

## Representations of African Women Victimisation in Chimamanda Adichie's Novels

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### **Abstract**

*The victimisation of African women is a persistent issue that arises from the intersection of several systems of oppression rooted in gender, race and socio-economic variables. The aim of this study is to shed some light on representations of women's oppression and subjugation as they are fictionally delineated in Chimamanda Adichie's novels Purple Hibiscus (2003), Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) and Americanah (2013). From Black feminist perspectives, the study highlights the significance of Adichie as a formidable advocate for feminism, vigorously combating the victimisation of women via her works on the one hand, and prompting a need for a change in social standards and perspectives on the other.*

**Keywords:** African Women Victimisation, Black feminism, Chimamanda Adichie, Purple Hibiscus, Half of a Yellow Sun, Americanah

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977) has established herself as a famous advocate for feminism, aggressively opposing the victimisation of women in her literary works and public appearances. She advocates for gender equality, questions patriarchal standards and advocates for the independence of women through her books, articles and lectures. Adichie's literary works, including Purple Hibiscus, Half of a Yellow Sun and Americanah, are captivating stories that portray the ordeals of oppressed women and illuminate the systemic injustices they encounter.

Black feminism is a prominent and impactful subset of feminist philosophy that focuses on the unique experiences and challenges encountered by black women (Collins, 2000). It developed as a reaction to the limitations of the mainstream feminist movement, which frequently disregarded the various obstacles encountered by black women as a result of the interconnectedness of race and gender (Carby, 1982). Black feminists contend that comprehending the lived realities of black women requires acknowledging the interrelated complexities of race, socioeconomic status and gender. (Davis, 1981).

An influential text that played a significant role in the growth of black feminism is Black Feminist Thought, by Patricia Hill Collins. Collins' book delves into the concurrent forms of oppression experienced by black women and presents a theoretical framework to comprehend and confront these oppressive systems (Collins, 2000). She underlines the significance of black women's experiences and expertise in influencing theory and action and stresses the necessity of a feminism that is both inclusive and intersectional.

Adichie's advocacy as a strong feminist goes beyond her creative work. Her essay "We Should All Be Feminists" underscores the significance of confronting the victimisation of women and advocating for gender equality in society. Adichie asserts that the deconstruction of patriarchal structures and the empowerment of women yield advantages not just for individuals but also for society at large (Adichie, 2013). Adichie's renowned non-fictional work, We Should All be Feminists, openly demonstrates her viewpoint as a black feminist. Adichie contends, in her book, that feminism ought to be all-encompassing, incorporating the experiences of women from many racial and sociocultural backgrounds. According to Adichie (2014), the issue with gender is that it dictates how we should behave instead of acknowledging our true nature (11). Adichie's focus on acknowledging and appreciating the many experiences of women corresponds with the demand of black feminism for intersectional examination and comprehension.

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Adichie's support for inclusive and intersectional feminism is further demonstrated in her "The Danger of a Single Story". She argues that narrative is crucial in forming our comprehension of others. Adichie cautions against oversimplifying people into a singular storyline, as this might perpetuate preconceived notions and strengthen disparities. This viewpoint aligns with the objective of black feminism, which aims to dismantle oppressive structures by questioning prevailing narratives that marginalise black women. Adichie makes an active contribution to the black feminist debate by disseminating her writing and speaking engagements, thus raising and broadening awareness and championing the rights and liberation of black women. Adichie reflects on the issue of female subjugation within specific cultural and social constraints. Purple Hibiscus explores the plight of black women in a patriarchal culture as they confront domestic violence and abuse. Christine N. Quanta (1987) describes the situation of women in Nigeria thus:

She has no past and no future, given the inherent backwardness of her society. Her consciousness about her oppression is awakened ... and she is surprised by their comparative freedom. She never speaks for herself but is always spoken about. This image is projected with such consistency, but it has almost been transformed into fact by mere repetition. (11)

Adichie utilises Purple Hibiscus to shed light on the prevalent realities within several African households. The despotic, malevolent and duplicitous lifestyle of Eugene Achike and his authoritarian control over his home exemplify the prevailing patriarchal norms observed in many African households. Supporting this argument, Orie (2011) states that:

Eugene (Papa) is the symbol of patriarchy, whose mere presence sparks off the fire of danger that keeps the females under fear, tension: so, they are silenced. In fact, Kambili early on sounds lachrymal: "I felt suffocated" (p. 7), and at another time bursts out, bemused: "fear, I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt I felt it, it was never the same as the other times, as though it came in different flavours and colours".

Adichie's novel challenges patriarchal cultural norms by highlighting women's pain and male cruelty through female characters like Beatrice and her daughter, Kambili, intensifying their victimization. Kate Millett (1972) examines the essence of womanhood under a patriarchal culture, stating;

Under patriarchy the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. As both the primitive and civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas, which shaped culture in regard to the female, were also of male design. The image of woman as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the "otherness" of woman. Yet, this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the subject and referent to which the female is "other" or alien. Whatever its origin, the function of the male's sexual antipathy is to provide a means of control over a subordinate group and a rationale which justifies the inferior station of those in a lower order, explaining the oppression of their lives. (46-7)

Beatrice embodies the stereotypical image of African women as passive, oppressed, dependent and obedient. She is severely maltreated by her husband, Eugene, who consistently inflicts physical harm and mistreatment on Beatrice, resulting in her experiencing a miscarriage: "For an unnamed wrongdoing, Eugene breaks a heavy mahogany table on her stomach leading to another miscarriage of her six week pregnancy" (Adichie, 2003, 243). Kambili's account of Eugene's tyranny and masculine dominance is manifested through her mother's blood. The "blood" symbol represents domestic violence and the severe suffering that women endure as a result of cruel male abuse.

Adichie constructs a narrative in which Eugene retains absolute authority over Beatrice, serving as a representation of the subjugation of women in Nigerian families. After enduring a severe beating from her husband, Beatrice, who was pregnant at the time, experienced a highly abnormal childbirth. She then informs her children about the incident: "There was an accident; the child is gone" (Adichie 2003, 34). This displays her suppressed agony and her husband's dominance over her reaction to the children. In the same vein, Leslie Ogunjide (1984) opines:

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. (p. 35)

Eugene embodies harsh societal masculine traits, imposing limitations on his family, including his Nigerian father, and insulting everyone adhering to the tribal faith as "heathens". As a fanatical Catholic, Eugene abandons his own father because of his refusal to deviate from his chosen path towards Christianity. He subjects his children to physical punishment if they do not comply with his religious commands. Kambili is severely punished for violating her fasting regimen by consuming food before attending church, as she has to take medication for her ailment. This exemplifies the malevolent aspect of Eugene, who presents himself as a benefactor and a dissenter against British tyranny. However, in his private life, he subjugates his own family under the guise of a religion that is foreign to all of them. Both Beatrice and Kambili, the female characters in the family, experience suffering. Eugene prohibits his children from engaging in food-sharing or spending time with their grandfather due to his disapproval of Christianity.

He exhibits callous and cruel behaviour towards his family members and children. Kambili and Jaja frequently face punishment due to their concealment of their residence at their grandfather's house in Aunt Ifeoma's household. For this, Eugene pours hot water on their feet. Eugene's brutal behaviours unequivocally demonstrate his embodiment of masculine egoism and male brutality. Adichie critically analyses the black feminist perspective, aiming to eradicate the repressive and derogatory attitudes of males towards women. As a black feminist, she criticises Eugene, who exhibits oppressive behaviour towards women. Eugene reprimands Kambili, and her narrative succinctly recounts the savage assault by Eugene:

He poured hot water on my feet, slowly, if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen ... I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed. "That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet," he said. (Adichie, 2003, 194)

Kambili is apprehensive of his authoritarian conduct, which results in her tendency to stutter. Highlighting Kambili's miserable condition, Okuyade (2009) resolves:

The function of Kambili's tongue is so constricted that her struggle to express herself usually terminates with a stutter, making her classmates observe her with familiarity laced with contempt. Because of her inability to make her tongue function in school she is labelled a "backyard snob". (253)

Eugene's propensity for violence towards his daughter is further shown in another context: "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" (Adichie, 2003, 210).

Beatrice undergoes severe physical and psychological suffering. When faced with such circumstances, many women choose to accept their fate. However, courageous individuals always manage to liberate themselves. As a radical feminist, Beatrice manages to triumph over patriarchal victimization. To get rid of her pain, she resolves to kill Eugene, the one responsible for her misfortunes. Okuyade (2009) affirms that:

Kambili's mother, an embodiment of the traditional African woman who is unsophisticated and content with the economic security her husband guarantees, decides to liberate her children and herself from her husband's sinking philosophy. She is about the most interesting character in the novel. She steps out of her enervating state, fractures the patriarchal social structure, and demystifies the idealised traditional images of the African woman. She puts behind [her] the psychological rift between her body and mind and liberates herself from the marginal status she assumes at the beginning of the novel as she begins to doctor her husband's meals. It is this aspect of the novel that gives it a very radical feminist outlook. (243)

The inherent fortitude of a woman becomes prominent when she attains her liberation. This novel concludes with the demise of Eugene, brought about by his haughty disposition. Beatrice becomes a strong woman who triumphs over the oppression enforced upon her by a domineering husband.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* explores the violation of women's rights during the Nigerian civil war and the atrocities that victimise women. Amidst armed conflict, women endure a range of sexual and psychological assaults. Additionally, they suffer from severe deprivation of food and other essential necessities. The novel portrays women as resilient characters who triumph against challenging circumstances, often demonstrating greater strength than men. Adichie's female characters are predominantly educated Nigerian women who actively contribute to societal progress, despite prevailing inequities. According to Mineke Schipper (1984):

The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice ... in the family, in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organisations, discrimination reign supreme ... Within African literature, room must be made for women. (46-7)

In her writing, Adichie focuses on establishing a liberated society for women. Therefore, she mostly concentrates on the gender difficulties faced by women in this story. The gender hegemony of males is an inevitable consequence of warfare, resulting in the affliction of women. During the Biafran civil war, the Nigerian military deliberately attacks Biafran civilians, and the army disregards the established standards of behaviour on the battlefield. Military soldiers from various Nigerian ethnic groups have begun sexually assaulting innocent women and girls belonging to the Igbo-Biafran community under the pretext of seeking retribution against the Igbo community.

The war's brutality has resulted in a scarcity of food in their country, leaving the people of Biafra, particularly women, suffering from starvation as they strive to provide for their children and elderly family members. The issue of food shortages is becoming increasingly severe, resulting in a significant number of women and children experiencing starvation and death. Under these conditions, Nigerian troops subject women to barbaric acts of rape, exacerbating their already dire situation.

A significant number of troops engage in transactions with women, offering essential provisions such as food and medication in return for sexual favours. Federal Nigerian Soldiers abduct village women and subject them to fatal sexual assault. After the war, Ugwu returns to his hometown where he learns that Nigerian soldiers had committed a heinous act of sexual assault against his sister, Anulika. This is confirmed by the testimony of Nnesinachi, a local girl, and Ugwu's lover from the village. She tells him: "They forced themselves on her. Five of them. They said the first one that climbed on top of her, she bit him on the arm and drew blood. They nearly beat her to death. One of her eyes has refused to open well since" (Adichie, 2006, 421).

During this moment of severe crisis, some Biafran women participate in marriages with enemy troops as a means of protecting themselves from the threat of gang rape and murder. The troops have difficulty finding spouses and resort to coercing available women into marriage. These women believe that they might get sustenance and protection from Nigerian troops by proposing marriage to them. Ugwu discovers that Nnesinachi is with child and asks about her situation after learning about what happened to her. He is informed that she has entered into matrimony with a soldier from the Hausa tribe. She explains her decision by using the circumstances of Ugwu's sister, who was subjected to a horrible act of rape by troops. She claims that the only thing that has ensured her survival is marrying her rival. Sara Pendergast (2007) describes further atrocious acts committed against women in areas affected by war:

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". (271)

Adichie not only depicts the brutality of the Federal Nigerian army but also captures the anguish endured by the Biafran army. The Biafran army is also involved in committing crimes that oppress their women. In this respect, McLuckie and McPhails (2000) opine that: "Soldiers from both the Nigerian and Biafran armies were

notorious during the war in their sexual escapades, which involved rape and kidnapping of women" (63). Ugwu witnesses Eberechi, his beloved, sleeping with the general of the Biafran army. Eberechi is a resilient woman who disregards societal norms in order to save her family. Eberechi's parents convince her to make this choice in order to protect their family from the Nigerian military. Additionally, she promises Ugwu that she can endorse the general's decision to exclude Ugwu from conscription. Eberechi's audacious actions exemplify the brutality of war and the courageous resilience of women in their oppressed condition. The repercussions of battle compel them to acknowledge the actuality of their existence and the deprivation they have endured.

Adichie illustrates how males perceive rape as a demonstration of their manhood while targeting innocent women. Ugwu's reluctance to engage in sexual assault is met with coercion from his fellow troops, ultimately leading him to comply. During times of conflict, the majority of instances of sexual assault occur as a means to demonstrate male dominance over women. As Nwaogu (2008) accentuates, "This treatment of women as sexual objects through all manners of rape confirms the fact that women are victims of wars where sexual violence is used as one of the most extreme expressions of the masculine domination over women" (254). Adichie's war tales demonstrate the disproportionate exploitation of women during times of conflict.

Adichie examines the personalities of courageous women who are actively engaged in the civil war. As a result of prolonged military conflicts, men aimlessly traverse battle zones and disregard their families. The protagonist of this novel, Odeinigbo, relocates to Tanzania and becomes disillusioned, losing his optimism for triumph and the possibility of returning to his homeland. However, Olana, his girlfriend, remains optimistic and takes care of their child.

Olana displays unwavering loyalty to Odeinigbo and diligently tends to their child. Olana's portrayal displays her deep affection for humanity. She possesses exceptional intelligence and displays kindness towards everyone. Similar to her, several educated women from the Igbo community demonstrate their generosity during socially catastrophic situations and assist their male counterparts in achieving victory in warfare. Sophia Ogwude (2011) praises the female characters depicted by Adichie: "The novel bustles with bold and successful full-bodied women with no inhibitions. These women—Kainene, Olanna, their mom, the visiting black American lecturer, Edna Whaler, Aunt Ifeka, and Miss Adebayo—and their worldview and lifestyles" (120). Olana efficiently collects and preserves food for the refugee camp without assistance from any male individuals. She alone oversees the management of the refugee camp in the face of food scarcity. Simultaneously, Kainene, her twin sister, establishes an educational institution catering to the youngsters residing in the refugee camp. Both individuals endeavour to provide education to their people during their nation's grave conflicts. Ultimately, Kainene fearlessly traverses the borders of her adversaries in order to engage in an exchange of products, but she does not come back. She embodies exceptional patriotism.

Americanah highlights the experiences of Ifemelu, who is confronted with the challenge of combating racial prejudice as well as gender discrimination and class-based biases, resulting in the complex predicament of triple consciousness. It explores the societal challenges encountered by impoverished migrants who are compelled to engage in prostitution as a means of financial sustenance. Ifemelu becomes frustrated with the males she encounters, including Curt and Blaine, as she comes to the realisation that men perceive women just as objects of desire. Therefore, Americanah may be seen as a manifestation of black women's literature, as described by Collins (2009), which offers:

...a comprehensive view of black women's struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of derogated images of black womanhood. Portraying the range of ways that African-American women experience internalised oppression has been a prominent theme in black women's writing. (93)

Both Giniki, Ifemelu's companion, and Uju, her aunt, have been impacted by American notions of beauty, much like the majority of African women. They prefer to embrace the American lifestyle as disseminated through the media. In this respect, the famous feminist, bell hooks (1992), claims that "most media contribute to the institutionalization of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitations, and overall domination of all black people" (2). Curly hair and a dark skin colour are frequently perceived as inferior to a fair white skin colour or straight hair, or blue eyes. Consequently, black women experience social and psychological discrimination due to their exclusion from conventional American

beauty ideals, which impedes their social progress and impacts on their self-confidence. They experience disdain for their own dark colour and feel ashamed of themselves due to their perceived lower status. They find themselves in a predicament, which Collins (2000) characterises as "the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other-Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (89).

The societal ideals of female beauty compel women to alter their appearance in order to transcend the racial disparities experienced by immigrants in America within the context of gender-based cultural norms. According to Nayar (2008), "Race and gender make the black woman the outsider" (164). Upon immigrating to America, Ifemelu becomes very conscious of the intricacies of beauty politics as a Nigerian woman. At the beginning of the novel, she admires her mother's hair and aspires to emulate her. Following her mother's conversion to Christianity, both of their hairstyles undergo a transformation in accordance with their new religion. Reluctantly, Ifemelu trims her hair to accommodate her mother's new religious beliefs, which adversely affects her inherent attractiveness as a black woman. Upon relocating to America, she once again encounters the intricacies of physical appearance politics, prompting her to modify her own identity to align with various ethnic and social contexts dictated by other cultures. The importance of hair style is significant in the manifestation of racial prejudice in America. Adichie comments that: "Since she came to America, she had always braided her hair with long extensions, always alarmed at how much it cost. She wore each style for three months, even four months, until her scalp itched unbearably and the braids sprouted fuzzily from a bed of new growth" (Adichie 2013, 203). The social hierarchy in America places significant emphasis on the ordered ideals of beauty for women, which are determined by the dominant influences from the Western world. Survival in America is unattainable without adhering to Western values. Ifemelu immediately realises this.

When Ifemelu expresses her desire to participate in an interview in Baltimore, Ruth offers her counsel: "My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get the job" (Adichie 2013, 202). Ifemelu acquiesces to American societal norms and seeks a place to reside that aligns with American cultural ideals. Adichie effectively highlights the importance of hairdo politics and racial prejudice by portraying American societal standards. Similarly, the shape of the body serves as a significant point of contention for women in both America and Nigeria. Ifemelu excessively contemplates her physique and desires to alter herself in order to conform to Western ideals of attractiveness. While in Nigeria, she engages in body comparisons with her friend, Ginika, who is renowned for her exceptional beauty. After a prolonged period, she encounters her in America and marvels at her slender physique. Ginika discusses the beauty standards that are necessary to obtain employment and reside in America. Adichie reveals the perception held by Americans that is intended to cater to the masculine population. Their orientation towards sexuality becomes apparent during a dialogue between Ginika and Ifemelu:

"Obinze had better hurry up to and come to US, before somebody will carry you away. You know you have the kind of body they like here." "What?" "You're thin with big breasts." "Please, I'm not thin. I'm slim." "Americans says 'thin'. Here 'thin' is a good word." "Is that why you stopped eating?" Ifemelu said. (Adichie 2013, 124)

Ginika reveals her own encounters in America, shedding light on the concealed social prejudice that stems from sexual characteristics. These standards are Western norms influenced by the colonisers. Freire (1963) notes that, "At one point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and their way of life ... in their alienation the oppressed want at any cost to resemble their oppressors, to imitate them and follow them" (33). Ginika and Ifemelu relinquish their African female identities and adopt Westernised standards of beauty and physical attractiveness.

Ifemelu, trapped in poverty, experiences feelings of guilt over her sexual activities, in which she sacrifices her body and relinquishes her sense of self as a woman in order to obtain income. Ifemelu's marginalised position as a woman, compounded by her status as a black poor immigrant, subjects her to more hardships. These are the hardships faced by several young female immigrants. Ifemelu is aware of all the forces of victimization that impact on her existence, so she "develops critical thinking and critical consciousness ... invents new, alternative habits of being and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined" (hooks, 1992, 15).

Undoubtedly, Ifemelu's educational journey is characterised by her transformation into a subject who possesses refined critical thinking skills and has successfully mastered the challenges of triple awareness. Collins (2005) opines that "the process of becoming a subject is determined by active involvement with various forms of oppression" (5). Describing this process, Collins (2009) argues that: "[I]n this process Black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality and class" (125).

Ifemelu's educational journey culminates with her embracing critical consciousness, allowing her to reject white cultural standards, reclaim her own self and achieve a sense of belonging within her black community in Nigeria. Ifemelu's choice to return to her native country not only challenges but also dismantles the high ideals of the "American Dream", which purports to offer prosperity and achievement to immigrants of all ethnic backgrounds. The concepts of equality, freedom and brotherhood in white America are revealed to be nothing more than a superficial façade or hollow platitudes that conceal the presence of abhorrent bigotry. According to Adichie, genuine self-esteem and achievement can only be fully realised inside one's own country. Ifemelu's choice to return to her homeland is a significant milestone in her journey of personal growth and maturation. Androne (2017) observes that: "Rather than growing through overcoming barriers ... Ifemelu advances through her recognition that staying where she is will stunt her growth and force her to accept a place in a world which is increasingly alien" (230).

## CONCLUSION

Adichie's novels explore the multifaced victimisation of African women, highlighting patriarchal systems, religious extremism and racial disparities. She uses real-life stories to depict these women's hardships and advocate for societal transformation. As a feminist, Adichie emphasises the importance of addressing power imbalances and revealing the unfair treatment of women, ultimately calling for cultural change.

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