

## RAISING FLAG OF PROTEST: REPUDIATION OF THE VICTIM ROLE IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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### **Abstract:**

Margaret Atwood proclaims Four Basic Victim Positions in her critique of Canadian literature, titled *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. This paper uses the model to analyse *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It treats the characters as victims since the novel narrates the lives of people who suffer physically and psychologically due to the political, economic, and ethnic conflicts. The positions are conceptual models that group work of arts dealing with the story of victims as Atwood says "I here propose to regard novels and poems as though they were expressions of Positions..." (HYS 37). Adichie's novels enunciate such positions as they all portray survival of the victims in their given situations. Her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* is centred on Kambili, a victim of a father who turn out to be a religious fanatic, *Americanah* shows the racial victimisation of Ifemelu, and *The Thing Around Your Neck* presents the lives of oppressed women.

**Key Words:** *Victims, ethnic conflict, survival, fanatic.*

"What matters is not what they went through but that they survived."  
(C. N. Adichie)

Margaret Atwood proclaims Four Basic Victim Positions in her critique of Canadian literature, titled *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. This paper uses the model to analyse *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It treats the characters as victims since the novel narrates the lives of people who suffer physically and psychologically due to the political, economic, and ethnic conflicts. The positions are conceptual models that group work of arts dealing with the story of victims as Atwood says "I here propose to regard novels and poems as though they were expressions of Positions..." (HYS 37). Adichie's novels enunciate such positions as they all portray survival of the victims in their given situations. Her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* is centred on Kambili, a victim of a father who turn out to be a religious fanatic, *Americanah* shows the racial victimisation of Ifemelu, and *The Thing Around Your Neck* presents the lives of oppressed women.

Olanna and her twin sister Kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun* find themselves in the Position Three of repudiating Victim Role: "To acknowledge the fact that that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable." (Atwood 34). Though the novel talks about the lives of many important characters like Odenigbo, Ugwu, Kainene, and Richard, Olanna and Kainene are the focal points of the novel. Adichie throws considerable attention to the characterization of Olanna and Kainene by placing them as archetypal women. Olanna is a beautiful, educated, and rich young woman returning from London to her homeland Nigeria, to live with her beloved Odenigbo, a lecturer in the university of Nsukka. Though bold, and outspoken, Kainene underestimates herself as "ugly" and "unattractive". Olanna admires Kainene for being "The sort of person who did not need to lean on others" (HYS 103).

Olanna's determination is explicit while refusing to be a victim for the illegal profit expected by her

parents using her as a sex bait. She constantly refuses her parents' persuasions to marry wealthy politicians like Chief Okonji, who offers her a job in ministry. Olanna's choice to move away from her parents is reasoned out while she "looked at the photo of her and her mother... their faces contended and complacent, at a cocktail party hosted by the British high commissioner... the discomfort that came with being a part of the gloss that was her parent's life." (HYS 34). As a knowledgeable woman, she is able to grasp the minds of the people around her. Through the bitter experiences enforced by their parents' business motives to coax and marry so called 'powerful' big men who only cares for physical beauty, she resolves to move to her lover at once. It is visible when the narrator speaks for her of the elite men who court beautiful woman like Olanna: "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." (HYS 33). But it is visible, Olanna values 'braveness' over 'beauty' as much as she values 'dignity' over 'power'. Though Odenigbo's economic status is comparatively lower than that of Olanna's, she chooses to move in with him to Nsukka, the university town which further implies her interest in seeking knowledge and self-respect. Adichie seems to imply through Olanna's characterization that women should express their own self to confront the situations that subjugates them. Olanna expresses her mind when her father tries to persuade her by pointing out Odenigbo's low-income job and lifestyle. Whenever Olanna faces a criticism of Odenigbo, she cuts them plainly with straight reply. For instance, when Ariza suggests her to marry the handsome Mohammed instead of not-good-looking Abba men, she says, "Odenigbo is not ugly. Good looks come in different ways" (HYS 42), affirms her stance to her reluctant parents by saying, "I don't want to work in Lagos. I want to work in the university, and I want to live with him." (HYS 35). Unlike Olanna, Kainene is more assertive for taking charge of her own life. Nobody could move into her sphere unless she allows them to, even her twin sister Olanna. Her straight-forward, open-minded statements are sometimes mistaken as rude behaviour. Richard becomes the only person who could win her heart, though she befriended many white boyfriends during study in London. Kainene simply put full stop to conversations that lead to embarrassment of Richard. When Udodi blabbers about having a white man as her partner who questions her for being a new slave of a white man despite having the status of a Big Man's daughter, she gives an immediate daring reply that "My choice of lovers is none of your business" (HYS 80). Adichie crafts her character like Auntie Ifeoma's "who knows where she is going" (PH 71). Richard could sense Kainene's preferences in her life, where she plays business first and people next.

Both Olanna and Kainene are betrayed by their lovers at some point. They both disagree the common attitude of the African women, as in *Imitation*, "men are like that" (TAYN 34), which shows defeatism of Position Two. Rather, they show a strong contempt towards the persons for breaking their trust on them, nevertheless they forgive them. They take responsibility of their choice they make in their life. They are honest and do not reside in bad faith. Odenigbo's betrayal drives her back to Kano, because it's the only place where she could think clearly" (HYS 225), further shows her attempts to see things and analyse before taking any decision. The motif of sisterhood can be apparent as she could think of Kainene and Kano in order before leaving Odenigbo. She expects Kainene to be there for she "would say something clever and sarcastic and comforting all at once" (HYS 225). In Kano, she is boosted up by her Aunt's empowering speech that made her to observe her own self. Auntie Ifeka is one such bold woman, who would never want to compromise her life for anyone. It is quite clear that Olanna's act of repudiation is strengthened by her words, "You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man... Your life belongs to you and you alone..." (HYS 226). Olanna's resentment to carry the image of the "wounded woman" proves the fact that she refuses to be a victim. Nor she resides in the state of bewilderment, or she concludes her situation as unchangeable as in Position Two. Her deportment is substantiated by the narrator: "She could be a woman taking charge of her own life. She could be anything" (HYS 228).

Kainene's perception of Richard's betrayal is not like that of Olanna's. Kainene never places her

situation of choicelessness for Olanna. Richards's observation of Kainene clarifies her intrepid attitude: "hers was a life that ran fully and would run fully even if he was not in it... he was not the only occupant of her world, but stranger still was how her routines were already in place... Her work came first, she was determined to make her father's factories grow, to do better..." (HYS 77). It is an immediate decision of her to burn Richard's manuscript of his book, an act of retaliation, which Richard hopes as, "by burning the manuscript, she had shown him that she would not end the relationship; she would not bother to cause him pain if she was not going to stay" (HYS 258).

The institution of marriage means nothing to Olanna as well as Kainene, for they both eschew it as a trap, which cannot true relationship. It is clear when Olanna puts it: "Each time he suggested they get married, she said no... she feared that marriage would flatten it to a prosaic partnership" (HYS 52). Motherhood becomes one of the main factors of victimization of women, especially for those who do not happen to experience it. It causes a sense of guilt and the threat of disgrace to women who fear of being branded as barren or evil. Olanna is even shamed by Odenigbo's mother as an educated witch, degrading her character by saying: "These girls that go to university follow men around until their bodies are useless. Nobody knows if she can have children" (HYS 97). The commodification of women as bodies that are only meant for reproduction and child-bearing is prevalent in African societies, which praises mothers and curses single women, as Remi Akujobi observes in her article:

Motherhood in Africa is seen as a God-giving role and for this reason it is sacred. So whether one sees African women as victims or actors, whether or not one depicts women's travails... Motherhood is so critical in most traditional societies in Africa that there is no worse misfortune for a woman than being childless. A barren woman is seen as incomplete, she is what Mbiti calls the dead end of human life, not only for genealogical level but also for herself (2-3).

Women are curbed to roles of good wives and mothers. Most of the female characters except Olanna and Kainene express the anxieties of marriage and motherhood. Olanna's cousin Arize worries much for her delay in marriage fearing she "will expire" if she waits too long (HYS 41). The pressures of family depress women wanting to acquire the status. "Odenigbo's mother's visit had ripped a hole in her safe mesh of feathers, startled her, snatched something away from her... The thought came to her slowly: She wanted to have Odenigbo's child... She once told him that she did not have that fabled female longing to give birth, and her mother called her *abnormal* until Kainene said she didn't have it either... the longing in the lower part of her belly was sudden and searing and new. She wanted the solid weight of a child, his child in her body" (HYS 104). Olanna acknowledges the fact that she is a victim of cultural implications on the motherhood, but does not ever resides on the fact that she has been victimized by her husband, or her parents, or the social crisis she goes through. She does not complain for she determines to treat the hurdles as experiences that can be overcome with the power of love and concern. Residing onto her pitiful state seems impossible for her.

War begets incongruity in the minds of people since they are extricated from their everyday life and pushed into facing pain and death. *Half of the Yellow Sun* shows the darker side of war and the pessimistic attitude of women in response to war. Nationalism gives them strength to endure the pain inflicted by cruelties of war, for every woman actively participate in the discussion of forming Biafra. Jane Bryce in her article "Conflict and Contradiction in Women's Writing on the Nigerian Civil War" observes that, "Women became the cohesive force in a shifting, diminishing people who were slowly losing what they saw as a war of survival" (33). Educated and empowered women like Olanna and Kainene try their best to do something for their nation, even though they are startled at the beginning by witnessing heart wrenching scenes of war. Olanna's transformation is marked by the revelation of the absurdity of death. The notion of the absurd particularly emerges out in the conditions of war as individuals exposed to most unpleasant occurrences.

This enables the interpretation of Sartre on the human condition that “they lack a foundation outside of themselves” (AZE 51). The transformation from her Position Two attitude of resignation to the Position Three rebellion can be ensured in the following lines:

Death was the only thing that made any sense as she hunched underground...The war would continue without them. Olanna exhaled, filled with a frothy rage. It was the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter. She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die. Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life (HYS 280).

Power and solidarity propels women to move forward and channel their energy into constructive actions. As an intelligent woman, Olanna shows pessimistic attitude that she could “distinguish between the *role* of Victim...and the *objective experience* that is making you a victim” (Atwood 34). So no longer dwells on the state of victim of war, rather showing the guts to protest as she was first to climb out of the bunker. She teaches children about war and gives hope to her jobless detached husband. As for the broadminded Kainene, she demonstrates the brave and undaunted stance against war. Her patriotism is no less than the men around her. Adichie characterises Kainene, a stereotype of proud and independent woman, who never fears for anything. supply army boots, Her Position Three constructive anger seems to move forward to attain Position Four freedom. These women overcome the obliterations of war through their unabashed progressive attempts. Kainene calls to mind Debbie Ogedemgbe, “the radical and modern” woman of Buchi Emecheta, who “remains a product of her class and a male-defined 'exceptional' woman, doing a man's job” (Conflict 40). Like the twin sisters, Debbie return from England to Biafra to support her husband by all means. Woman provide a huge backing and a source of power to sustainability and survival. *Half of a Yellow Sun* captures the break of submissive silence to evolvement of what Atwood calls, “self-confidence (call it faith) to sustain such a rebellion” (Atwood 276).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* Adichie seems to tribute the women who became the ray of aspiration to the people who suffer the trauma of Biafra War by acknowledging remarkable female characters. The Position Three revolutionary attitude alludes to the readers the reinforcement of one's moral strength to look forward and welcome a hopeful future.

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