

Resilience of Women Characters in Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus and Half of a Yellow Sun

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ABSTRACT

Women in war literature across the globe are usually described as the most vulnerable victims along with the children. It is true to a great extent. Women are molested and abducted during the war. They become the victims of violence, suffering the trauma throughout their life. Due to the stigma attached to rape in many societies, it becomes difficult for women to readjust in society after such incidents. The present study deals with the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, namely Purple Hibiscus and Half of a Yellow Sun, that show the horrors of civil war in Nigeria. Adichie’s treatment of women in her works is different as they refuse to be voiceless victims. They are equal partners with men in the efforts to emerge survivors in the face of death and devastation. In many cases, women prove better than men. Even in the worst moments of adversity, they remain calm and do not lose hope providing solace and strength to their counterparts in moments of utter despair. They show their strength in the times of war and help the nation in every way possible. While enduring suffering, they rise above the difficulties proving their perseverance.

Keywords: *Trauma, civil war, resilience, victims, adversities, endurance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the beginning of the civilization, gender roles have remained largely fixed. It is ironic that while in the animal world, the female is in control of herself and her sexuality, the human female’s self and sexuality have been suppressed through customs and traditions to strengthen the foundations of social structure which resists change. When we talk of maintaining social order we naturally imply curtailment of every individual’s rights by a slight degree. In practice, however, there has been considerable disparity. Through centuries of psychological conditioning, women have been assigned specific domestic roles that remain more or less fixed. Division of labour may provide convenient options for smooth functioning of the societal machinery. Yet in practice, an equal status eludes women.

During the times of war, when human rights are abused, it is most often the women and young children that bear the appalling consequences of war. It is true that physical torture, disease and death are rampant during the war; women are subjected to untold suffering in the form of sexual, psychological and domestic abuse. Even after the war, it takes a lot of time for the women to overcome the trauma as the scars inflicted on them are deeper.

II. UNIVERSALITY OF WOMEN’S OPPRESSION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Khaled Hosseini showcase the plight of women in two different countries separated by culture and geography. However, the fact that the spectacle of pain and suffering in one country is nearly the same as in the other, reiterates the universality and frequency of crimes against women, especially during the war. It also highlights the inferior status of women in a world still governed by patriarchy where the suffering of women becomes manifold during the times of war as the law and order machinery collapses. The portrayal of women by Hosseini and Adichie is certainly more intense than the traditional characterisation of women in literature. Their women do not blindly follow the conservative dictates. Even during the wars, they ensure their full participation. Not only this, the women characters take equal part in the process of rehabilitation. Assertive and strong, they do not stick to the false notions of virtue and purity when the situations demand them to take a middle path in the war for survival. When a woman takes a stand for herself, she also stands up for all women. Therefore, we find women of all ages in these portrait galleries, struggling to find foothold, both before and during the war. Each has a different outlook on life, a different way to make things work and a different destiny. Some soar towards their destinations, while others keep on trying to free themselves from the cages constraining their flight.

III. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie opens during a coup and portrays the chaotic conditions during the time. The novel lets us witness how the freakish patriarch, obsessed with exercising absolute control in the house mercilessly beats the women, when his supremacy is challenged. When things go beyond his control in the wake of the coup, the life of people both in the country and in Eugene’s home becomes miserable. Adichie voices her protest against this mistreatment of women by portraying characters who refuse to be the victims. Therefore apart from focusing on the household of Eugene where he tortures his family members, it also features the character like Aunt Ifeoma and her daughter Amaka, who vocally reject the societal dogmas. Ifeoma, after losing her husband and boldly enduring the blame of his death, single handedly takes care of her family in the war torn times. She refuses to take the help of even her brother Eugene who is quite influential. She resists the government’s action against her when they blame her for rebellious activities. During the riots, she supports her family bravely. On an occasion when she comes to her brother’s house she tells Beatrice about the hardships:

Look at what this military tyrant is doing to our country...We have not had fuel for three months in Nsukka. I spent the night in the petrol station last week, waiting for fuel. And at the end, the fuel did not come. Some people left their cars in the station because they did not have enough fuel to drive back home...We just called off yet another strike, even though no lecturer has been paid for the last two months. They tell us the Federal Government has no money”...“*Ifukwa*, people are leaving the country. [1]

In contrast to Ifeoma, her brother Eugene, a strong and well respected man in the society, finds it difficult to maintain his sanity during the times of war. Eugene is obsessed with the Christian and colonial ways of life. This is reflected in the way his household is run. From the crockery to the evening tea, there is evident the influence of the British ways. Eugene, who runs a newspaper; succumbs to pressure during the coup. The tyrant

military government tortures people and usurps their rights. Unable to cope with the trauma, he vents his wrath and frustration on his family, especially his daughter and wife.

The violence and inhuman treatment the family members suffer in the novel may appear exaggerated and unreal to some western readers. But these seemingly unreal situations are facts of everyday life for these people. They accept these without questioning their *raison d'être*. It is a common observation that during periods such as coup or war, the crimes against the women and girls increase manifold as the people are concerned more with issues that are seemingly larger. As the women are soft targets and usually do not dare go against the patriarchal authority, they are victimized even more during the times of war. This happens because of men's inability to resist the external agents. Women, therefore, become easy targets whom they can easily maneuver and subjugate. In the process home becomes the miniature canvas where the oppressed becomes the oppressor and the people whom he is supposed to protect become victims/ targets. Commenting on the treatment of women in the novel, Fwangyil says that the oppressive and dehumanizing situations women undergo in this novel seem extraordinary, but these are real life stories that have been modified and recreated for the society's awareness. This novel is, in effect, a dramatic indictment of the oppressive attitude of men towards women and children that they are supposed to love and care for. It, therefore, has direct relevance to our contemporary society. [2]

Though Eugene has always been quite authoritative and strict regarding his colonial ways and even his family is always on the guard carefully avoiding annoying him, the conditions become far worse when the political atmosphere in the country gets unstable. Eugene receives the first jolt when the coup happens. His behavior changes instantly. He starts getting infuriated more easily than usual. After the coup they go to the church and Beatrice expresses her discomfort at meeting the priest because of her pregnancy induced sickness. Eugene gets very upset. Though he does not say anything to her at the time, he beats her up so badly when they get back home that she suffers a miscarriage. Kambili tells us:

I was in my room after lunch, reading James chapter five because I would talk about the biblical roots of the anointing of the sick during family time, when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parents' hand-carved bed-room door...Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice...He opened the dining room door... “There's blood on the floor,” Jaja said. “I'll get brush from the bathroom.” [1]

Eugene crosses all limits of insanity when he beats up Kambili after Ade Coker, his Newspaper editor, is killed by a letter bomb. Due to Eugene's criticism of the military government, it is assumed that he was killed by the Federal government. “Ade Coker was blown up when he opened the package--a package everybody would have known was from the Head of State even if his wife Yewande had not said that Ade Coker looked at the envelop and said “it has the State House seal” before he opened it” [3]. This incident throws Eugene totally off-focus. When he finds Jaja and Kambili with his father's picture on his return home, he severely beats Kambili. In the face of war, Eugene seems to have lost his sanity and uses flimsy excuses to prove his manhood in brutal ways by exercising his dominance over his family. Kambili, the narrator tells us:

He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, like soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo and...I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of painting...Kicking. Kicking.Kicking...More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. [1]

Most of the works by Adichie are set in Nigeria and deal with the disturbed conditions of the country inspired by real incidents. Written along the same lines, *Half of a Yellow Sun* uses the backdrop of Nigerian Civil War to capture the hardships faced by Nigerian women during the years of Nigeria- Biafra strife. Adichie brings to the fore the condition of the people during the war. Especially the fate of women during the armed conflicts is treated with a greater focus. The sufferings of the women in the form of various war crimes are delineated very clearly and objectively by her. Breaking away from the traditional association of women with virtue and purity, she captures their sufferings in a different light. Though her women are strong and dynamic and do not get deterred easily, she talks of those women too who do not have many options before them. Commenting on her characterization in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ogwude says that she presents her characters in clear positive light as against what it is believed many male writers have either been unwilling to do, or have been incapable of doing. The novel bustles with bold and successful full-bodied women with no inhibitions. These women – Kainene, Olanna, their mum, the visiting black American lecturer, Edna Whaler, Aunty Ifeka, and Miss Adebayo – and their worldview and life-styles remind us of Soyinka’s sophisticated female characters who are also well grounded in, and proud of our culture. [4]

When the war broke out in Nigeria, the people, especially women were treated in inhuman ways. Apart from rape and abduction, they were killed in such inhuman ways that most of the cases were hushed up. A very brutal practice was to cut open the bellies of pregnant women and thus kill the child inside. The logic they would give for such brutality was to kill the babies who might turn into rebels after their birth. Apart from the gang rapes that happened routinely in the war zones, there were many more horrendous stories: tales of mothers who were raped in full view of their children before being bludgeoned to death. Stories of machete-wielding soldiers who would split open the bellies of pregnant women at roadblocks, “to find hidden rebels.” [5]

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus we see that the women characters portrayed by Adichie and Hosseini, in spite of their suffering emerge as characters embodying hope and courage that set these women down in our memory as ones who stand up for their rights and fight in the face of adversity. Each one of them has a unique personality and a distinct mode of survival and they all stand firm in the face of war. Hunger, adversity and death cannot annihilate their strong will power. They do not give up in the face of despair, rather they try to offer solace and rejuvenate others. In the gloom of the war, they stand out as beacons of hope and do their bit for the society and people around them till the end.

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