

## Womanism in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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**Abstract:** *The formulation of the theory of Womanism is accredited to the African American feminist author Alice Walker. In her book In Search of Our Mothers' Garden she introduced the term "womanist" and advocated Womanism belongs to women of colour, and that African women were womanists long before feminism came into being by associating it with black folk tradition. She accentuates that Womanism is not anti-feminism or its variety but encompasses it. The present article analyses the character of the protagonist of the novel Half of a Yellow Sun by the Nigerian feminist author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie under the light of Womanism. An endeavour has been made to explore the nuances of Womanism and its relation with feminism. It will be analyzed how Womanism and feminism counter sexism and patriarchy, and how they identify and uplift women.*

**Keywords:** African Women, Feminism, Sexism, Womanism, Women of Colour

### Introduction

*I can imagine black women who loves another women sexually or not hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing but instead it referring to themselves as "whole" women from "wholly" of "holy". Or as round women- women who love other women., yet, but women who also have concerns in a culture that oppresses all black people (and this would go back very far) for their fathers brothers and sons no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be "womanist". (Walker 2012, p71)*

Alice walker coined the term "womanist" in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. The introduction of this very term leads into the formulation of the theory of Womanism. Womanism is a social theory based on the history and everyday experience of black woman including both African women and the women of African diaspora. Since Walker's initial use, the term "womanist" has evolved to envelop varied interpretation of concepts such as feminism, men and blackness. These interpretations are often contradictory.

Womanism has often been interpreted as opposed to feminism; or as an offshoot or type of feminism; but, according to Walker, is instinctively pro-humankind idea which incorporates feminism. Womanism is an umbrella term. Walker writes, "(W)omanist is too feminist as purple is to lavender"(2012,p5).

Thus, she clarifies that Womanism is a broad term. The present article explores the aspects of Womanism in the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* written by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It explores Womanism in two levels- first one is superficial and the second one is deep and enduring.

### Materials and Methods

The present article is a feminist study of *Half of a Yellow Sun* by the critically acclaimed young anglophone author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who won Bailey's Prize for fiction for this novel. The present article has a qualitative approach which includes content analysis and in-depth study of the selected piece. Like Adichie's other novels, vis. *Purple Hibiscus* and *Americanah*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a feminist novel. Primarily the theory of Womanism has been explored and compared with feminism.

**Acting Womanish, like a Woman: First Interpretation:** Adichie primarily explores female characters in her novels. In the award winning novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie offers an intimate portraiture of a Nigerian woman named Olanna , a woman who endeavors to hold on to and hold together those who

were near and dear to her during the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War). Olanna belonged to an Elite family in Lagos, Nigeria. She is beautiful, educated, romantic, idealistic and share the Nationalist zeal of her "revolutionary" lover" Odenigbo. She is essentially a womanist; she possesses the qualities of "womanist" as described by Walker.

According to Walker, a womanist is a "black feminist" or a "feminist of color". She herself has derived this term from "womanish" which she explains is, "the black folk expression of mother's to female children. "You acting womanish", i.e., like a woman; usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or 'willful' behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up" (2012, p5). At the onset of the novel we see this assumed growing up in Olanna when she has learned to resist her parents desire to entertain wealthy and important guest, with a purpose to seek favours in business, and to get married for business prospects. One evening while her parents were entertaining Chief Okonji, a wealthy businessman, at their residence, Olanna refused to be the "sex bait" for him, much to the displeasure of her parents. Adichie writes, "She was used to her mother's disapproval; it had colored most of her major decisions, after all, when she chose two weeks' suspension rather than apologize to her Heath grove form mistress for insisting that the lessons on Pox Britannica were contradictory; when she joined the Students' movement for Independence at Ibadan; when she refused to marry Igwe Okagbue's son, and later, Chief Okaro's son "(2007,p35). Rather she has decided to move to Nsukka to join against a post of Instructor in the Department of Sociology in the university and, furthermore, to move in with Odenigbo. In a country like Nigeria where people are adverse to Western influence and preferably stick to their tradition, Olanna chose to stay in a live in relationship because she cherished the passionate bond she shares with her lover, and she fears that marriage would gradually end up in a "prosaic partnership". This is a "courageous" and "wilful" attitude of hers; non-compliance with her parents' buttering, and that of the tradition. Her decision to move to Nsukka was a step forward from "girlish" to "womanish".

Mohanty writes, Here is a bare-bones description of my own feminist vision: this is a vision of the world that is pro-sex and -woman, a world where women and men are free to live creative lives, in security and with bodily health and integrity, where they are free to choose whom they love, and whom they set up house with, and whether they want to have or not have children; a world where pleasure rather than just duty and drudgery determine our choices, where free and imaginative exploration of the mind is a fundamental right; a vision in which economic stability, ecological sustainability, racial equality, and the redistribution of wealth form the material basis of people's well-being (2003,p3).

**Growing up as a Woman: Second Interpretation:** Walker offers yet another interpretation of the term "womanish". Another black folk expression of this word is: "You trying to be grown". While "girlish" stands for "frivolous, irresponsible, not serious", "womanish" stands for responsible, in charge, serious (2012,p5). These qualities develop within Olanna as the novel progress. Adichie reveals during an interview to Wale Adebani, "Olanna is a character that is in many ways NOT a feminist, at least in the earlier part of the novel" (2007, p37). This statement suggests that feminist rising is stirred within her protagonist during the course of the novel. Bell Hooks states, "Feminists are made not born"(7). Initially, Olanna didn't have that temperament which Mary Wollstonecraft refers to as "sufficient strength of mind"(26). She writes that women who are "most respectable" are the "most oppressed" and it is a "melancholy truth ". Kainene, Olanna's twin sister, blames their parents for intending to use Olanna as a "sex bait" to win business favors. She was used to "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... her body would stay limp for a while before she pushed them away "(Adichie 2007,p33). Olanna was attracted by Odenigbo's machismo. For Odenigbo she broke up with Mohammed, a Hausa prince, who loved her equally but their love couldn't be materialized. She admired Odenigbo's concern for the nation and his community. Though a mathematician, he used to write newspaper articles about

African socialism. Olanna not only admired but was "awed at Odenigbo's self-assured eccentricities and fiercer moralities"(29). Though afraid and uncertain, yet she was living a blissful life with him; celebrating love; entertaining intellectuals every evening in the drawing room; getting involved in their discussions of political tumult going on in Nigeria; striving to be a part of them; admiring Odenigbo more when he made long speeches and arguments. She was awed at his certainty. She strived to live up to his standards; to be a part of the intellectuals. What Olanna hasn't realized was that she has actually internalized sexism. Sexism is the collective belief of the society, including men and women, that men are superior to women, hence their work is primary.

Erica Jong writes that sexism predisposes women to see men's work as more important than theirs (Napikoski). Olanna was unaware that she has imbibed this biased mindset. She has a predisposition that Odenigbo is somehow superior to her: makes her complete. For instance, "She wondered, too, what he really thought of her. There was clearly affection, but there was also a quiet speculation in his eyes, as if he was holding her up to something. And she worried that she came out lacking" (Adichie 48) Olanna endures. It is ironic that well educated women may be in the grip of sexism and males become the sovereigns in the household. Bell Hooks refers to this internal sexism as "the enemy within". Hooks writes, "We all knew first-hand that we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred. Sexist thinking made us judge each other without compassion and punish one another harshly" (2015,p14). The peace was broken after the arrival of Odenigbo's mother. Mother completely rejected Olanna, ignored her, yelled at her and created a scene. Humiliated, Olanna left for her flat. Later on, when Odenigbo learnt about this he goes to Olanna's flat to bring her back but is surprised to see her upset. Adichie narrates, "(S)he was upset, and made even more so by Odenigbo's expression, as if he could not believe she was not quite as high-minded as he had thought. He was making her feel small and absurdly petulant and, worse yet, she suspected he was right. She always suspected he was right."(101) Olanna looked upon Odenigbo as an embodiment of perfection; as a superior being; she was amazed at his certainty. He was "the constant of her life"; someone more important than herself.

Adichie further adds, "Then she wished, more rationally, that she could love him without needing him. Need gave him power without his trying; need was the choicelessness she often felt around him."(101) After their first quarrel, Olanna starts to confront her internalized sexism. She chose to stay melancholy and claim her right to be upset. But this change didn't take place overnight. Her awakening of feminist consciousness is slow and gradual. Hooks writes, "endurance is not to be confused with transformation". There's more for her to endure. She received yet another shock when Odenigbo cheated on her. She was shattered. In order to recuperate from her emotional injury she planned to stay at Kano with her Auntie Ifeka. Auntie strongly advised her to go back to Nsukka, not for her lover, but to adhere to her own identity and job. She also gave her a lesson which echoes feminists thoughts. She said, "You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man... your life belongs to you and you alone."(226) Thereafter Olanna decided to not to be the "wounded woman" whose man had deprived her. She did not pine for him but spent her time in cooking, gardening and improving her lectures. That was a turning phase in her life. She improved herself. Olanna exhibits essence of Womanism within her; she resorts to nature and her culture.

Walker explains that a womanist is also, A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually; committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female (5). Olanna stroke a friendship with Edna, her neighbor, and found her company refreshing. She shared a bond with her kinsmen throughout the novel. She used to pay regular visits to Kano exclusively to meet

Aunty Ifeka, Uncle Mbozi and her cousin Arize. Aunty Ifeka was not only her relative but her wet nurse. The scarcity and poverty of this family never impede her to stay with them. She cherished the love and respect she got as a "big sister" by Arize. She further longed to reestablish her understanding with her twin sister Kainene, which, finally, she was able to realize towards the end of the novel. She was tolerant towards Odenigbo's mother and insisted her to flee with them when their hometown was about to fall. When she heard about the riots in Kano, she ran to her aunt's place with Mohammed. Alas! She could only find their deceased bodies.

Apart from being "Responsible, Incharge, Serious" a womanist also has a tremendous capacity to love. Her love for Odenigbo is boundless. When his inconstancy was revealed she first tried to forget him but finally, though gradually, forgave him. Mass slaughter made her realize the ephemeral nature of life --- she moved back with her lover. She then took a brave step of adopting Odenigbo's daughter born from the village girl, Ambala. She identified herself with the baby who seemed "so helpless" just like its mother, thus she followed her maternal instincts. She became "Responsible. Incharge. Serious " about her domestic life and child rearing. She stood by Odenigbo's side during the war years; when they had to flee from their abode; when he worked hard in the Manpower Directorate; when they had to survive on frugal resources; when a bridge was created between them after the death of his mother; when she had to struggle for food standing in the long queues in relief centre; when her dear houseboy, Ugwu, was conscripted and she had to look after Baby and do all the household chores alone; when Odenigbo's charisma faded away and was silence by local gin.

At one point her love changed into disgust, for sure, just like her fear had changed into anger. One fine morning, after an raid, she realized that the world will continue even if she and her family died that day. "It was the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury", (280). Her anger reverberates the anger of early feminist. It was a step forward towards feminist awakening. Her anger was short and constructive; it helped her to stand against the adversities of war. Earlier Olanna was dependent on Odenigbo. But when he seized to be a gentleman and turned into a "rough, inelegant husband" Olanna didn't "model her soul to suit the realities of her companion" but she bears with him. His character became "a trial but not an impediment to virtue"(Wollstonecraft 39). At this stage Olanna "committed" herself to the "survival and wholeness of entire people". she stopped thinking about Odenigbo and worried about other things --- about herself, about Baby, about other children who were starving and forgetting to read and write. she was determined to keep their minds alert because "they were Biafra's future". So she started to teach them every day. She also helps Kainene in managing the refugee camp.

The war snatched away Olanna's privilege, her job in the university, her money, her home, her family members and friends. But it brought her sister back. She completely agrees with Kainene when she said, "There are some things that are so unforgivable that they make other things easily forgivable".(346) She forgave Odenigbo for a second time and accepted him as he was. Their love was reestablished by physical union. This act is an affirmation of life in the middle of mass slaughter. Olanna's forbearance didn't confound the sense of right or wrong for her. she, consequently, earned respect from her better half. Odenigbo said, "You are so strong. Nkem!"; and this really mattered for her. He always called her "Nkem" which means "my own" Thus exhibiting a sense of possession; she was his "Aphrodite". But at that time he saw a transformed woman "Responsible, Incharge, Serious" who was wonderfully coping up with the harsh realities of life. She had grown as a woman.

## Conclusion

Olanna is a person who is connected to nature, to people and moreover, to herself. She is kind and has the capacity to subvert herself. At the same time she is also conscious of herself. She too had sexist outlook but under certain circumstances and situations she is able to confront her sexism. But she didn't stop at her



disillusionment. She adopted feminist perspective at personal level. Olanna could be said a womanist from the very beginning due to her caring and nurturing nature which is extended to all that were known to her; whether it be her family member or neighbor or a strangers that were brought near her due to the war. It is wonderful to see Olanna's growth as a feminist. Her's is not an absolute case. She's not oppressed directly but her experience is subtle which in a way helps to understand the undercurrent of male dominance and power dynamics.

Most feminists believe that it is not individual men that subjugate women but the "oppression of women came from the underlying bias of a patriarchal society."(Napikoski). Nigerian society regards women as subservient and "property of their husband"(Begum 28). The way she revered Odenigbo; the way she incurred flirting of big men, the way she was unpleasantly used to be offered as suitable commodity to rich bachelors, the way she always considered herself inferior to her male counterpart and devoted herself to him, the way she quit everything and ran to escape on being cheated; many of her actions inhibit sexism. And then Olanna is prodded awaken by her aunt's words, "your life belongs to you". This statement disillusioned her and she accepted the life as it is and made the best of it. She focused on her strength. She not only supported herself, her child and husband, and her houseboy during the war but she also contributed in helping the victims of war. Had she been swamped in gloom, she would never have been able to ensure their survival. She faced the adversaries with great fortitude. She also won Odenigbo's respect: from his "speculative eyes" to his statement "you are so strong": is not only noteworthy but a victory of feminism. As wollstonecraft invokes that the "grand end" of women's exertion"should be to unfold their own faculties and aquire the dignity of conscious virtue "(33). Olanna had almost all the qualities of a "womanist " as portrayed by Alice Walker. After confronting her internalized sexism, Olanna emerged as a feminist, but, throughout the novel she had been a "womanist". She had tremendous capacity to love others. She was attached to nature and her culture and mankind. During the course of the novel she begun to reflect feminist tendencies by rejecting things that made her suffer like a victim. She refused to be a mute suppressed person, nor did she dwelt in escape, but proved that he was a woman with a backbone. Her journey supports Walker 's statement that "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender ". It is not something imposed from outside but very much inherent in Nigerian women.

To sum up it can be said that Olanna's journey is that of a woman who divested herself of her sexism. Her experience could be an eye-opener and inspirational to many. and as Walker perpetuates, she-"Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Love love and food and roundness. Love struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

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