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Depiction of Women as Resourceful Social Service Providers in *Sunset at Dawn* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Most novels of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, especially those written by writers of Igbo extraction, depict women that contribute in diverse ways to the survival of people in Biafra during the 30-month fratricidal war. Besides women's participation in the attack trade, another sphere that women prove their mettle and contribute to the survival of people in Biafra is the provision of social service to both the army and the needy civilian population. Apart from providing food and clothes to the soldiers, women also serve as nurses in hospitals as well as caregivers at refugee camps and feeding centres. Some studies have tangentially treated this aspect of the Nigerian Civil war narrative as it affects women. This paper attempts to comprehensively analyze the various depictions of women as resourceful social service providers during the Nigerian Civil War as portrayed in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Keywords: Depiction, Women, Womanism, Nigerian Civil War, Novels, *Sunset at Dawn*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Introduction

Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) use Womanist principles of "complementarity," "bonding" and "collaboration" as analytical tools. According to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Womanist theory aims "to establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic, geographical, educational, gender, ethical, class, religious, military, and political differences" (123). In the same vein, Mary Kolawole contends that "womanism is the

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totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways" (24).

A close reading of the two novels shows that they depict women that provide such vital survival service. The portrayal of these female service providers in these novels is reflective of the social reality of war-time Biafra as buttressed in some real accounts of the war. In his war memoir, the Commander of the Biafran Army, Alexander Madiebo attests that at the initial stages of the war, "the small Biafran Army under formation was almost completely administered and maintained by donations from the civil population" (Madiebo 106-107). There is no doubt that most members of the civil population that are involved in the food donations are women. Some women characters organize informal classes for some Biafran children while others serve as civil defenders that mount checkpoints to ward off enemy infiltrators and other women serve as members of the Land Army, a unit responsible for growing food for the people. The service of the Land Army becomes imperative following the loss of many farm lands in Biafra to Nigerian troops. In fact, women's role as social service providers is central to the Biafran struggle and is also very instrumental to the sustenance of life and survival in Biafra.

Fatima and Other Resourceful Women in *Sunset at Dawn*

In this novel, Chukwuemeka Ike portrays the invaluable roles of Biafran women to the war effort as social service providers in the war-ravaged society. Women are variously portrayed as caregivers, nurses, civil defenders and members of the Land Army. Women's support duties are complementary to those of the soldiers in the war fronts. Such support duties are vital to survival in Biafra. Fatima, the major female character in Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* is outstanding in this regard, especially in the efficient manner she runs her feeding centre and her communal cooperative goat scheme. In this scheme, she works with other women, especially Halima, to ensure the survival of women, men and children in the Biafran society.

The most notable female characters in *Sunset at Dawn* are Fatima and Halima. Ironically, both are Hausa women married to Igbo men. Although both tribes are in Nigeria but with the creation of Biafra, Hausa belongs to Nigeria and Igbo to Biafra. Over time, the two Hausa women transform and become Biafrans and highly identify with the Biafran cause. Their experiences reflect the lived experience of some Nigerian women married to Biafran men during the war. As nurturers and caregivers, the roles of women like Fatima, Halima and others are vital to survival in the new nation. Following her transformation in the course of the war, Fatima sets up a care centre to cater to Biafran malnourished children as part of her contribution to the win-the-war effort. She also runs a cooperative revolving scheme where goats are bought, killed and sold while those engaged in the cooperatives share the animal entrails that serve as a steady supply of animal protein in Biafra where meat is a scarce commodity. Through this modest effort, the women ensure that their families do not lack animal protein in their diets as well as make some income for themselves. The success of the goat

scheme is attested by its replication in two neighbouring villages. The narrator in the novel sums up Fatima's satisfaction with the goat scheme:

> Fatima smiled with satisfaction as her thoughts flashed back at the goat scheme. At the time the idea occurred to her, she doubted whether the people of Obodo would buy it. Surprisingly, they did and before she knew what was happening, two neighbouring villages had launched similar schemes (Ike 148).

The replication of such useful cooperative schemes may have been extended beyond the two neigbouring villages in Biafra as revealed in the text. These are some of the innovations that Biafran women introduce during the war to ensure survival of people. In Biafra, no part of an animal is wasted. The entrails which hitherto would have been thrown away in peace time have become part of the soup menus of most Biafran families. Besides the goat scheme, Fatima's feeding centre becomes an indispensable humanitarian venture in Biafra. Ike underscores the indispensability and importance of Halima's feeding centre: "Her feeding centre had, within a relatively short time, turned out to be an indispensable humanitarian gesture" (Ike 148).

Later, Fatima's humanitarian gesture is extended to Gabon, too, upon her posting there in course of the war. During the war, many malnourished Biafran children, boys and girls, whose *kwashiorkor* cases are very acute are sent to Gabon by the Biafran government so that they can be given adequate medical treatment. Fatima's Gabon experience parallels the lived experience of some Biafran *kwashiorkor*-ridden children that were sent to Gabon in the heat of the war. Majority of them only came back after the war in 1970 and thereafter. Tamuno (1989:1-22), validates this assertion. Fatima's sterling qualities may have made Palmer (2008:29) to regard Fatima as the most fascinating character in the novel. Also, Feuser praises Fatima for her deep commitment to the Biafran cause:

> … estranged and embittered at first by the loss of her elder son, killed by a Nigerian shell, and the quaintness of Igbo village life after her flight from the comfort of Enugu, she becomes involved in work for the refugees, especially kwashiorkor cases ('Harold Wilson's children'), and ends up deeply committed to the Biafran cause (Feuser 230).

The collaborative spirit between the males and females in Biafra is visible in the social services sphere of the new nation. The female principle is appropriated maximally by Biafra. There is no doubt that Biafra taps the resourcefulness and energies of her women and that tremendously has assisted in its survival strategies. The unleashing of women's talents helps in the survival of many Biafrans as Nwapa alludes to *Wives at War and Other Stories* (13). In Biafra, every taxable male contributes one big yam while every woman contributes five cassava tubers or one cup of garri and every village one tin of palm oil (80). This weekly contribution of food items by men and women to the Biafran army demonstrates a collaborative spirit by both sexes to the war and survival effort. Through the weekly food donations, women contribute their quota to human survival in Biafra. It is this cooperative spirit and communalism between men and women, which is in line with Womanist philosophy that largely sustains

Biafra. Some Biafran women render enormous help through cooking for soldiers and making of dry packs for soldiers (138). In Biafra, almost every local foodstuff can be made into dry packs. That is why the narrator in Ike's war novel says: "our home economists have come out with dry packs of practically every local foodstuff, and these can be preserved indefinitely" (191). The nurses are instrumental to the quick recovery and rehabilitation of wounded soldiers and other people that are sick. In this wise, women serve as nurturers as well as healers of the wounded soldiers and civilians.

The cooperative spirit between men and women in Biafra attracts the critical attention of Ohaeto, who submits that "Ike in *Sunset at Dawn* proves that women can equally exhibit the courage needed to survive adverse conditions" (140). Fatima's transformation largely contributes to the survival effort in Biafra. Similarly, Ugbabe rightly observes that "Fatima's meeting with Halima brings about her remarkable transformation and that makes her begin to think positively about her new environment and her new role in it" (130). Fatima's collaboration and bonding with Halima is womanist and supports Ugbabe's position on women in *Sunset at Dawn*. Fatima and the local women's contributions to the Biafran war effort and survival in general are outstanding.

Heroic Women in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Similarly, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fictional Biafra in her *Half of a Yellow Sun*, women are in the forefront of providing social services. The activities of some of these women are portrayed in the novel mainly as teachers, farmers, traders, civil defenders and care givers. In an interview with Wale Adebanwi, Adichie reveals her conception of true war heroes: "I believe that the true war heroes are the ones about whom nobody writes books, and especially the Biafran women who showed remarkable bravery in keeping families together. I think the reason that the ordinary person's story is more engaging is that it is in those lives that we see the real effects of the war—the indignity of starvation, the struggle to hold on to their humanity" (Plaias 76). In this work, Adichie, like Nwapa and Emecheta, her literary foremothers, privileges women's story, their experiences and their roles during the war, while not leaving out the roles of men as well. Women like Olanna, Kainene, Mrs Maduako, and Mrs Muokelu are good representations of women that stand out in their war effort to ensure survival of the young nation. Olanna and Kainene would have travelled abroad with their rich parents if they had wanted but they decide to stay in Biafra to defend the new nation as women and mothers (194). The resolve of Olanna and Kainene to stay in Biafra and help with the war effort, a huge sacrifice, is in tandem with D. Kandiyoti's thesis that:

> women bear the burden of being 'mothers of the nation' (a duty that gets ideologically defined to suit official priorities), as well as being those who produce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the culture and who are privileged signifiers of national difference (377).

Makokha says that "the nation Biafra in this case, demanded that the woman stayed at home to feed and take care of the children and to go and get food for the family from

the refugee camps while the men went to war to liberate Biafra from the Nigerian soldiers" (116-117). Women like Olanna, Kainene, Mrs Muokelu, Mama Oji and others played the role of mothers of the nation well in Adichie's war novel in the various ways they contribute to the win-the war effort. In this novel, many Biafran men and youths are conscripted and drafted into the war while their wives are left to take care of the children and the aged ones. Mrs Muokelu's husband fought and lost one of his legs in the war and depends on his wife for sustenance, while Mama Oji's husband came back as a deserter. Literary critics, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu regard the action of Olanna and Kainene to stay in Biafra instead of travelling abroad with their parents during the war as an indication of "strength because weaker characters would have jumped at the opportunity to leave the embattled enclave" (206). In keeping faith with their resolve to be part of Biafra, the twin sisters swing into action to help the young nation to stand on its feet without being prompted to do so.

Their zeal epitomizes the kind of patriotism that is given to the new nation by her citizens. Olanna teaches young Biafrans about the new nation, the national anthem and the flag so that they can be patriotic and good citizens of Biafra. According to the narrator, "She (Olanna) taught them about the Biafran flag. Red was the blood of the siblings massacred in the North, black was for mourning them, green was for the prosperity Biafra would have and finally, the half of a yellow sun stood for the glorious future" (287). She also teaches them, Ojukwu's "flying salute" as well as how to draw the images of Ojukwu and Gowon, giving more emphasis on Ojukwu's image than Gowon. Kainene donates money to the war effort as she (315). Besides the donation of money to the war effort, Kainene also sets up a refugee centre to cater for displaced Biafrans. Apart from giving them garri and other essential commodities and medications, she establishes a soya beans and *akidi* farm at the camp to produce protein-giving foods that are scarce in Biafra. Women that engage in farming during the war are regarded as part of the Land Army. She also engages a highly talented craftsman from Enugu to teach the inmates of the refugee camp how to make baskets and lamps so that they can generate income (325). She also sets up a craft centre where the inmates of the refugee centre can learn one trade or another and thereby make products that can generate income for them. As the war progresses and with increasing scarcity of garri from Mbosi, "Kainene launched a Plant Our Own Food movement" as her own Land Army effort to grow more food (398). She also joins the men and children in making ridges and Olanna is amazed at Kainene's skilful use the hoe.

Plaias may have Olanna, Kainene and Mrs Muokelu in mind when she contends that "the women Adichie writes about are most resilient and fight their daily battles by playing multiple roles, which show the arbitrariness of such gender roles, and by extension the women's capability to perform them" (76). Even ordinary village women that do not have anything spare the little they have for the survival of Biafra. These women donate yams, plantains and fruits to the soldiers as well. Such kind-hearted donation is portrayed by Adichie: "There is a group of women at the barracks every other day, from all sorts of backwater villages, bringing yams and plantains and fruits

to the soldiers. These are people who have nothing themselves" (187-188). Such women abound in Biafra and are all instrumental to the survival of the new nation. The women are there too as civil defenders ensuring the internal defence of Biafra by examining every vehicle and all gadgets to ensure that 'enemies' do not infiltrate into Biafra. Since their 'watchword is vigilance' they make sure that they examine every item including handbags and 'special duties passes.' Biafrans do this because they believe that anybody surrounded by enemies all the time must always be on the guard so that he will not be caught unawares. The civil defenders do not leave anything to chance. The internal security of Biafra is uppermost in their mind.

Conclusion

This paper has examined comprehensively the depiction of women as resourceful social service providers in the two Nigerian Civil War novels. It concludes that the two authors of the works analysed in this paper portray women as resourceful social service providers that contribute excessively to the survival of people in Biafra. While some of the female characters work in feeding centres, refugee camps, and cook and sew cloth for the soldiers, others work as civil defence officials, nurses and caregivers in hospitals and refugee camps. Some of the women work as teachers and others work as farmers as well. In the absence of the men, they become breadwinners to their families. Many women contribute food and vegetables to soldiers and others make dry packs for them. Their war efforts complemented those of the men.

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