

Defying Gender Essentialism: An Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's

Half of a Yellow Sun

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a contemporary feminist icon who brings awareness through her writings to fight the lower status of women. She is a writer of the novels *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Americanah*, the short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and the essay *We Should All Be Feminists*. The gender essentialism attributes some fixed qualities to be exhibited by both men and women. Therefore essentialism reinforces women's subordinate position. Adichie presents characters those have internalized essential feminine essences, which sets boundary to women and also characters defying essentialism and becoming powerful and independent. The paper will analyze characters in the novel who defy feminine essences and become independent self and characters who internalize the societal conditions and remain the second sex.

Keywords: essentialism, existentialism, feminine essences, subordination, independent self

Gender essentialism according to Elizabeth Grosz is "the attribution of a fixed essences to men and women. Women's essence is assumed to be universal and is generally identified with those characteristics viewed as being specifically feminine" (33). In the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie presents characters which are radically free and defies feminine qualities. The paradoxical philosophy for the essentialism is existentialism. The prime focus of existentialism is individual's freedom of choices. So the individual is the sole responsible for his actions. Essentialism according to Jean-Paul Satre is "Man is nothing but that which he makes of himself"(28).

The paper analyzes the characters exhibiting existential aspects in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The twin daughters of Chief Ozobia named Olanna and Kainene are very assertive and powerful in the novel. The reason is both of them are educated at London and have a very high supportive financial background, but still they adhere to their cultural values. Also, they are very decisive and always decide their lives on their own, they do not fall prey to the patriarchal forces like their father or chief Okonji or to any other powerful male characters in the novel.

Olanna plans to stay at her lover Odenigbo's place at Nsukka, She meets Ugwu, the houseboy the first time; she speaks Igbo with ease as she speaks English. But Ugwu wished "she would stumble in her Igbo; he had not expected English that perfect to sit beside equally perfect Igbo" (23). She clearly balances the influences of colonizer's culture. Though she spent many years in London she evolves into better being confirming her roots. She stands an example to the contemporary world to defy the standards of eurocentrism.

Olanna proves to be a woman of her choices, though her parents wanted her to marry chief Okonji, she chooses Odenigbo, despite of knowing that she can have an affluent life with Okonji. Even when Olanna's mother tries to persuade her not to go to his lover, she gave her very stern answer "I have never been surer of anything... I don't want to work in Lagos. I want to work in the university and I want to live with him" (35). Once again she proves to be decisive.

Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz says in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* that

Essentialism entails the belief that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times. It implies a limit of the variations and possibilities of change—it is not possible for a subject to act in a manner contrary to her essence. Her essence underlies all the apparent variations differentiating women from each other. Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristic, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization. (33)

In the novel Arize is one of the characters who flashes the aspects of gender essentialism. Before going to Nsukka, Olanna visits her Uncle Mbaezi and Aunty Ifeka's house. Arize talks to Olanna about her plans of marriage. But Olanna advises her cousin Arize to focus on her financial independence rather than marriage. "You are young, Olanna said. You should focus on your sewing for now."(41). But Arize is succumbed to marriage "is it sewing that will give me a child? Even if I had managed to pass to go to school, I would still want a child" (41). She exhibits the stereotypical girl who thinks marriage as a major achievement in a girl's life. As Adichie in *Feminist Manifesto* says "Never speak of marriage as an achievement. Find ways to make clear to her that marriage is not an achievement, nor is it what she should aspire to"(13), but society always

grooms a girl for marriage and expects her complete submission to the man's family and puts a picture that marriage is the major part of girl's life. She loses her own identity in the process of marriage subjugation. She becomes a reproductive machine and sexual object in marriage. Arize does not decide anything on her own, she even leaves the choice of her husband to her parents. Arize has internalized the societal feminine essences.

Olanna and Kainene are in living together relationship with their lovers which is a taboo in African culture. Marriage does not bother them at all. Even Odenigbo every time "suggested they get married, she said no. They were too happy, precariously so, and she wanted to guard that bond" (52). She does not have any insecurity about her relationship with Odenigbo. She was least concerned about her marriage, which shows she has a different set of sexual morality for herself. She here also defies the societal terms of marriage to be with a man or to live with.

Kainene is dauntless. Her father remarks "Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two, her father said" (31). She is in love with Richard Churchill, a Whiteman who comes to write a book on Igbo-Ukwu art. Richard Churchill stays with Susan, but when he meets Kainene at a party, he immediately gets attracted to her. The very next day he meets Kainene at her hotel and they stay together in a room. Though he is a European, he is so much anxious to be with her. He failed physically to satisfy Kainene. But she smokes and gave him his time to overcome his physical and mental barriers. She behaves with more understanding in the relationship. She never treats him as a sex giver, a traditional thought that every girl has. She supports him to overcome his anxiety when Richard feels inferior to her.

Major Udodi visits Kainene when she is with Richard and says "the white men will poke and poke and poke the women [blacks] in the dark but they will never marry them.... But the women will continue to disgrace themselves and struggle for the men so they will get chicken-feed money and nonsense tea in a fancy tin. It's a new slavery... but you are a Big man's daughter, so what are you doing with him" (81). Kainene is angered of these low comments. She is a girl who puts her self esteem to the front. She replies clearly "my choice of lovers is none of your business, Udodi" (80). After he leaves she looks at the contract papers of her business. She seems very normal. This shows she is very strong willed than other characters in the novel. She takes the criticism of men on women as of no value. Because both men and women have their destiny through their own decisions and actions, and Adichie clearly indicates through the character Kainene that an individual's attitude is not the concern of the society.

Odenigbo's mother visits his home and makes comments to Ugwu that "what does a boy know about real cooking?"(94). Then the elder talks to Amala "is that not so, Amala? Does a boy belong in the kitchen? 'kpa, Mama, no,' Amala said" (95). This clearly shows that women are the intruders of the women themselves.

They stick to the conditions of society. Women take self pride at home cooking. They think home is their kingdom and outside world is not their forte. But Olanna and Kainene are different; they progress towards their passion teaching and business. They distinctly stand from other characters defying feminine qualities stated by society. They act upon their will and their motives.

Odenigo's mother also says "Too much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that. It gives a woman a big head and she will start to insult her husband. What kind of wife will be that?"(98). She has internalized the societal feminine essences. As Mary Wollstonecraft says "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves." (35). Women must try to overcome barriers and become powerful over themselves. The fault of women is that they lack the understanding that there is no pride in being a slave under men. These are hypocritical constructions of society. One has to evolve as rational beings who can support the society to grow. Both Olanna and Kainene defies the conditions of society. They move on with free will.

For women to be successful, Ibekwe Ezeakola insists "the need for self-assertion as a first step to female self-reclamation. All barriers to women liberation and self fulfillment need to be dismantled by women themselves" (77). As Ezeakola says self assertion of women has to happen within oneself and it is essential for the well being of society which can be more rational and free of inequality. At this point men have a superior position in the society, so he must support women in the process of becoming more liberal from social stigmas. Adichie points out in *Half of a Yellow Sun* what Carole Boyce describes African female consciousness in literature as "...not antagonistic to ... men, but challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of woman subjugation" (8-9).

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