through the representation of feminist men like Olanna's ex-boyfriend, Mohammed, whose "tall slim body and tapering fingers spoke of fragility, gentleness" (Adichie, 2006:44). Despite his bragging "about coming from a lineage of holy warriors, the very avatars of pious masculinity" Mohammed is compassionate and empathetic. For instance, when Olanna reveals her intention to end their relationship, he displays a "disbelieving pain on his face" (Adichie, 2006:45) and contrary to his claims to intergenerational impassive masculine traits he passionately pleads with Olanna to "go ahead and sleep with Odenigbo as long as she did not leave him" (Adichie, 2006:45).

During Olanna's visit to Kano at the onset of the war, after witnessing the brutal massacre of her uncle's family by northern vandals Mohammed demonstrates great bravery and chivalry by risking both their lives and whisking her away from the scene of the violence. He does not act out of the consideration that Olanna jilted him in favour of Odenigbo. Rather he saves her life by a hair's breadth and drives her to the train station ensuring her safety. And in the middle of the war, despite being from the enemy side, Mohammed is sensitive enough to write Olanna letters and even sends her a parcel containing "handkerchiefs, crisp white underwears, bars of Lux soap, and Swiss chocolate" (Adichie, 2006:376). Although Olanna is incensed by the fact that "the patterns of his old life remained in place" and therefore "insulted her reality" (Adichie,

2006:376), Mohammed's thoughtfulness and feminist empathy, especially in his inclusion of items of feminine care in the parcel is remarkable.

In a similar demonstration of feminist empathy, Nnakwanze stands up to his mother in defence of his childless wife, Arize. He interdicts her from visiting their home and orders her to stop bringing "foul-smelling concoctions for Arize to drink in bitter gulps" (Adichie, 2006:130), as has been mentioned. In addition, as soon as Arize falls pregnant, Nnakwanze tries to alleviate her physical stress by working "more overtime at the railway" and asking "her to cut down on her sewing" (Adichie, 2006:130). While visiting the couple Olanna observes that "Nnakwanze was sitting on the floor at Arize's feet, rubbing her belly in light circular motions" and when Arize makes to rise and go to bed Nnakwanze offers "to help Arize up, but she brushed him aside" (Adichie, 2006:130). Nnakwanze's sensitivity to his wife's biological and hormonal needs and the emotional and physical support and love he offers her are at variance with Eugene's "absolutist intolerance of women's biological functions" (Stobie, 2010:427) exhibited, as has been mentioned in chapter four, in his repeated brutalising of his pregnant wife resulting in miscarriages. Adichie presents Nnakwanze's sensitive and empathetic character as worthy of emulation by men to ensure harmonious and peaceful relationships and families.

Conversely, although Adichie portrays Eugene as a paragon of patriarchal monstrosity in *Purple hibiscus*, she does so not as an "unstinting [...] attempt to castrate the males" in her novels as the Nigerian literary critics Chukwuka Nwachukwu and Amaechi UnekeEnyi (2015:45) vitriolically argue but with the aim of feminist conscientisation. For instance, despite Adichie's depiction of Eugene as a compendium of extreme complexities, the Finnish postcolonial/African feminist critic Anna-Leena Toivanen notes that "the narrative refuses to portray him as purely evil" (2013:108). Instead, she represents him "not in an abstract, demonized stereotype but as one tragic element of an otherwise admirable character, a man clearly seeking to do right in many spheres" (Wallace, 2012:471) in a way that "reveals complexities and contradictions in his

character, showing ways in which he is principled, courageous and justly honoured” (Stobie, 2010:425).

As a way of creating a balanced perspective of patriarchal authority in the novel, Adichie represents an alternative figure of positive fatherhood in the character of Father Amadi. In spite of being a spiritual paternal figure and celibate, Father Amadi “truly understands the empathy and patience that are vital for true fatherhood, as opposed to the mere ability to sire offspring” (Olufunwa, 2012:8). These positive paternal traits are reflected in the motivational role he plays in the lives of his young parishioners, especially Kambili, who he steers to self-affirmation and assertiveness.

Furthermore, Adichie portrays feminist empathy and positive masculinity in the two young male characters in the novel, namely Jaja and Obiora. It is important to note that Adichie’s portrayal of these two young men as feminists is deliberate and strategic. Since Jaja and Obiora are to take over the male headship of their families from the regressively patriarchal Eugene and their traditionalist and sexist grandfather, Papa Nnukwu, Adichie imbues them with the qualities of the “new man”— the feminist man. Despite their youth these characters are gender-sympathetic and they positively contribute to the well-being of the women in the narrative in their own little ways. They protect the women from patriarchal injustices. They also respect womanhood and they offer the female characters the emotional support needed to maintain peace and harmony in their respective families. For instance, although Jaja grows up as a victim of his father’s tyranny and abuse, he exhibits a deep sense of respect towards his mother, Beatrice, and his sister, Kambili. Having experienced first-hand the devastating effects of his father’s violence on his mother and sister, Jaja conscientiously makes the decision to be a better man than his father was. During an episode of violence in the novel, when Eugene throws the Missal at Jaja for not participating in the holy Eucharist and it narrowly misses him and shatters his mother’s figurines on the *étagère*, Jaja shows Beatrice solidarity by assisting her to pick the broken pieces of

figurines from the floor (Adichie, 2004:9). Although Jaja is incapacitated to take any cogent action against his father's violence and abuse, when he discovers that his mother is pregnant again, he expresses his concern for the unborn baby and vows to protect it from Eugene's cruelty. He solemnly tells Kambili "we will take care of the baby; we will protect him" (Adichie, 2004:23). Similarly, during their holiday at Nsukka, Jaja observes Obiora's supportiveness towards Auntie Ifeoma and he retrospectively regrets his own inaction against Papa's tyranny. With great remorse, he tells Kambili: "I should have taken care of Mama. Look at how Obiora balances Auntie Ifeoma's family on his head, and I am older than he is. I should have taken care of Mama" (Adichie, 2004:289). This heartfelt yearning to protect his mother and sister from their father's brutality propels him to take responsibility for the death of Eugene. Jaja is incarcerated in place of his mother for Eugene's murder. By deciding to save his mother from the mortifying experiences of prison life after the life of trauma she has already lived through in her marriage, Jaja demonstrates overwhelming feminist empathy. In appreciation and acknowledgement of Jaja's selflessness, Kambili declares, "my hero, the brother who tried always to protect me the best he could. He will never think that he did enough, and he will never understand that I do not think he should have done more" (Adichie, 2004:305).

These male feminists recognise the contingency of a contemporary society where dominant and toxic masculine attitudes are no longer acceptable. They are respectful in their relationships with women and oppose exploitative and oppressive gender relations. They demonstrate a genuine desire to help women realise their potential. Furthermore, they take it upon themselves to motivate women towards self-actualisation and empowerment. This commitment to change in relationships between men and women is a necessary step towards the transformation of social gender relations in African societies. Because it is more productive to instil ideals into the youth, the next section examines how Adichie propounds gender-balanced socialisation and re-socialisation in her novels as a means to achieve gender complementarity.

### 5.3 Resocialisation as a means to gender complementarity

The African feminist agitation for gender equality through literary representation is a worthy cause because, although issues of gender mostly affect women, they also affects men. So, if a redefinition of the status of African women is attained, it would be to the advantage of all humanity. Moreover, because human beings are social beings and issues of gender are socially constructed all, human beings, whether male or female, also internalise gendered ideas and notions through socialisation. Therefore, to achieve change in gender relations there has to be a re-evaluation of the deeply entrenched patriarchal gender norms through resocialisation. As Adichie (2013) rightly states:

Gender matters everywhere in the world, but I want to focus on Nigeria and on Africa in general, because it is where I know and because it is where my heart is. And I would like today to ask that we begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves. And this is how to start. We must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently.

Since the socialisation of human beings begins in infancy within the social structures of the home, to efficiently demolish gender chasms it is imperative that resocialisation should begin from the family unit to the outer society. This begins with raising children with a focus on their interests and abilities rather than their biological constitution and the societal dictates pertaining to that. In view of this, in *Purple hibiscus*, Adichie deconstructs the designation of exclusive gender roles and advocates an inclusive and non-gendered upbringing where girls and boys are equally equipped with skills that are crucial for their survival without the delineation of roles along gender lines. For example, Auntie Ifeoma consciously raises her children to become gender-sensitive and complimentary individuals. She defies the patriarchal exclusivity of roles according to sexes by incorporating every member of her family in all forms of chores. Kambili recounts that “the flat always sparkled. Amaka scrubbed the floors with a stiff brush, Obiora did the sweeping, and Chima plumped up the cushions on the chairs. Everybody took turns washing plates. Auntie Ifeoma included Jaja and me in the plate-washing schedule” (Adichie, 2004:140).

By engaging both the boys and girls in diverse types of domestic chores Auntie Ifeoma is depicted as an exemplar of inclusive and holistic socialisation. Adichie extols Auntie Ifeoma's nurturing skills because she fosters mutual respect, unity, complementarity of the sexes and resourcefulness among all the children. Kambili describes the manner in which Ifeoma looks at her children while they liberally chatter away as a "proud-coach-watching-the-team way" (Adichie, 2004:132). Ifeoma is proud to raise children who are not only academically vibrant but who are also confident, independent, socio-psychologically grounded, and gender-sensitive. This revolutionary manner of gender-balanced socialisation is reiterated in *Americanah* by the way Obinze's mother raises her son. Ifemelu notes that "they cooked together, his mother stirring the soup, Obinze making the garri" (Adichie, 2013:69). She further observes that because of her non-gendered style of upbringing Obinze's mother "had taught her son the ability to be, even in the middle of a crowd, somehow comfortably inside himself" (Adichie, 2013:70). This "ability to be" is evident in the roundedness of Obinze's personality. He is not attuned to conforming gender expectations and is unperturbed by false ideas of masculinity. The following section explores how Adichie adheres to and infuses the African feminist principles of gender-balanced representation in her novels as a means to gender complementarity.

#### **5.4 The 'balancing' act of gender representation in Adichie's novels**

Fundamentally, in theory and praxis, African feminism "seeks to combine African concerns with feminist concerns" and in doing that it requires "a sort of balancing act where women's own issues along with a common struggle with African men against imperialism is important" (Davies & Graves, 1986:12). In other words, as the Nigerian feminist critic Ijeoma Nwajiaku puts it, "in the African woman's quest for a positive and wholesome definition of womanhood and empowerment, the African male is not excluded" (2004:56). The discourse of feminism, especially in the African context, cannot be considered successful without a balanced representation of how patriarchy and gender affects both men and women. Adichie exemplifies

this balancing act in diverse ways across her three novels. Firstly, she highlights the burden of gender expectations on men. Secondly, she examines the flipside of gender discrimination with women as the oppressors. Finally, Adichie examines the centrality of harmonious existence between men and women in familial settings. Each of these interrelated aspects of the balancing act will subsequently come into focus in the following sections.

The first way Adichie exemplifies gender-balanced representation in her novels is through her examination of the burden of masculinity on men. Although the crux of Adichie's literary agenda is aimed at positive and reformist feminist conscientisation, she does not stop at examining women's resistance against patriarchy and interrogating issues of feminine concerns. In uniformity with African feminist ideals, she highlights the struggles of men in their attempt to navigate through societal constructs of masculinity. This aspect of representing a balanced narrativization of gender is imperative because, as the prominent feminist critic Elaine Showalter rightly asserts, "masculinity is no more natural, transparent, and unproblematic than femininity. It, too, is a socially constructed role, defined within particular cultural and historical circumstances" (Showalter, 1990:8). Adichie herself argues in her 2013 TEDtalk that we do a great disservice to boys

in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity becomes this hard small cage and we put boys inside the cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves because they have to be, in Nigerian- speak, hard man. [...] But by far the worst thing we do to males, by making them feel that they have to be hard, is that we leave them with very fragile egos. The more "hard man" a man feels compelled to be, the weaker his ego is. And then we do a much greater disservice to girls because we raise them to cater to fragile egos of men.

While criticising the symptomatic exhibition of toxic or hyper-masculinity by male characters reflected in gender and sexual violence, alcoholism, and substance abuse illustrated in the preceding passages of this dissertation, Adichie equally examines these issues from the perspective that they are consequences of the unrealistic gender expectations foisted upon men by patriarchy.

In *Half of a yellow sun*, she uses the dramatic transformation of Odenigbo's character during the war to criticise the imposition of social constructs of masculinity on men, especially as "a reaction against passivity and powerlessness" and characterised by "a repression of all the desires and traits that a given society defines as negatively passive or as resonant of passive experiences" (Kaufman, 1987:8) on men in patriarchal societies. In doing so, she attempts to illuminate the universality of qualities such as emotionality, weakness, strength, and vulnerability as qualifying traits of all humanity and non-gendered-deprecatory traits. For example, after Mama Odenigbo's verbal assault on Olanna the first cracks in Odenigbo's masculine façade begin to become visible. When Olanna moves to her flat to avoid further confrontations with Mama, she expects Odenigbo to assert his masculine authority in her favour, "to ask her to come back with him to the house" and perhaps promise her that "he would tell his mother off in front of her, for her" (Adichie, 2006:102). But he does none of that. Rather, he decides "to stay at her flat, like a frightened little boy hiding from his mother" (Adichie, 2006:102). After an introspective appraisal of Odenigbo's inaction under that circumstance Olanna glimpses "the vulnerability that hid itself so well underneath his voluble confidence" (Adichie, 2006:104). She is jolted to the realisation that regardless of Odenigbo's super-masculine affectations "he could be afraid, after all" (Adichie, 2006:104).

The Biafra wars "destabilizing and traumatic effects on ordinary individuals" (Aghogho, 2013:25) further accentuates Odenigbo's metamorphosis. At the earlier stage of the war Olanna finds the "calmness" and "tranquil tone" with which Odenigbo confronts "their new world, their changed circumstances" (Adichie, 2006:26) rather bewildering. However, he soon becomes overwhelmingly disillusioned by the factual realisation not just of the severity of the war but also the loss of absolute faith in the possibility of a successful Biafran secession as was earlier enthused, contrary to his pre-Biafra war revolutionary bravado that he exhibits at the pro-Independence rallies at the University where he climbs up to the podium "waving his Biafran

flag” (Adichie, 2006:164) and chanting Biafran slogans. With the progression of the war and the subsequent waning of the “romantic promise” which the Biafran succession held for the Igbos, Odenigbo, like many Biafrans, is forced to “place the profound loss and disappointment of defeat in a philosophical and historical perspective” (Aghogho, 2013:25). Although Odenigbo tries very hard at reinforcing the bulwarks of his already deteriorating masculine front, the death of his mother at the hands of Nigerian soldiers leaves him psychologically disarrayed, leading further to his exposition as a symptomatic case of the “fragility of masculinity” (Kaufman, 1987:7). Odenigbo gradually descends from being a person with “high ideals” and one who walks with an “aggressive confidence in his stride” (Adichie, 2006:186) to one whose presence Olanna begins to associate with the “cheap vapor-heavy scent of local gin” (Adichie, 2006:380). From being an erudite academic he takes a dive into being a fellow marked by an incessant state of insobriety, which divests him of his intellectual verve, “silenced him”, and “made him retreat into himself and look out at the world with bleary weary eyes” (Adichie, 2006:380). Also from being a proud and effervescent man who “did not ask favours of highly placed friends” (Adichie, 2006:336), Odenigbo becomes one who depends solely on his wife for sustenance.

Sadly, despite the emotional and psychological issues that weigh upon him, Odenigbo is unable to divulge his pains and anxieties, not even to his wife. This repression of emotion is informed by Kaufman’s observation that “masculinity requires a suppression of a whole range of human needs, aims, feelings, and forms of expression” (1987:8). Therefore, when Olanna complains about Odenigbo’s increasing lugubriousness to his friend Okeoma he advises her to “be patient with him” saying that “Odenigbo has never known how to be weak” (Adichie, 2006:322).

The societal pressure foisted on men to exude so-called masculine strength even in the direst circumstances is reflected in association of weakness to emotional expressiveness. Therefore, even though Odenigbo is far from being all right, he masks his pain and whenever Olanna seeks to know how he is feeling, he dismissively tells her that he is fine. Still, she senses “the layers of

his grief” and desperately longs for Odenigbo “to truly talk to her, to help her to help him grieve” (Adichie, 2006:322). In a state of absolute frustration she laments to Kainene: “I want this war to end so that he can come back. He has become somebody else” (Adichie, 2006:388).

Odenigbo’s downward-spiralling struggle with intense grief over the loss of his mother, his dwindling into alcoholism and psychological detachment caused by the disillusionment at the war situation, all demonstrate his humanity and subvert the idealisation of the super-masculine status in patriarchal social settings. Adichie’s portrayal of this salient issue is crucial because if we are to achieve the desired change in gender relations then it is pertinent that we address the weight of gendered-assumptions and expectations as they affect men and women concurrently.

Furthermore, Adichie points out the absolute normalcy of men expressing their emotions. For example, when Olanna finds Odenigbo silently weeping she initially tries to pacify him. However, seeing that he needed to vent his long pent-up emotions, “she did not want him to stop. She wanted him to cry and cry until he dislodged the pain that clogged his throat, until he rinsed away his sullen grief. She cradled him, wrapped her arms around him, and slowly he relaxed against her. His arms circled her. His sobs became more audible” (Adichie, 2006:330). The unrestrained weeping has a cathartic effect on Odenigbo because for the first time in months he is able to talk of the pain of losing his mother and to express his regrets at having not done enough for her whilst she was alive. On their return to Nsukka after the war ends Ugwu is surprised by Odenigbo’s demonstration of emotion exhibited in the manner in which he mourns the loss of his academic works and the incineration of his library remarking that there was something “so undignified, so unmasterly” (Adichie, 2006:418) about it. Contrary to Ugwu’s description of his master’s show of emotion as “unmasterly”, Adichie presents Odenigbo’s post-war overt expression of emotion as an affirmation that he is as emotional and vulnerable as much as he is rational and strong, in summary he is a human being after all.

Adichie presents the Biafra war as a backdrop through which gender roles and the normative patriarchal idealisation of masculinity are scrutinised. This is because the war situation led to an overturning of social conventions that put women in passive roles and exhibited the “manipulation of gender roles in such a way as to show the arbitrariness of such roles, and by extension the equal capability of women to perform such roles” (Olufunwa, 2012:8). Adichie reflects this reversal of roles by highlighting the important roles women played in the win-the-war efforts and in the maintenance of the military, the refugee camps, and the home fronts while many men cowered from their gendered responsibilities by going into hiding to avoid being conscripted, leaving the entire burden of familial sustenance to their wives. Some examples of male characters who renege from their expected masculine roles include Pastor Ambrose who, as Alice reveals, “is pretending to be a pastor to avoid joining the army” (Adichie, 2006:334). Others include men such as Mama Oji’s husband who “ran away from the army”, and the other woman’s husband who “lives the shivering life of a coward in the forest of Ohafia so that the soldiers will not see him” (Adichie, 2006:338).

### **5.5 Balancing the act: the flipside of the gender coin**

In her criticism of the discrimination against women in patriarchal societies, Adichie acknowledges that not all men are gender oppressors who subjugate women. Likewise, men are not entirely to be blamed for the status of women in society. This is because, more often than not, women are the strongest proponents of patriarchal behaviour due to “centuries of interiorisation of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy” (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994:15). Adichie indeed portrays the ways through which women collaborate with men in the perpetration and perpetuation of gender issues and provides a balanced outlook on gender-assumptions and accusations levelled solely against men. An example of the issues that Adichie uses to portray the double-sidedness of the gender coin is infidelity in relationships. For example, the issue of infidelity in relationships is portrayed in the three novels as a predominantly masculine flaw,

through exiguous characters like Chief Ozobia in *Half of a yellow sun* who engages in an extramarital affair with a woman whom his wife describes as “a Yoruba goat from the bush with two children from two different men” (Adichie, 2006:218). In addition, the general in *Americanah* disrespects his wife, a “lawyer who had given up working to raise their four children” (Adichie, 2013:85) without compunction by keeping Aunt Uju as his mistress and having a son by her. However, it is through Odenigbo and Olanna’s relationship that Adichie balances the narrative regarding the issue of infidelity in relationships. When Olanna informs her Aunt about Odenigbo’s infidelity, she remarks that he has done “what all men do and has inserted his penis in the first hole he could find” (Adichie, 2006:226). Aunt Ifeka’s comment is rather sweeping and has subsequently been faulted by renowned critics like Brenda Cooper who argues that by “describing all men in this way, she contrarily appears to condone them by confirming that it is in their biological makeup to be sexually promiscuous” (2008:149).

This comment does not seem fair in view of the fact that it does not include the entire scope of Adichie’s engagement with matters of infidelity. And contrary to Cooper’s argument that Adichie vindicates men of their misdoings, she actually censures their irrationality and demands culpability on their part. For instance, after he sleeps with Amala, instead of admitting his mistakes and taking responsibility for his actions, Odenigbo tries to exonerate himself. He tells Olanna: “I am not a philandering man, and you know that. This would not have happened if my mother didn’t have a hand!” (Adichie, 2006:240). Olanna categorically replies “[i]t’s you and not your mother. It happened because you let it happen! You must take responsibility!” (Adichie, 2006:240). She further asks him “did your mother pull out your penis and insert it into Amala as well?” (Adichie, 2006:241). I would argue that the fact that Olanna firmly demands that Odenigbo acknowledges his misdoing and accepts responsibility for it instead of attempting self-exculpation, shows that Adichie does not absolve her male characters of their licentiousness as Cooper asserts.

Actually, Adichie demonstrates that infidelity in relationships is not a gender-specific flaw but a human flaw. For example, as a way of reclaiming her sexual autonomy after Odenigbo's infidelity, Olanna unscrupulously engages in retaliatory sex with Richard, her sister's British boyfriend. Although she is in denial about it, saying that the act is neither "a crude revenge, nor a scorekeeping", Olanna admits nonetheless that it took on a "redemptive significance" for her (Adichie, 2006:244). She reveals that in place of prickling guilt she felt "filled with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace" (Adichie, 2006:234) and comes to the realisation that "the selfishness had liberated her" (Adichie, 2006:244). As much as Olanna denies her agenda for engaging in this act of infidelity, it apparently signifies that she is as guilty as Odenigbo, and it corroborates my argument about Adichie disassociation of irresponsible behaviour with one gender only.

Another female character that exhibits indecent sexual behaviour in *Half of a yellow sun* is Susan Grenville, who confesses to Richard about having an affair with John Blake, the husband of her close friend, Caroline. She brazenly informs him that it was a fling that meant "nothing, absolutely nothing" (Adichie, 2006:236). Initially Richard considers reprimanding her for being disloyal to her friend but he realises "how hypocritical it would sound, even if only to himself" (Adichie, 2006:236), this is because he has equally been disloyal by sleeping with his girlfriend's sister. Just as with the case of Odenigbo and Olanna, Adichie skilfully deviates from representing infidelity as a stereotypical behaviour of either gender as both Richard and Susan are guilty as charged.

In a similar vein, in *Americanah*, even though Ifemelu's boyfriend, Curt, is a fundamentally loving partner and a sympathetic male character, she cheats on him with her neighbour out of sheer curiosity "about how he would be, naked in bed with her" (Adichie, 2013:288). Although Ifemelu regrets her action and describes it as an impulsive "mistake and a stupid thing" (Adichie, 2013:288) her infidelity to Curt proves that women, as much as men, are culprits of sexual

recklessness and infidelity. By portraying these acts of sexual indiscretion committed by male and female characters alike, Adichie reinforces the all-encompassing, non-gendered nature of all human foibles and balances the gender-blame game in tune with the ‘balancing’ act of African feminism.

In a daring fictional-feminist act, Adichie goes further. Although she succinctly criticises the marginalisation of women throughout her literary oeuvre she also addresses the issue of negative femininity, which is characterised by a conscious reversal and assumption of oppressive roles by women. This involves circumstances where women use their positions of power to victimise their male counterparts. This issue is exemplified in *Americanah* where Papa Ifemelu’s new female boss unconscionably dismisses him after “twelve years of dedicated labour” at the federal agency for refusing to call her “Mummy” (Adichie, 2013:46). Ifemelu bitterly recounts how her father came home earlier than usual on the day he was sacked, “wracked with bitter disbelief, his termination letter in his hand, complaining about the absurdity of a grown man calling a grown woman Mummy because she had decided it was the best way to show her respect” (Adichie, 2013:46). By narrating the incident, Adichie criticises women who see defeminisation (that is the conscious divesting of femininity) as a means of self-assertion or achieving self-respect. This is because femininity and feminism are not mutually exclusive and a woman does not necessarily have to take on negative masculine traits to assert her individuality.

Similarly noteworthy is the fact that, while examining the insalubrity of patriarchy and male violence on women in her novels, Adichie balances the gender narrative by exploring the notion of woman-to-woman discrimination or violence and the ways in which women’s victimisation is replicated by none other than themselves. In an interview with Synne Rifbjerg, Adichie reveals that her interest in gender is not restricted to the male/female angle but also the “female/female sort of the way women are very quick to judge other women, very quick to condemn other women” (2014). One is reminded of how Obioma Nnaemeka aptly says about the oppression of

women that it is “not simply a masculinist flaw”. Rather, “it also entails women-on-women violence that is often an outcome of institutionalised, hierarchical female spaces that make women victims and collaborators in patriarchal violence” (Nnaemeka, 2005:19).

The scope of Adichie’s fictional-feminist achievement indeed embraces this kind of recognition. Even though some male characters perpetrate sexism against women in the novels, as has been amply indicated in the preceding passages here, a few female characters equally entrench such patriarchal attitudes against their own type. This is mostly demonstrated through the angle of mother-in-law antagonism against their daughters-in-law and is exemplified in *Half of a yellow sun* (as has been extensively discussed in chapter three) by Mama Odenigbo’s victimisation of Olanna and Arize’s victimisation by her mother-in-law. It is further illustrated by the stigmatisation Mama Odenigbo faces at the hands of her fellow women in the village because her son has no child. The shame and humiliation she endures on the account of her son’s childlessness propels Mama Odenigbo into coercing Amala to sleep with him in order to bear him a child (Adichie, 2004:216). The consequence of this is that it becomes a vicious cycle of dehumanisation as women’s status in society is compromised first by their failure to procreate and then by their own children’s failure to bear them grandchildren. What is more disturbing is the fact that women remain the victims as well as the collaborators at the centre of their own patriarchal victimisation.

Similarly, though the patriarchal socio-cultural context of most African societies is responsible for the marriage pressure foisted on young women, women are mostly the custodians and enforcers of this particular trend and collaborate with men in perpetuating it. An example that validates this assertion is presented by Mrs Nwizu, Mrs Ozobia’s friend, about whom Mrs Ozobia tells Olanna “she said something catty the other day about people whose daughters have refused to marry. I think she was throwing words at me and wanted to see if I would throw them

back at her” (Adichie, 2006:222). By means of these insolent insinuations Mrs Nwizu becomes an enabler of the unhealthy preoccupation with marriage.

What these brief examples indicate is that it remains pertinent to criticise not only the oppression of women by men but also women’s collaborative role in their own oppression, because women are largely accomplices in the perpetuation of gender relations that discriminate against their kind. More often than not, women collude with men consciously and unconsciously in the perpetuation of female oppression. By reading Adichie one comes to recognise that to achieve comprehensive effacement of gender discrimination concerted collaborative efforts from men and women are mandatory. Women, as much as men, must desist from being active vehicles for the dissemination and perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies. The next section explores how she portrays the practicality of complementarity and negotiation in *Half of a yellow sun*.

## **5.6 Gender complementarity and negotiation in practice**

African feminism does not thrive on the disintegration of the family unit because of the centrality of familial and communal cohesion to the African way of life. Instead, it welcomes the African feminist principles of “negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance” (Nnaemeka, 2003:378), as mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation; these imperatives should be concretised based on mutual respect for the focal survival point of familial structures. For example, when Olanna and Odenigbo’s union is “irretrievably compromised by the chain of infidelities set off by Odenigbo” (Strehle, 662), Olanna angrily vents her disappointment to her sister. Kainene emphatically seizes the opportunity to tell Olanna that ““there’s something very lazy about the way you have loved him blindly for so long without ever criticizing him. You’ve never even accepted that the man is ugly” (Adichie, 2006:88). She further suggests that Olanna confronts Odenigbo: “[b]efore you ask him, just walk up to him and slap his face. If he dares to slap you back, I will come at him with Harrison’s kitchen knife. But the slap will shake the truth

out of him” (Adichie, 2006:390). However, as intolerable as his infidelities seem, Olanna refrains from retaliating confrontationally.

Besides the apparent fact that Olanna loves Odenigbo, one could also argue that her resolve to synergise with Odenigbo irrespective of his idiosyncrasies is in reciprocation of the love and support he shows her during her own struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder. Regardless of the indignation Olanna feels, she also identifies deeply with Odenigbo’s predicament, because just like in his case, the experience of the massacre at Kano “had changed her and made her so much more inward” (Adichie, 2006:186) too. Furthermore, she looks beyond his present flaws to acknowledge the dedication Odenigbo offered her when, like him, she suffered from severe trauma and grief after witnessing the massacre of her uncle’s family in Kano. For, while Olanna’s “dark swoops” (Adichie, 2006:156) and temporary paralysis last, Odenigbo relentlessly caters for all her physical needs and “even sang when he bathed her in the tub full of water scented with Baby’s bath foam” (Adichie, 2006:156). Olanna realises that being vindictive or confrontational would not produce peaceful conciliatory solutions to their problems. She decides instead to employ diplomacy and tact in dealing with the family’s conflicts. Bearing in mind that in true complementary spirit she is at that point the stronger and more psychologically fortified member of the team, in view of the “fraying of private bonds and the fracturing of homes” (Strehle, 2011:653) occasioned by the war, with their humanities overly tested and the resilience of their human spirit stretched beyond limits, for Olanna the prosperity of their surviving family unit assumes precedence over other trivial aspects of humanity. Under these circumstances, as Sophia Ogwude aptly observes, “human lapses are condoned in a humane stance” (2011:121) and Olanna accepts that given the frail state of not just their family but also their individual psychological fragmentations, without making conciliatory concessions their union was bound to fall apart.

This kind of accommodating approach on Adichie's side has been condemned by Brenda Cooper. She describes the novel as "a maelstrom of competing currents" and argues that in the novel "issues of the domestic, of gender, of the everyday, are reduced, shrunken and brought down to size; like Dickens, like rhubarb crumble, they are a luxury during times of war" (2008:150). Cooper further contends that it is by Adichie's juggling of her "feminist critique of men in general" on the one hand and her "womanist insistence on including men in the projects of national healing" on the other that "the novel's gender politics come apart" (2008:150). However, it is my opinion that Olanna's accommodating act of overlooking Odenigbo's moral excesses is not an act of weakness or an enabling remittance. Rather, it boils down to an exhibition of inner strength and tact by an African woman who recognises the gravity of loss and the ephemerality of life and willingly chooses to be a binding force instead. From this perspective it becomes clear that Adichie uses Olanna and Odenigbo's union to epitomise the African feminist notion of humane understanding, tolerance, and the ability to navigate through issues with mutual negotiation in the interest of common peace. Through Olanna's tactical conflict resolution methods, Adichie posits the need for necessary collaboration between men and women especially in familial settings.

In conclusion: despite his acts of disloyalty towards Olanna, Odenigbo is not depicted in a negative light. Rather, Adichie highlights his full humanity. Throughout the narrative he remains a phenomenal lover, a quintessential romantic, a gender-sensitive man, and most importantly, his love for Olanna remains unflinching. At the end of the novel, when Olanna is overcome by the crippling grief of the possible loss of her twin sister, in a very symbolic depiction of relational symbiosis, Odenigbo reciprocally becomes her stronghold. While Olanna weeps softly, Odenigbo envelops Olanna in a warm hug and the novel ends with the poignant words: "Odenigbo took her in his arms" (Adichie, 2006:428).

## 5.7 Conclusion

In the three novels discussed, Adichie demonstrates that African feminism indeed deals with women's struggle to overcome marginalisation in their sexist and patriarchal society, while maintaining peaceful co-existence with their male counterparts. She reaffirms the notion that African feminism is not concerned with embattlement of the sexes. She shows instead that it recognises gender roles and advocates the complementarity of the sexes as a means to achieving gender parity

Adichie does this by depicting the ideals of inclusivity, complementarity, and non-combativeness in her three novels. She achieves this literary feat by adopting the African feminist 'balancing act' of concurrently correcting male and female stereotyping in African fiction. This is illustrated through the depiction of male feminists like Obinze and Boubacar in *Americanah*, Nnakwanze and Mohammed in *Half of a yellow sun*, and Jaja and Obiora in *Purple hibiscus*, all of whom exhibit admirable feminist empathy in their relationships with the female characters despite their all their human flaws and the serious disruption caused by pervasive domestic and societal violence as epitomized by the Biafra wars.

Adichie similarly injects gender-equity into her literary oeuvre by inscribing her works with a dual-reflective perspective of patriarchy. That is the double-edged nature of patriarchal damage which embodies the bitter truth that it affects the perpetrators as much as it benefits them. This is best exemplified through the character of Ugwu in *Half of a yellow sun*, who, after he partakes in the brutal rape of a bar girl to salvage his ego in the face of hyper-masculinity, returns home after the war ends to realise that his only sister suffered the same fate at the hands of soldiers like himself. In doing so, Adichie criticises the social sense of masculinity which insists on such behavioural patterns as the unquestionable right of men to exhibit domination and authority over one's female partner while this supposedly constitutes the ideal of 'a real man'.

Perhaps most importantly, the recognition that men are as disadvantaged by the binary notions of gender as women and would equally benefit from the dismantling of gender bias as highlighted in the novels. Adichie demonstrates that not all men are aggressive chauvinists and sexists while not all women are feminist-conscious especially because women collude with men to perpetuate the oppression of their kind, while some men on the other hand are gender sensitive and fully-fledged feminists.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION AND LIST OF REFERENCES

#### 6.1 CONCLUSION

This dissertation sought to illustrate 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 woman 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. 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 adaption of re-socialisation to correct the existing damage and a feminist-conscientised socialisation 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.

In order to establish how Adichie achieves her position as the indisputable touchstone for contemporary African feminism, this dissertation investigated three important research questions. The first of these asks how female characters are represented in Adichie's novels as positive role models for African feminism. The second question, which, together with the first, constitutes the core of African feminist engagement, asks how Adichie reveals the actualities of the African female experience; that is, how are feminine thematic issues such as patriarchy and racial and gender discrimination portrayed in her literary oeuvre? To answer these two questions, this dissertation undertook an in-depth analysis of the female characters in the novels categorising them under groups that explicate their feminist status. In addition, it engaged in an

appraisal of which characters fit into the model of the redefined contemporary African woman and which do not.

In the third chapter entitled “Debunking patriarchy and gender discrimination towards women in Adichie’s novels”, this dissertation discussed various thematic issues of feminist concern including sexism, domestic violence, the valorisation of marriage and motherhood as well as male-child preference. It did this by highlighting the intricate and intertwined nature of these patriarchal strictures and the manner in which Adichie’s novels criticise the inimical effects of these socio-cultural issues on female actualisation.

In furtherance of this dissertation’s exploration of Adichie’s commitment to the African feminist enterprise, chapter four illustrated how she transcends the previously tabooed, yet crucial area of the African feminine reality—female sexuality. Firstly, the chapter focused on her criticism of the patriarchal suppression of female sexuality as exemplified in *Purple hibiscus*. Another aspect of female sexuality that this chapter discussed is Adichie’s infusion of feminine sexual agency and autonomy in her female characters as a way of correcting the age-old image of the African woman as a sexual object crafted for the sole aim of male satisfaction. Furthermore, this chapter examined the sensitive and disheartening feminist issues of sexual violation of women in conflict situations, such as the rape of young women during the Biafran war by both enemies and defending soldiers portrayed in *Half of a yellow sun*. In the analysis of *Americanah* the gray areas of sexual violence was explored through the harrowing experience of the principal character, Ifemelu. Finally, the chapter addressed the issues of sexual objectification and hyper-sexualisation of the African female body found in the novels.

In tune with the African feminist principles of gender complementarity and inclusivity, the fifth chapter of this dissertation examined the portrayal of male of characters in the three novels, and illustrated that, contrary to the disparaging criticisms against African feminists who are often accused of being men-haters, Adichie does not depict all men as unsympathetic and desensitised

individuals. Rather she depicts both female and male feminist role models in her novels. In a similar vein, Adichie also accentuates the fact that women as much as men are implicated in the perpetuation of gender inequality and violence against women. To illustrate this notion, she offers instances in which women consciously or unconsciously collude with men to victimise women, such as the case of mother/daughter in-law relations. Adichie also addresses the much-overlooked aspect of the negative effects of patriarchy on men, which is evinced in the gendered assumptions of compulsory masculine strength. Additionally, this chapter examines how she discredits social constructs of masculinity using Odenigbo's character in *Half of a yellow sun* as the case in point.

The three novels discussed in this study share thematic and ideological similitude, as Adichie exhibits an intrinsic involvement with women's sexist history and explores the reality of African women's experiences in a manner which is unmatched by her contemporaries in all of them. Evidently, Adichie concerns herself with redefining the role of women in a male-dominated world by consciously attempting to portray empowered women in her texts and advocating for a radical change in the unidirectional socio-political status quo in context. Faced with the urgent need of altering the patriarchal praxis that has held sway in earlier literary creativity, Adichie makes women the subjects of her fictional enterprise. Her major characters are women depicted as irrepressible heroines. Through these characters, she insightfully examines the lives, situations, and experiences of women in Africa and in the diaspora as immigrants.

As part of her task of redefining the African woman in contemporary fiction Adichie subverts the relegation of women to the background as docile and inconsequential personalities in traditional male fiction, fiction that is prevalent in Africa and written by authors such as the famous Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Cyprian Ekwensi in her novels. Adichie does this by representing a nuanced plurality of female characters that create agency for themselves by repositioning themselves in their familial and political spheres. Female characters like Aunty Ifeoma and

Mama Obinze, Kainene and Olanna, Kambili and Amaka, Aunty Ifeka, and Ifemelu “emerge as strong, confident women whose negotiation of social and political ideologies recall a more balanced gender subjectivity in traditional Nigerian society and culture” (Da Silva, 2012:458). Adichie posits female characters like Ifemelu, Olanna and Kainene, and Kambili and Aunty Ifeoma who are self-actualising and are neither solely dependent on men for their sustenance nor essentially tied to men in order to enjoy identity. In her literary oeuvre she applauds female characters who exhibit autonomy, a sense of adventurousness, and intellectual curiosity, while those who are comfortable and complacent in playing assessorial roles to men or choose to exist as mere appendages to men are not depicted as portraits worthy of emulation. The female protagonists in the novels are vocal about their pains and joys, they assert themselves through their determination to take charge of their lives, and control their destinies as far as possible given the patriarchal odds against them.

However, although Adichie’s primary creative aim involves the redefinition of the negative image of women portrayed in male-authored texts and the recreation of positive female characters for female readers’ identification, she successfully guards against “character idealization” (Register, 1989:21). Her representation of female characters is unbiased and conforms to the literary standard of plausibility. Despite the urge to create positive exemplary female characters, she reveals the varied realities of women’s existence. She explores the peculiarities and differences between women in the novels as the feminine characters exist along binary axes of assertiveness and passivity, well-educated and illiterate, professional and domesticated women, and border -liners and game changers, as has been shown in chapter two of this dissertation. That is, she shows that women in reality are distinct. They do not enjoy the same level of empowerment and they encounter various forms or degrees of subjugation in their varied contexts. These literary considerations reveal certain implications of African womanhood and make the female characters in novels more realistic and credible to the reader. The portrayal

of female peculiarities exemplified by Adichie is indeed pivotal to literary female representation since she portrays each female character to satisfy a different goal.

Where some of the women represented in the novels do not exhibit self-affirmation and feminist consciousness like Anulika and Amala, it is because, in spite of all the agitations towards women advancement and empowerment, the African society, especially in the rural settings, is male-dominated. Some others, like Ranyinudo, Kosi and Beatrice choose to settle within the spaces circumscribed by patriarchy, and therefore become easy pawns in the hands of the chauvinistic men not solely because they are incapacitated, but because of their gullibility. Therefore, since their traits are inimical to the goals of feminism. Adichie does not present them as feminist models for emulation. Rather, such characters mirror the unfortunate circumstance of the average woman in patriarchal African society. In addition, though, these very characters in their entrapment act as creative elements that would further provoke the desired change of feminine status quo in text and context and this explains why their stoicism is criticised while their representations in the novels are minimal.

I have implicitly argued in this dissertation that Adichie's fiction is crucial to African feminism. This notion finds further confirmation when one considers Tony Simoes Da Silva's recognition that "what distinguishes the work of 'third generation' African writers is the confronting manner in which they explore the post-colonial nation's fraught identity and the themes once deemed too problematic, such as domestic abuse, gendered violence and sexuality" (Da Silva, 2012:457) . Adichie addresses these problematic thematic issues with grace and impeccable craft in her novels.

Literature and commitment are essentially interconnected. Feminist literature becomes real and concrete to the people it serves when it confirms, represents, and explores the reality of their existence. In this sense, literature performs significant social functions that encapsulate entertainment, education, historical and social documentation, social exposition, social criticism,

and conscientisation. These functions make relevance and commitment important factors of literary creativity.

Aware of the relevance of literature as an agent of social change, feminist writers adopt literary creativity as a medium of addressing not only perplexing feminine issues but also nationalist and global matters. In this regard, Adichie has proven her mettle as a committed African feminist writer. The woman question comes unmistakably to the fore in all three novels studied in this dissertation. Her commitment to dignifying women in text and context is evident in her detailed and encompassing treatment of the conditions of African women using the Nigerian environment as a microcosm.

As has been demonstrated, the thematic issues of concern to women addressed in the novels in this study include female marginalisation, violence against women, exclusion of women from politics and political power, sexism, oppressive cultural and traditional practices, all of these issues revolve around the patriarchal social structure of society. The thematic issues in Adichie's oeuvre are pertinently relevant not so much for her expertise and vibrancy as a novelist but because of the currency and universality of these issues, not only within Nigerian society, but also in other patriarchal societies in Africa and all over the world. As far as these issues of women's concern remain recurrent issues in society they will always be relevant pointers in the agitation for social change. For example, Adichie fiercely repudiates the patriarchal idealisation and fetishisation of domesticity, marriage, and motherhood as serving the purpose of the subjugation of women. Rather, she proposes alternatives such as mothering practices like adoption and wetnursing to alleviate the piteous plight childless women face in patriarchal societies. These are markers of the extent to which Adichie is willing not simply to play a politically correct game. She is willing to become as realistic—in the most ordinary sense of the word—as possible about the actual challenges involved and their actual potential resolution.

Similarly, Adichie presents fresh perspectives to and delves into formally prohibited yet valid feminist territories such as female sexuality, desire, and sexual violation. She humanises female sexuality by portraying it not as an aspect of life that serves solely male interests but, in taking a pertinent step towards reconfiguring the warp in a sexually biased culture, as a woman's right. In addition to functioning as "narrative strategies of empathy and political resistance to sexual shaming" (Norridge, 2012:30) this portrayal of female sexuality and sexual issues as a whole are also her authorial way of foregrounding the dawn of a new female creative era where women can own their sexuality.

Adichie further proposes the prioritisation of female education rather than marriage as a means of addressing and ameliorating the situation of women in patriarchy and ensuring better and wider economic and social opportunities for women. She emphasises the importance of education for women because it imparts knowledge and self-esteem. This provides a springboard to give flight to the actualisation of women's aspirations for the betterment of all of humanity. Similarly, she suggests financial independence, female solidarity, and bonding as alternative ways through which women can effectively ease the burden of femaleness within patriarchal settings.

Most importantly, as has been shown in this dissertation, Adichie does not deviate from the African feminist advocacy for complementary co-existence between the sexes. She instigates instead the renegotiation and re-evaluation of gender relations by examining how patriarchy affects men as well as women, as has been demonstrated. She further argues that, rather than a parasitical existence in which the female exists as the male's prey or vice versa, the ideal reality would be a symbiotic co-existence in which women are proactive in both the private and public spheres just as men. This idea is demonstrated in the controversial relationship between Odenigbo and Olanna, as has been illustrated.

In conclusion, I agree with the male African feminist critic Okechukwu Ikediugwu's observation that

Adichie is not a radical feminist: she approaches feminism from the African point of view. She understands that Africans live and cherish communal life, while the reverse is the case in the western societies. Any form of feminism that tampers with the African communality is not acceptable to Africans [...] Her female characters support, protect, and accommodate the men in their lives (2013:10)-

It is therefore clear that Adichie does not sweep issues of women's reality under her literary carpet. Instead she highlights them and makes explicit statements about gender relations in Africa in her novels. She manifests her feminist ideological alignment in more areas than one and this commitment enables readers to reappraise their lives, raise their consciousness, and change their situations for the better. From this perspective it is little wonder that her novels have been prescribed for school reading and translated into over twenty-one languages across the world, the Swedish translation of her famous TEDtalk titled *We Should All Be Feminists* under the title *–Alla Borde Vara Feminister* and is to be distributed to every 16-year-old in Sweden. Her TED talks and various interviews further underscore the influence of her ideas, while these ideas are mediated most strongly and convincingly within her prime mode of communication, namely prose fiction. Therefore, it can rightly be said that she is at the forefront of the battle for the positive representation of women in all aspects of their social, economic, and political experiences in text and context.

Adichie has carved a niche for herself in the literary scene in Africa and the diaspora. A discussion of contemporary African feminism without a mention of her name would be much the poorer. Arguably, Adichie is presently the foremost contemporary African female writer. She is indisputably the most appreciated and ideologically engaged African female writer on the continent and the rest of the world. This is not surprising because, since the beginning of her literary career over a decade ago, she has demonstrated passionate affiliation to societal and feminine trends and issues.

Her literary creativity offers fresh insights into women's issues and the developmental goals that African feminism seeks to affirm. This is a positive turn of events from what has been obtainable in male literary creativity. And let it be said that she has not earned this authorial feat by merit of her gender but by the intricate content and context of her creativity as well as the overall artistic principles and creative philosophies expressed in her novels. This study therefore posits Adichie as an African feminist icon whose style of creative commitment to feminine issues is worthy of emulation by aspiring writers while, for the critical reader, as shown here, it offers a wealth of feminist analysis and insight.

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