

Invigorating Radical Feminism: An Appraisal of Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Sunday Michael OYELEKE

Ahmadu Bello University, Faculty of Arts, Department of English and Literary Studies, Zaria, Nigeria
sundaymichaeloyeleke@gmail.com

Abstract

Apparently in the novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) by Chimamanda Adichie, the dominant leitmotif of the Nigerian civil war seems to have beclouded many critics from observing the radical feminist view of ending patriarchy through sociopolitical empowerment of women to create their own structure delineated in the text (as against the liberal feminists' clamouring for equality). The common perception of feminism, specifically radical feminist theory is the misinformation that feminists are extremely misandrists or man-haters. This study hereby attempts to clarify the problem of defining radical feminist theory by providing its brief history, major proponents and submissions which also guides the hermeneutic praxis for the analysis of the selected text. This paper basically expounds how female dynamic characters are invigorated or reinstated in the selected novels to espouse the radical feminist tenet of expunging patriarchal characterization of women in misogynist writings, as well as annihilate patriarchal societies' political and socioeconomic subjugation of women. As depicted in the selected text, the study examines the characterization of some dominant female characters who have radically reversed the male domineering culture to create their own new strong sociopolitical structure where male characters can serve women as their cooks and servants. This research aims to add to the existing knowledge in literary discourses.

Keywords: Feminism, Radical Feminism, Patriarchy, Women Writing

1. Introduction

This study assesses how Chimamanda Adichie's fictional novel titled *Half of a Yellow Sun* gives energy or support to some tenets of radical feminism. This is one of the possible ways of generating empirical interpretation of the text that has been read intensively as fictional Nigerian civil war novel. Since the text can be located under the umbrella term of contemporary women writing, it is essential to describe some keywords in order to foreground the analysis herein.

The term "Women's Writing" simply describes the writing of the female gender or writings that present the female gender issues usually in a patriarchal society. A reading of women's writing within a feminist skeleton usually gives vigour and inspires a theorisation within its own specific or larger context. In unmixed words of Nana Wilson-Tagoe (1997: 11):

For what a feminist framework does is to introduce gender as a fundamental category in literary analysis, enabling the critic to see representations in texts as mediated by sexual difference and the aesthetic and political assumption that surround gender.

There is indisputably a confluence between women writing as literary discourse and feminism as concept. Women writing can be described to be as old as the antiquity literature itself. Many women in faraway history have used their writings to express the assumptions of feminism. The concept of feminism has evolved from time immemorial and has grown into a cocoon, as it is today. It is hard, if not impossible, to pigeonhole the varied strands of contemporary feminist criticism into a single ideology because many feminist approaches have been developed, as each creates its distinct "sphere of concern while usually intersecting not only with other approaches of feminism but also with other schools of literary criticism" (Bressler, 2011). According to Charles Bressler, feminist criticism can be classified into four subgroupings as **Anglo-American feminism** –having some renowned feminists that are, but not circumscribed to, Virginia Woolf, Judith Fetterley, Annette Kolodny, Nina Bayn, Elaine Showalter, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. **Poststructuralist feminism** also has notable feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Catherine Clement, Monique Wittig, Joan Scott, Julia Kristeva, and Helen Cixious, etc. Thirdly, there is the **Materialist feminism** with some of its proponents as Juliet Mitchell, Katie King, Michele Barrett, Rosalind Coward, Jacqueline Rose, Donna Haraway, Catherine Belsey, and Toril Moi; and fourthly **Postmodern feminism**, having notable advocates as Judith Butler, Gloria Analdua, Uma Narayan, Chandra Mohanty, Diana Fuss, Mary Daly, and Jane Gallop.

In addition, some critics prefer to divide feminist criticism "into a variety of subcategories, ranging in number that is more than thirty" (Bressler: 2011). Some of these subcategories include: Amazon feminism, radical feminism, liberal feminism, cultural feminism, ecofeminism, material feminism, separatism, and postcolonial or third-world feminism, to list a few. This

study herein provides a brief historical development of feminism and an exegesis of radical feminism as defined by some of its notable proponents in order to foreground how the selected text (*Half of a Yellow Sun*) enlivens some of the tenets of radical feminism.

The whole argument about feminism may be summarized in the words of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) that asserts, “To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relation she bears to man”. This gives an overview that feminism is mainly about the freedom of women in social relation. From the mid twentieth to the turn of this twenty-first century, feminism has remained one of the most vital developments in literary discourses by basically advocating equal rights for all gender in sociopolitical, economical and psychological facets of life. Bressler (2011) buttresses that feminist criticism is a general or encompassing term for different approaches “to culture and literature that are of particular interest to women.” Bressler (2011) explains that feminism focuses on patriarchy (men’s domineering rule of culture and society) which is key or overarching in the various aims and strategies of feminist criticism.

Toril Moi, in the essay “Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory” (1985), describes feminist criticism as a particular form of political discourse and “a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism.” She opines that a major goal of a feminist is to critique and question the patriarchal views enshrined in both culture and literature. Feminist criticism mainly aims to openly condemn and discard “phallogocentrism” –privileging of male point of view. Similarly, Judith Fetterley (1978) espouses the aforementioned premise that, “feminist criticism is [also] a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it....” Fetterley asserts that the first act of a feminist critic is to “become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in” women. On the whole, this research, in a way, examines the nexus between the literary discourse of women writing and the concept of feminism by adopting the praxis of radical feminism on the selected text as a case for women writing.

2. Brief Historical Development of Feminism

According to Charles Bressler (2011), some scholars believe that the “first major work of feminist criticism” that challenges the dominant male voices is *L’Epistre au Dieu d’amours*, which is authored by Christine de Pizan (1365 –c. 1434). In another work, *Le Livre de la Cite des Dames* (1405), Pizan religiously posits that God creates both the man and the woman as equal beings.

Other female voices expressed the right of women to be heard and acknowledged as artists, scholars and writers in the following centuries. The first English professional female writer of the Restoration, who has written works that depict the sexual love fiction in British Literature, is widely accredited to be Aphra Behn (1640 –1689). Unlike most of her contemporaries, Behn used her fictional writings to bring to the forefront and describes women’s sexual desires directed toward both male and female gender. Some of her notable influential works include the play, *The Amorous Prince* (1671), poetry *On Desire* (1688), and novel *Oroonoko* (1688). Behn was so influential that the twentieth century feminist, Virginia Woolf lauds her and urges all women to give homage to her, by asserting “All women together, ought to let flowers fall upon the grave of Aphra Behn”.

Similarly, *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* (1792), by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797), is widely regarded as the first major published work that acknowledges an awareness of women’s struggles for equal rights. Wollstonecraft asserts that women must define for themselves the definition of a woman by rejecting the patriarchal assertion that women are inferior to men (Bressler: 2011).

Major concerns of feminist criticism, in Bressler’s words, took root in literature and criticism during the Progressive Era of the early 1900s. It was this period that women gained right to vote and became prominent activists in the social issues of the day. Building on Mary Wollstonecraft’s ideas, Virginia Woolf (1882 –1941) laid the foundation for present day feminist criticism in her influential work *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). While in support with Samuel T Coleridge that great minds possess both male and female characteristics, Woolf created the hypothesis of the existence of Shakespeare’s Sister as one who is equally gifted a writer as Shakespeare but prevented because of her sex from having “a room of her own”. Having “a room of her own” symbolizes the solitude and independence needed to seclude herself from the world and its social constraints and find time to think and write. Thus, Woolf argues the loss of artistic talent and personal growth due to the social construct of women as intellectually inferior to men. She advocates that women must eschew the societal construct of “femaleness” and define themselves in their own identity. To achieve this, she recommends women must challenge the prevailing false notions about their sexual identity and develop a female discourse that will accurately portray their relationship “to the world of reality and not to the world of men” (Bressler: 2011).

Simone de Beauvoir (1908 –1986) as a French writer and feminist made the publication of her influential work after the Word War II titled *The Second Sex*. She posits that the French society and Western societies at large are controlled by males. She argues that considering the female is defined to be different from the male, the female becomes the “Other”. Thus, she

advocates that women must defy male classification as the Other. For her, women must ask themselves, “What is a woman?” and that a woman’s answer must not be “mankind” because such a term promotes patriarchy.

Kate Millett’s publication of *Sexual Politics* in 1970 gives a new wave to feminism by challenging the ideological features of the male and the female gender. She posits that a female is born while a woman is created. In other words, one’s sex is ascertained at birth, while one’s gender is a product of social and cultural norms and creation. Conforming to the dictated sex roles in the society is what Millett calls “sexual politics”, or the operations of power relations in the society (Bressler: 2011).

Since the 1970s, literature that defines women’s writings in feminine terms flourished. One of the strong voices of feminist criticism, from the late 1970s and through the decades that follow, is Elaine Showalter. Showalter (1979) posits that feminist theorists must construct a feministic framework for analysis of women’s writings to produce new models and theories.” She coins the term “**gynocriticism**” to represent a feminist concept. Bressler further buttresses Showalter’s gynocriticism this way:

Through gynocriticism, Showalter exposes the false cultural assumptions and characteristics of women depicted in canonical literature. Showalter coins the word gynocritics –a classification she gives to those critics who “construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt to male models and theories”. Gynocritics and gynocriticism provide us with four models that address the nature of women’s writing: the biological, the linguistics, the psychoanalytic, and the cultural. (Bressler, 2011, 153)

Showalter argues that female writers were deliberately excluded from the literary canon by male professors who first established the canon itself. Therefore, she notes that the budding feminist theorists/critics presently concern themselves with developing the peculiarity in comprehending the female experience in art, such as a feminine analysis of literary forms and techniques. Such a task, according to Showalter, includes the uncovering of **misogyny** (a term used to describe the male hatred of women) in texts.

Nonetheless in the development of feminism, some scholars have made a division based on geographical strains. These strain can be summed in the words of Bressler thus:

According to Showalter, American feminism at this time was essentially textual, stressing repression of texts authored by females; British feminism was essentially Marxist, stressing oppression; and French feminism was essentially psychoanalytic, stressing repression. The aim of all groups was similar: to rescue women from being considered “the Other”.

All in all, the core tenet of feminist theory or criticism from its emergence till date is the submission that all humans –women and men are socially, politically, psychologically and economically equal, and basically advocates the rights of the female gender.

3. Hermeneutical Framework: Radical Feminism

Radical feminism is often misinterpreted as cultural feminism or separatist feminism. While separatist feminism advocates total or partial separation from men and some of them practice lesbianism, the term “radical feminism” suggests the leftist or the feminist political movement that believes in revolution as opposed to reform. According to Bressler, radical feminism and cultural feminism are synonymous thus:

Sometimes referred to as radical feminism, cultural feminism asserts that personality and biological differences exist between men and women. According to cultural feminists such as Elizabeth Gould Davis (*The First Sex*, 1971), the main tenet of cultural feminism states that women are inherently and biologically “kinder and gentler” than men. Such women’s ways should be celebrated because in the eyes of many cultural feminists, women’s ways are better than men’s (Bressler, 2011,158).

Contrary to the foregoing assumption that radical feminism is interchangeable with cultural feminism, Alice Echols succinctly describes the divergence between the two. She contrasts that while “radical feminism was a movement to transform society, cultural feminism retreated to vanguardism, working instead to build women’s culture”. Echols asserts that while radical feminism died out as a movement, cultural feminism emerged. Consequently, many of the radical feminists shifted to cultural feminism. In Echols’ words:

As various 1960s movements for social change fell apart or got co-opted, people got pessimistic about the very possibility of social change. Many of them turned their attention

to building alternatives, so that if they couldn't change the dominant society, they could avoid it as much as possible (Echols, 1989).

Giving credence to the above distinction and thus revealing the core precept of radical feminism, Willis Ellen, one of the founding proponents of radical feminism clarifies in her influential essay "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism" (1984) this way:

I was a radical feminist activist in the late 60s. Today I often have the odd feeling that this period, so vivid to me, occurred fifty years ago, not a mere fifteen. Much of the early history of the Women's Liberation Movement, and especially radical feminism (which was not synonymous with the WLM but a specific political current within it) has been lost, misunderstood or distorted beyond recognition. The left, the right, and the liberal feminists have all for their own reasons contributed to misrepresenting and trivializing radical feminist ideas. To add to the confusion, radical feminism in its original sense barely exists today. The great majority of women who presently call themselves "radical feminists" in fact subscribe to a politics more accurately labeled "cultural feminist". That is, they see the primary goal of feminism is essentially a moral, counter cultural movement aimed at redeeming its participants, while radical feminism began as a political movement to end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life, and rejected the whole idea of opposing male and female natures and values as a sexist idea, a basic part of what we are fighting for. Though cultural feminism came out of the radical feminist movement, the premise of the two tendencies are antithetical (Ellen, 1984,1).

Radical feminism is widely posited to have emerged from a left-wing group within the Women's Liberation Movement in the United States known as Redstockings. The group, which was sometimes referred as the Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement, was created in 1969 in the city of New York (Schneir, 1994). The word "Redstockings" from the group's name was derived from the word "bluestocking" – a pejorative term used to belittle scholarly and educated women of the earlier times in literary history. In exchanging the blue for the red in the formation of the word "Redstockings", it shows the group is associated with the revolutionary left and suggests a more opposing faction to such derogatory term as "bluestockings" that is used to refer to scholarly women who usually challenge patriarchy.

Furthermore, radical feminists posit that the differences in the reproductive system and secondary sex characteristics should be insubstantial culturally or politically. Hanisch Carol (2020) reveals that the radical feminists insist that "women's special role in reproduction should be recognized and accommodated without penalty in the workplace", while some of them have advocated that women be compensated for their essential social work.

Foregrounding these radical feminist precepts in the selected text, Adichie depicts female characters (Kainene especially) who radically challenge patriarchy. These characters attempt to change or transform the patriarchal society by seeking political and economic freedom that made them to define themselves as powerful women whom men serve and rely on for survival. This study hereby examines the characterization that gives energy to the tenet of transforming the patriarchal society by raising female political consciousness to rise to leading their societies and creating new values for themselves, more than seeking to amend the male domineering culture as advocated by the liberal feminists.

4. Invigorating Radical Feminism in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

The representation of Kainene and Olanna (nonidentical twin sisters) gives vigor to feminism. While Kainene may be viewed as possessing some of the qualities of a radical feminist because she attempts to change than negotiate with the male domineering culture, Olanna can be described to be sort of liberal. In describing the two in relation to their parents, the narrator reveals, "Kainene had always been the withdrawn child, the sullen and often acerbic teenager, the one who, because she did not try to please their parents, left Olanna with the duty" (p.52). The text delineates the argument that the girl-child can develop better social values than the boy-child to the extent that even a symbol of patriarchy in the text (represented by the father of the twin sisters) recognizes the possibility of having a girl-child developing better value than the boy-child. This is deductible in the text through a dialogue showing the character, Chief Okonji (another patriarchal symbol) and the father of the twins thus:

"Whosoever said you lost out by having twin daughters is a liar", Chief Okonji said.

"Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two", her father said. (p.46)

The twin characters blatantly reject the patriarchal structure of their father when he tries to arrange them for an affair with Chief Okonji. Olanna also confronts her father in defense of her mother over his infidelity. Their cheated mother represents the subjugated woman who could not confront her husband despite her knowledge of his unfaithfulness. When Olanna heard of her mother's complaint, she openly confronted the father, though wished her twin sister, Kainene was present to confront

their father instead, “Kainene was the best person for this. Kainene would know exactly what to say and would not feel the awkward ineptness that she did now, Kainene with her sharp edges and her bitter tongue and her supreme confidence” (p.266).

In a seemingly continuous revolt against patriarchal structure, Kainene changes the interior decoration of her father’s house in Port Harcourt to suit her feminist taste when she decides to occupy it. While showing Richard the rooms in her three-storey house, she says, “I did wish it was closer to the sea, so we could have a better view. But I changed Daddy’s décor...” (p.99)

Both Kainene and Olanna in the relation with men suffer the gender issue of infidelity, just as their mother suffers in her relation with their father. However, their individual reactions to this issue are quite different. While the mother represents the subjugated woman who sees herself to be inferior to her husband and cannot question his loyalty because of the patriarchal structure that the man is entitled to having many wives and mistresses, Kainene and Olanna confronted their men. Though Olanna’s reaction can be said to be more of tit for tat, Kainene creates her own way seeking revenge rather than letting the man’s action defines her reaction. In seeking to be even with Odenigbo, Olanna also commits the same offense as his: Odenigbo claims to be drunk and sleeps with Amala, she also gets drunken and sleeps with Richard (her twin sister’s lover). However, it was difficult for Richard to define Kainene’s expression and could not fathom how she would respond to the news of his infidelity. Eventually, Kainene takes her revenge by burning the almost ready manuscript Richard has been writing since his childhood, “Her face was expressionless. ‘I took your manuscript from the study and I burnt it’ she said” (p.315). This depiction corresponds to the radical feminist tenet that advocates that women should **change** patriarchy by creating their own values rather than seek equality or recognition with the male values.

Because of her socio-political empowerment, Kainene in the text is able to transform her society by defending feminism in the patriarchal physical setting of Nigeria and the temporal setting of the Biafran civil war. She violently attacks Father Marcel for sexually abusing young girls at the refugee camp she manages. She chases him and his accomplice Father Jude out of the camp and promises to ensure justice is done for the young girls by reporting such pedophiles:

Later, Ugwu watched Kainene push at Father Marcel’s chest with both hands, shouting into his face, shoving him so hard that Ugwu feared the man would fall. ‘*Amosu!* You devil!’ Then she turned to Father Jude. ‘How could you stay here and let him spread the legs of starving girls? How will you account for this to your God? You both are leaving now, right now. I will take this to Ojukwu myself if I have to!’ (p480).

As a strong independent woman, Kainene leads in her society and makes decision on her own without patriarchal influence. Against Odenigbo’s and Richard’s counsel not to go trade “across enemy lines” in her bid to procure foods for her starving people, she says. “It’s all decided.” (p.485). She transforms her community as a leader by also launching a Plant Our Food Movement (p.470) and saves a hungry soldier accused of stealing from being lynched. The fact that many characters including the major male revolutionary character (Odenigbo) and Richard rely on Kainene for leadership and survival during the hard times of the war shows the radical feminist premise that women can form a dominant structure in a society.

Furthermore, the fictional narrative tries to “exorcise” the patriarchal belief implanted in women that they are restricted to doing chores and cooking for men by radically reversing this assumption. This is achieved with the creation of menservants as characters who do the chores and cooking for the empowered female characters –especially as represented in the characters of Kainene and Olanna. To borrow Fetterley’s words of “exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted” in women, the radical feminist is more interested in creating her own structure rather than seek for more space or equality in the existing structure. Within this praxis, Chimamanda elevated the female characters whose sociopolitical power does not limit their societal values to the kitchen. Kainene for instance has three menservants: Ikejide, Nnanna and Sebastian. She intimidates them as their master and even lampoons them when introducing them to her white lover, Richard thus, “‘Ikejide is the only one with half a brain in his head,’ Kainene said. The three men smiled, as though they each thought differently but would of course say nothing” (p.99).

Similarly, Kainene satirizes Richard’s manservant, Harrison who cooks well for a living but would not cook for his own family because he subscribes to the patriarchal structure. This is delineated in the dialogue that ensues:

“Thank you, madam.” Harrison bowed.
“And do you cook this in your home?”
Harrison looked wounded. “I am not cooking in my home, madam. My wife is cooking native food” (p.312)

The portrayal that shows the cooks in the text to be all male characters can be viewed as a radical call to change and not negotiate with the patriarchal dominant structure. This patriarchy is well captured when the boy-servant, Ugwu narrates thus, “‘That’s better’, Master’s mother said, ‘You see why boys have no business in the kitchen?’” (p.123) Although Ugwu is originally employed to serve Odenigbo in the text, he takes command from Odenigbo’s lover (Olanna) as portrayed in the text, “My madam has never asked me to cook it” (p259). Apart from the aforementioned menservants weaved in the text,

Okon (Susan's manservant), Maxwell and the “new manservant” who stole rice served the empowered female characters. Thus the tenet that women can also rise above men or beyond the patriarchal construct to become economic and political forces that men would rely on for survival and leadership has been successfully invigorated in the text.

5. Conclusion

Taking together, this study has critically examined the representation of some precepts of radical feminism as depicted in the fictional narrative –*Half of a Yellow Sun*. The study shows through characterization the need for women to obtain high education and seek political power in order to overturn the patriarchal base of their societies. Although radical feminism as a political movement is widely believed to have fallen just like Marxism in the early 1980s, its tenets are invigorated in some contemporary women writings. This study posits that even though the novel has an overwhelming leitmotif about the Nigerian civil war, it is also a feminist novel. Many strands of feminism, apart from the scope of radical feminism, can be assessed from the text. This therefore gives room for further research on the text or object of enquiry. All in all, since literature is a vital means for the women to create their own voice and structure, just as earlier their counterparts have used it to carve a dominant niche for themselves, courses like Women Writing, Women Studies and Gender Studies should be encouraged in Literature and the Humanities as a whole in a bid to continue to understand sociocultural and gender relations.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2006). *Half of a yellow sun*. Alfred a Knopf Incorporated.
- Adichie, C. N. (2013). *Americanah*. London. Hapercollins.
- De Beauvoir, S. (2014). *The Second Sex*. Trans. Ernestine, Simone Lucie, and Bertrand Marie. London. Vinatge Books.
- Begum, S. H. (2019). Americanah as a Transnational Feminist Novel: A Study. *Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*.
- Bressler, C. E. (2011). *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. (5th ed.) United States. Longman.
- Echols, A. (1989). *Daring to be Bad*. London. Longman.
- Willis, E. (1984) “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism”. *Social Text*. Duke. Duke University Press.
- Fetterley, J. (1978). *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press..
- Hanisch, C..(2020) Housework, Reproduction and Women’s Liberation. *Meeting Ground Online*. Retrieved from: <http://meetinggroundonline.org/housework-reproduction-and-womens-liberation/>
- Moi, T. (1985). *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London; New York: Methuen .
- Schneir, M. (1994). *Feminism in our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present*. New York. Vintage Books.. pp. 125 –126
- Showalter, E. (1997) Towards a Feminist Poetics. In *Women’s Writing and Writing about Women*. London: Croom Helm. pp. 22- 41..
- Wilson-Tagoe, N. (1997). Reading towards a theorization of African women's writing: African women writers within feminist gynocriticism. In *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa*. Ed. Newell, S. London. Zed Books.. p.11

This article is open-access, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

