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Decolonising Gender: Postcolonial Feminism and the Politics of Trauma in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Adichie's novel, Half of a Yellow Sun, critically examines the intersections between gender, trauma and postcolonial identities, viewed through the lens of postcolonial feminism. The novel illustrates how the colonial legacy and patriarchy shape the lives of women in postcolonial Nigeria, with trauma functioning as both a product and a tool of resistance. By employing the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial feminism as articulated by scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and trauma theory (drawing on Cathy Caruth's concepts of trauma as repetition and representation), Adichie's narrative becomes a site of contestation, where gendered trauma is decolonised and women's autonomy is reasserted. In Half of a Yellow Sun, Adichie depicts the lives of Olanna and Kainene, two sisters whose experiences during the Nigerian Civil War expose the gendered violence inherent in both colonialism and patriarchy. Drawing from Mohanty's argument that postcolonial women's experiences are often obscured by Western narratives, Adichie challenges these external constructs by presenting the protagonists' personal and collective struggles. Olanna's trauma during the war is shaped not only by the external violence of conflict but also by the patriarchal forces that marginalise her agency. The women's efforts to reclaim control over their bodies and narratives illuminate their resistance to the gendered traumas that define their existence, transforming their rebellions into a form of decolonisation.

Keywords: gender, feminism, trauma, decolonisation, resistance

Introduction: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* explore gender, trauma and resistance within the ambit of postcolonial Nigerian society. Through these novels, she engages with postcolonial feminism to illuminate how women's bodies and experiences become battlegrounds for colonial and patriarchal oppression. This paper, drawing on postcolonial feminist and trauma theory, investigates how Adichie's works depict women reclaiming their agency through artistic expression and narrative construction. By exploring the political and emotional dimensions of trauma, it examines how Adichie transforms trauma from an oppressive experience into a site of resistance and empowerment.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie addresses the issue of "nationhood" (Jacob and Oviri 226) that seems to have been obliterated during the Nigerian Civil War. The causal problems

that Nigeria underwent during the pre-civil and post-civil war period are what is often called the "national question" (Falola and Heaton 158),

> What is Nigeria? Who are Nigerians? How does a country go about developing a meaningful national identity? The geographical area now known as Nigeria was created by the British colonial administration in 1914, not by indigenous peoples themselves. Thereafter, the people within the borders of Nigeria were known to the world as "Nigerians," but in reality this designation meant little to most people, whose lives continued to be primarily centered on local communities that had existed for hundreds and thousands of years (158).

The postcolonial condition, marked by arbitrary colonial borders and the violent aftermath of independence, creates a terrain where identities are contested and often redefined under duress. Within this volatile national landscape, the experiences of women become doubly invisible: first, as citizens of a nation struggling to define itself, and second, as subjects often sidelined by both patriarchal structures and Western feminist discourses. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's argument in "Under Western Eyes" that women in the Global South are frequently homogenised or misrepresented in dominant feminist frameworks resonates deeply here. The layered oppression experienced by women in Adichie's narrative—caught between civil war, cultural expectations, and colonial legacies—reveals how gender and nation intersect in complex ways. Postcolonial feminism, therefore, becomes essential in unpacking these forces, as it resists both the nationalist ideal that erases internal inequalities and the Western gaze that flattens diverse experiences into simplistic victimhood.

Furthermore, postcolonial feminism critiques the intersections of colonialism, gender, and cultural oppression, which can pose a challenge towards the Eurocentric feminist narratives that often overlook the specificities of non-Western women's struggles. Third World women are often homogenised as passive victims, yet Adichie's work disrupts this notion by portraying women who resist and reshape their realities despite immense suffering. Western narratives that often depict women from the Global South as passive, oppressed subjects in need of liberation fail to consider the nuances of local contexts, including the effects of colonialism and its lasting impact on gender. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* actively critiques this oversimplified portrayal by presenting complex, multifaceted female characters who resist, survive, and struggle against the violent legacies of colonialism.

Adichie's female characters are not merely emblematic of suffering but are also sites through which the lingering effects of colonial and patriarchal trauma are inscribed and rearticulated. The belated and fragmented nature of trauma, as Caruth theorises, resonates with the narrative strategies employed in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where memory, silence, and repetition convey the persistence of historical wounds. Trauma theory, as articulated by Cathy Caruth (*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*), taps into the psychic and emotional scars left by traumatic events of the past. Caruth's concept of trauma involves the notion of repetition and representation: trauma is not merely an event, but a memory that

disrupts the individual's psyche and is repeatedly re-lived through its haunting effects. Caruth explores how trauma disrupts conventional modes of historical and literary representation. She builds on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, arguing that trauma is not fully grasped in the moment of occurrence but is instead belatedly re-experienced, often in fragmented and haunting ways. *Half of a Yellow Sun* depicts trauma that is both personal and collective. The female protagonists, Olanna and Kainene, experience violence that is deeply entwined with colonial legacies and patriarchal structures. Olanna's experience of sexual violence during the Biafran War, for instance, reflects how women's bodies become sites of war, mirroring historical accounts of gendered violence in conflict zones.

Half of a Yellow Sun explores the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), with a powerful depiction of how war exacerbates the patriarchal violence already embedded in Nigerian society. For Olanna, trauma takes many forms, ranging from the physical violence of war to the emotional betrayal by her partner, Odenigbo. However, Olanna's struggle with trauma is not only shaped by external violence; her experiences also reflect the gendered dynamics of patriarchal power. The novel critiques how women are expected to adhere to societal norms, even in the face of war, where their suffering often remains invisible or overlooked.

The wartime setting of the novel complicates Olanna's position further. While she is subjected to the same physical dangers as men, such as the destruction of her home and displacement, her status as a woman renders her particularly vulnerable. The violence against her is not merely the violence of war but the added weight of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Olanna's trauma involves negotiating her gender identity within this violent environment, where her ability to assert agency is continually thwarted by both the external political forces of the war and the internalised patriarchy within her personal relationships. Olanna's parents' willingness to use their daughter as "sex bait" (*Half* 35) after her return from London in exchange for favours from Chief Okonji exemplifies the depths of corruption and moral decay within Nigerian society. The transactional nature of their relationship with Chief Okonji presents the extent to which individuals are willing to compromise their principles and exploit others for personal gain:

> 'I can't keep you out of my mind', he said, and a mist of alcohol settled on her face…
>
> 'I just can't keep you out of my mind', Chief Okonji said again. 'Look, you don't have to work at the ministry, I can appoint you to a board, any board you want, and I will furnish a flat for you wherever you want'. He pulled her to him, and for a while Olanna did nothing, her body limp against his (*Half* 33).

Chief Okonji's inappropriate advances towards Olanna illuminate the pervasive perniciousness of the patriarchal power dynamic where women are objectified and exploited for personal gain. Despite the pressures and expectations placed upon her, Olanna refuses to succumb to Chief Okonji's advances as she "pushe[s] him back" (*Half* 33), "vaguely sickened at how her hands sank into his soft chest. 'Stop it Chief'" (33). This refusal to passively

accept unwanted advances demonstrates her stance and unwillingness to submit to the expectations imposed upon her by the powerful men of her society. Additionally, that she was "vaguely sickened" (33) by the encounter illustrates her disgust at the objectification and manipulation that she experiences.

Olanna's recollection of the night when they fled Nsukka reflects her struggle with "survivor guilt" (Caruth 144), as she wrestles with the memories of those who did not survive the violence of the war such as her cousin, Arize, with her "pregnant belly, how easily it must have broken, skin stretched that taut. She started to cry" (*Half* 160). In his book, *The Broken Connection* (1979), Robert J. Lifton suggests that survivor guilt is not merely a "static" (172) emotion but can lead to transformative processes. Olanna's experience exemplifies this idea as she addresses her guilt and grief, seeking to understand and reconcile the traumatic events of the past; her introspective questions of whether she could have done more to prevent the suffering of others and whether her actions were sufficient in the face of overwhelming violence and destruction. This questioning self-examination allows her to confront her emotions and make sense of her experiences as she begins to journey towards her own post-traumatic healing.

In *Half*, understanding Caruth's analysis of trauma and Lifton's perspective on "survivor guilt" (Caruth 144) highlights the complexity of Olanna's emotional landscape and the potential growth and healing during the conflict. Through her struggle with "survivor guilt" (144), Olanna emerges resilient but introspective, exemplifying the transformative power of trauma through her ability to confront and process the experiences. As she contextualises her experiences within the larger socio-political landscape, Olanna gains a deeper understanding of the forces at play and the complexities of survivorship in war-torn Nigeria.

Olanna's story is ultimately about reclaiming agency. She confronts her trauma by deciding to care for displaced people during the war, by taking on leadership roles in the community. Through the lens of postcolonial feminism, Olanna's trauma becomes both a symbol of the colonial past and a site of resistance. Her efforts to reclaim control over her body, her sexuality, and her agency in a patriarchal society reveal the resilience of women in postcolonial contexts. Olanna's trauma is, therefore, not simply an individual experience; it is the collective trauma of a nation, one that manifests in gendered forms.

Kainene: The Unconventional Woman as Postcolonial Resistance

Kainene emerges in *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a subversive and unconventional female figure whose characterisation challenges both patriarchal and colonial constructions of femininity. In contrast to the more traditionally feminised Olanna, Kainene is portrayed as fiercely autonomous, exhibiting a pronounced disinterest in conforming to normative gender roles. Her strength is reflected not only in her economic independence and managerial acumen but also in her critical role during the Biafran War, particularly in her leadership of a

refugee camp—an act that situates her as an agent of resilience within a militarised and male-dominated landscape.

Kainene's refusal to seek validation through traditional institutions such as marriage or motherhood signifies a conscious disruption of the ideological constructs imposed by both colonial and indigenous patriarchies. Her identity formation is rooted in intellectual competence, pragmatic leadership, and emotional reserve, aligning her with the postcolonial feminist imperative to construct new, empowered subjectivities outside of hegemonic gender discourses. Yet, her eventual disappearance—ambiguous and unresolved—introduces a poignant narrative silence that symbolically represents the marginalisation and erasure of women's voices in both national and historical memory. This unresolved absence operates as a metaphor for the incomplete recognition of women's roles in anti-colonial and postcolonial struggles. Nonetheless, Kainene's enduring impact within the novel underscores the necessity of re-evaluating women's contributions to nation-building and social transformation, even when their narratives remain fragmented or unfinished. In this way, Adichie critiques both the historiographical omissions of traditional national narratives and the limitations of Western feminist frameworks that fail to engage with the complexities of postcolonial female agency.

Kainene's refusal to define herself through normative institutions such as marriage or motherhood echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concern in *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* with how women's voices are frequently appropriated or erased within dominant discourses. Kainene does not speak to fulfil a Western expectation of victimhood; rather, she operates from a position of deliberate opacity and resistance, refusing to be easily known or categorised. Her subjectivity is shaped through pragmatism and a rejection of the sentimentalisation often associated with female characters in both colonial and postcolonial literatures. Yet, her enigmatic disappearance at the novel's conclusion complicates this narrative of resistance. The unresolved nature of her absence functions as a narrative silence that allegorises the systemic erasure of women's roles in nationalist and historical memory. Anne McClintock's observation that "nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space" ("Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family 63) becomes particularly relevant here, as Kainene resists domestication and nationalistic myth-making. While her story remains unfinished, her legacy persists through her actions and influence, compelling a re-evaluation of the gendered dimensions of postcolonial nationhood. In positioning Kainene as both a figure of resistance and absence, Adichie not only critiques the historiographical omissions of traditional narratives but also challenges Western feminist frameworks to engage more rigorously with the complex, embodied realities of postcolonial women.

The trauma experienced by both Olanna and Kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is not just an individual experience but is also deeply tied to the historical and political context of postcolonial Nigeria. The Biafran War, in particular, is a critical moment in the novel that exposes the brutality of colonial histories and how postcolonial societies continue to be

shaped by the legacies of colonialism. For women, war becomes a site of compounded trauma—gendered violence is often intensified during times of conflict, and women's bodies become battlegrounds upon which power struggles are fought.

The psychological trauma of the war for women is portrayed through their struggles to survive and assert their voices. While the male characters in the novel engage in overt political struggles, the female protagonists—especially Olanna and Kainene—experience trauma not just on a personal level but as a collective trauma that echoes the wounds of colonialism. These characters do not merely represent passive recipients of violence; rather, they reflect what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak might call 'strategic essentialism'—a temporary collective identity mobilised to resist erasure. Their trauma is at once personal and symbolic, echoing the historical silencing of women in both colonial archives and nationalist discourses. Adichie destabilises these silences by foregrounding the intimate, everyday struggles of women who bear the dual burden of colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Kainene's assumption of a public role in the war effort and Olanna's insistence on an egalitarian relationship with Odenigbo are not only personal choices but also political acts that disrupt normative gender hierarchies. Through these portrayals, Adichie not only critiques the marginalisation of women's suffering in nationalist and historical narratives but also reclaims space for women's voices, subjectivities, and agency within the framework of postcolonial resistance and recovery.

Conclusion

By centring women's experiences, she not only critiques patriarchal oppression but also reclaims narratives that have historically been erased or misrepresented. She asserts that African women are not merely victims but active agents in shaping their destinies, thereby contributing to a broader decolonial feminist discourse. Adichie's protagonists resist the imposition of colonial and patriarchal narratives by rewriting their own stories. In this sense, the novels function as acts of cultural decolonisation, where the voices of women, often relegated to the margins, are reclaimed and celebrated. By foregrounding the role of narrative in the lives of her characters, Adichie reveals the transformative power of art in the process of decolonising gendered identities. The novel illustrates how women can resist the forces that seek to define them as passive victims, transforming their trauma into acts of rebellion and reclaiming their narratives as a form of decolonisation. The novel illustrates how women can resist the forces that seek to define them as passive victims, transforming their trauma into acts of rebellion and reclaiming their narratives as a form of decolonisation.

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