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CULTURAL CRITICISM AND FEMINIST LITERARY ACTIVISM IN THE WORKS OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

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Abstract
In this paper, I explore the feminist activism represented by the creative and critical works of the award-winning Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In a move that signalled her growing international influence as a cultural critic, her 2012 essay, "Why We Should All Be Feminists" was distributed to high school students across Sweden. Her three accomplished novels feature female protagonists through whom she provides powerful critiques of the androcentric social, cultural, and political structures of the societies she focuses on. The novels are Purple Hibiscus (2003), Half of a Yellow Sun (2007) and Americanah (2013). These are the major ways in which Adichie has made substantial contributions to feminist activism both on a global scale and in postcolonial societies. Using a narrative and socio-literary framework, I examine the feminist critique offered in these works to highlight Adichie's contributions to current feminist literary activism and scholarship.

Key terms: cultural criticism, gender activism, feminism, literary criticism, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Introduction: African literature and cultural criticism

In two essays, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" (1964) and "The Novelist as Teacher" (1975), Chinua Achebe, arguably Africa's most influential novelist to date, argues famously that African writers have a duty to use their works to contribute actively to the reshaping of their respective societies and cultures. Speaking specifically about the lingering legacies of colonial rule on Africa's then newly independent nations, Achebe proposed that his writing was meant "to help [his] society

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regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (Achebe, 1975: 71-72). This overt didacticism and socio-political commitment has indeed been one of the key features of African and post-colonial literatures since their evolution through periods of anti-colonial and nationalist activism especially following the end of the Second World War.

As early as 1956 when the African novel and indeed African literature as a distinctive discipline was very much in its infancy, Leopold Senghor, Senegalese statesman and frontline Negritude poet, declared that "African literature is politically motivated" (qtd. in Nwoga, 1978: 3). Such views underscore the growing practice whereby literatures from Africa (both fiction and non-fiction) are often deployed within scholarly and intellectual forums as veritable sociological knowledge in spite of the fact that such literatures are often non-empirical. This is why Anindyo Roy (2011: 5) argues that one of the "central impulse[s] of African postcolonial fiction" is the exploration of the perceived links between public conditions and private lives, a view that resonates with Frederic Jameson's (1986) problematical claim that 'Third World' literatures are to be considered, necessarily, as "national allegories".

African literatures, especially in the form of fiction, is therefore a fecund site for exploring the relationship between the social imagination of writers and material cultural, economic, and political realities. Achille Mbembe testifies to this in the preface to the most recent edition of his influential *On the Postcolony* (2015). Recalling W. E. Du Bois' observation that "Life is not simply fact", Mbembe demonstrates how creative cultural expression (in the form of music and fiction in particular) provides a productive point of entry into the philosophical investigation of the psychic and political conditions of late postcoloniality. Mbembe highlights how, from "the late 1980s onwards, the best of the African novel was already celebrating the demise of the nationalist project" and how it

exposed the failure of the continent's post-independence rulership (2015: xiv). He identifies the novels of the Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi, Nigeria's Amos Tutuola and Burkina Faso's Yambo Ouologuem as imaginative works through which "[u]nexpected bridges were built between abstraction and concreteness, reason, emotion and affect, the conscious, the unconscious and the oneiric. Art and thought were made to come alive and to resonate with one another" (xiv).

Resonances between the imaginative and the factual in those novels, whose writers creatively deploy history, allegory, ideology, language and a range of realist narratological and representational strategies, account for the influence of some of these writers not only in the recuperation of the hidden histories of formerly colonised societies, but also in the re-shaping of social imagination. In regard to novelistic rehistoricisation for example, Roy (2011) has noted the differences in the approach to realism adopted by older writers and those of the current generation of which Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a key member. According to Roy, while the older writers tended towards monolithic "historical synopticism," recent writing increasingly identifies, among others, "an uneven terrain that makes visible the interface of varying conditions of narrative authority that include location of narrative voice . . . " (6).[1] There is therefore a noticeable shift in narrative voice in the majority of recent African novels which explore the range of themes – such as identity, migration, power, globalisation – that animate postcolonial discourses. While earlier African novels and novelists offered predominantly masculinist and gerontocratic views on decolonisation and nationalism, contemporary texts increasingly give voice to marginal subjects especially children, youths and females.

Background to Adichie's literary feminism

Adichie's three award-wining

[1] Although Roy focuses on Helon Habila's novel *Measuring Time*, his observations apply equally to the works of Adichie whom he and other critics identify as one of the most influential of the current generation of Nigerian and African writers.

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novels – *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013) – are arguably representative of the more accomplished and influential texts within contemporary African literary production. While these novels have been recognised for a variety of reasons, their attention to feminist issues through robust engagement with the plight of female characters remains remarkable. Operating as veritable forms of cultural critique, Adichie's novels represent substantial contributions to feminist activism and gender studies both on a global scale and within the specific contexts of postcolonial societies in recent years. The social commentary represented by these novels has been strongly supplemented by the writer's roles as a growing fashionista, public speaker and essayist whose well-received 2012 talk "We Should All be Feminists" has been recently followed up by a long essay significantly titled *Dear Ijawere, Or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*.[2]

Adichie was born in 1977 in Nigeria to senior academics at the University of Nigeria, Nnsuka where she had initially registered to study medicine. She later moved to the United States to study Communication and Political Science because of her interest in writing. She wrote a short play titled *For Love of Biafra* in 1998 and at university, she published a number of impressive short stories in literary journals and won various prestigious literary prizes.[3] It was while at university that she wrote her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* which won the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Overall Winner, Best Book) and was shortlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction (Reynolds, 2007). *Half of a Yellow Sun* won the 2007 Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction and in 2008, Adichie won the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. *Half of a Yellow Sun* was adapted for film in 2013 with a screenplay written by Biyi Bandele. It stars

[2] This book was released just after the completion of this article.

[3]One of her short stories earned her a short-list for the 2003 Caine Prize for African Writing and runner-up of the 2002 commonwealth Short Story Award.

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Academy Award nominee, Chiwetel Ejiofor and BAFTA award winner, Thandie Newton (Soffel, 2013). Adichie's next work is a collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) which was shortlisted for the 2009 John Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize and the 2010 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best book from the African region (Ellam, 2008). *Americanah* was published in 2013 and won the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Fiction prize. It was announced in 2014 that a film adaptation of the novel is to be produced by Brad Pitt and will star award-winning actors David Oyewole and Lupita Nyong'o (Kroll, 2014).

Adichie has also published poetry and has a growing list of political essays and lectures including the well-received "The Danger of a Single Story" and "We Should All Be Feminists". The latter was sampled by the renowned American pop singer, Beyoncé Knowles in her 2013 song, "Flawless" and was sported on T-shirts in a top-class Christian Dior fashion show in September 2016 (Niven, 2016). It has been published as a short book that was distributed to all 16-year-old high school girls in Sweden in 2015 (Brockes, 2017). Adichie's growing status as a fashionista was boosted when her fashion choices were showcased in the March 2015 of *Vogue* magazine as well as when she was made the face of Boots No 7 make-up advertising campaign a year later.

Adichie follows an established tradition among established African women writers who confront patriarchal power structures using literature as "a weapon" (Harrell-Bond, 1980: 214). This literary tradition can be traced to the earliest novels by African women such as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), the first novel to be published in English by an African woman. *Efuru*'s title character is an industrious colonial-era woman who survives life's vicissitudes on her own despite being abandoned by successive husbands. Other pioneer African female writers whose works provide strong feminist critique include Ghana's Ama Ata Aidoo (especially in her debut play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* [1964]) and Senegal's

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Mariama Bâ, whose short epistolary novel, *So Long A Letter* (1980), explores the effects of polygamy on educated women in early postcolonial Muslim-dominated Senegalese society. Two important writers whose works were published between the late 1970s and the 1980s are Nigeria's Buchi Emecheta (best known for the novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* [1979]) and Zimbabwe's Tsitsi Dangamrembga, whose semi-autobiographical novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988) won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989. Among Adichie's contemporaries today whose works have commanded impressive responses in this regard are Nigeria's Seffi Atta, Ghana's Taiye Selasie and Zimbabwe's NoViolet Bulawayo. The main protagonist of Bulawayo's award-winning short story, "Hitting Budapest" (2011) as well as her debut novel *We Need New Names* (2013), is the story of a young girl who grows up in an impoverished Zimbabwe slum before emigrating to the United States.

These writers uncover the various ways in which women are silenced and dominated by prevailing cultural, religious and economic practices. They invariably give narrative voice and visibility to fictional female characters, some of which operate in quasi-autobiographical ways, to articulate – both subtly and unsubtly – recognisable feminist ideas that many ordinary women may be unable to express in real life.[4] Moreover, in the transnational and globalised context of late postcoloniality, African women writers face similar challenges as black writers in the West; a situation that has been described as 'double colonisation' (see Petersen and Rutherford, 1986). As Amiable Twagilimana (1997: 4) points out, these writers therefore have to "deal with the affliction of both racism and sexism, us[ing] traditional strategies to undo this double reduction. They strive to invent a new language to talk about their experience and their lives as black and women".

[4] Adichie has indicated autobiographical links with the fictional Ifemelu, admitting that the character is sometimes used as an outlet for the author's own ideological persuasions (see Ikhide, 2013).

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This literary approach to feminism is thus marked by scepticism towards classical Western (or first-wave) feminism which is perceived to be underpinned by colonialist ideologies that both racialiee and homogenise non-Western women (Mohanty, 1988). Indeed, contemporary African feminist literature pays attention to the specific lived experiences of African women within their diverse historical, economic, socio-political, and cultural contexts in similar ways as the black feminist movement in the United States, triggered by the twin struggles and racism and sexism, had, as its central principle, "a feminism rooted in class, culture, gender and race" realities of black American women (James, Abena and Busia, 1993: 16). Although a detailed exploration of the evolution of feminism and gender studies over time is outside the scope of this article, it is important to offer a short summary here. There are serious contestations over the common practice of historicizing modern feminism in terms of three waves from the late 19th and early 20th century onwards. The second wave is associated with the civil rights movements of the 1960s in the United States while the third is strongly tied to postcolonial and postmodern ideas (see Rampton, 2015). A putative fourth wave is often described as post-feminism, which Fien Adriaens (2009) defines as "a contradictory, pluralistic discourse that is mainly located in the academy", a "new, critical way of understanding the changed relations between feminism, popular culture and femininity" (see also Brooks, 1997; Tasker and Negra, 2005). Important gender theorists from Nigeria whose ideas generally intersect with postcolonial and postmodern feminisms include Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (Stiwanism), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (African Womanism), and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí who is credited with the concept of the "non-gendered Yoruba family" (Adou, 2016: 92).

The discussion will now turn to close analyses of Adichie's three novels, beginning with *Purple Hibiscus*. I highlight the novel's dominant feminist themes, especially its gendered

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critique of Nigerian nationalism through the narrative voice of its 15-year-old female protagonist. In the section after that, I focus on her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* which I explore in regard to the portrayal of two prominent male characters. I highlight the ways in which the development of these characters – from positions of centrality at the beginning of the story to peripheral positions at the end of the story – can be understood in terms of feministic subversion of the ideological assumptions underpinning patriarchal socio-political hegemony. In the final part of the article, I turn to Adichie's third novel, *Americanah* and her autobiographical essay, "Why We Should All Be Feminists" to explore the ways in which Adichie adopts post-feminist approaches and how these represent an attempt on her part to redefine feminism within the fluid and transnational contexts in which she writes.

Gendering the narrative of the nation in *Purple Hibiscus*

In order to understand the significance of *Purple Hibiscus* in terms of its feminist and social critique, it is important to locate it within major traditions of literary thematisations of nationalism in postcolonial Nigeria. Literary anti-colonial activism has been dominated almost exclusively by male writers who have invariably used male protagonists to articulate mainly masculinist perspectives on the idea of the postcolonial nation. This is especially the case among what many literary scholars problematically call the first generation of African writing.[5] The androcentric nature of dominant pioneer texts has led Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1988: 60) to describe Nigerian literature as "phallic". A perfect example of this view of Nigerian literature are the influential early novels of Chinua Achebe which collectively evoked a strong sense of cultural nationalism among formerly colonised subjects not only in Nigeria but across Africa and beyond.

[5] The periodization of modern African literature into distinct generations, though popular, is a subject of contestation among literary critics (see Dalley, 2015 and Akpome, 2016). The term is used here for convenience.

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Elleke Boehmer (1995: 187) has shown that Achebe achieved this through his skilful dramatisation of "family and compound life" that revolved around powerful patriarchal figures and their domestic genealogies such as those of the fictional Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In this literary tradition, the male figure is depicted as father and/or custodian of nationhood, whether it is the pre-colonial nation under attack from colonial forces as Okonkwo signifies, or in the emergent postcolonial nation as symbolised, for example, by Kenneth Kaunda's autobiography, *Zambia Shall Be Free* (1962). In either case, the father is invariably represented as defender and protector of the familial space of the nation. This form of literary representation has found resonance in the dominant cultural narratives that have sustained the patriarchal power structures entrenched following independence.

Following the failures of political leadership in Nigeria and the rest of the continent in the years after the euphoria of independence however, successive literary works have provided a far less positive and celebratory portrayal of the figure of the father of the nation. Two leading novels in this regard include Achebe's *A Man of The People* (1966) which seemed to 'predict' Nigeria's first military coup in 1966 and *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) by Ghana's Ayi Kwei Armah. But while these novels and others published in the 1970s and 1980s highlight the failure of post-independence political leadership and a growing disillusion with the new nations, it seems to have fallen to the so-called 'third-generation' of writers to focus attention on the peculiar gender and generational dimensions of the socio-political dysfunction that have increasingly characterised postcolonial African nations. Adichie has since been hailed as one of the most prominent writers among this group of current writers whose works seek, among other things, to subvert the hegemony of masculinist perspectives on postcolonial cultural and national expression.

This is where *Purple Hibiscus* is particularly significant. Set in the 1990s in Nigeria under brutal military dictatorship, the novel provides instructive commentary on the social and political oppressions that were prevalent in the country during that period. The story is told from the perspective of a 15-year-old girl, Kambili, who suffers, along with her mother and brother Jaja at the hands of an insensitive and abusive father, Eugene Achike, a complex character used partly to typify the authoritarian patriarchal and gerontocratic power structures that dominate Nigerian society. He is a wealthy businessman and a pious but bigoted Christian philanthropist who rules his family with an iron fist. Although he seems to love and care for his family, he repeatedly abuses them physically and enforces a strict version of Catholicism on the household. He therefore becomes estranged from members of his immediate and extended families such that his home becomes a space of silence, fear, frigidity and gloom.

The opening lines of *Purple Hibiscus* reveal that Adichie seeks to use her novel to revise prevailing masculine cultural perspectives with an explicit reference to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where Kambili narrates her brother Jaja's rebellion against their father: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère" (Adichie, 2003: 3). This allusion provides insight into the significant parallels between *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus* in terms of the ways in which the latter text operates effectively as a gendered critique of the latter. Whereas both writers focus on the figure and role of an authoritarian and abusive father figure (Okonkwo and Achike respectively), Adichie departs from Achebe by offering a female perspective that represents, as Heather Hewett (2005: 79) puts is, "the story that Okonkwo's wife cannot tell".

The story that Kambili tells is a story of the agony and trauma of the children and women at

the receiving end of patriarchal intemperance, insensitivity and domestic violence. Readers learn that despite his public image as devout Christian, generous philanthropist and pro-democracy activist, Eugene Achike is in fact a sadistic, narcissistic 'control freak', who inflicts untold pain on those he apparently seeks to protect and care for. The story includes many incidents of domestic violence such as Eugene's regular beatings of his wife that lead to repeated miscarriages but perhaps the most revolting of these is when he pours hot boiling water over Kambili's feet in a bath tub. This is punishment for Kambili's and Jaja's failure to inform him that their grandfather (Eugene's father whose traditional religious beliefs Eugene abhors) would be staying with them during a vacation. The terror that this incident has on Kambili is narrated very graphically:

> I stepped into the tub and stood looking at him. It didn't seem that he was going to get a stick, and I felt fear, stinging and raw, fill my bladder and my ears. I did not know what he was going to do to me. It was easier when I saw a stick, because I could rub my palms together and tighten the muscles of my calves in preparation. He had never asked me to stand inside a tub. Then I noticed the kettle on the floor, close to Papa's feet, the green kettle Sisi used to boil hot water for tea and garri, the one that whistled when the water started to boil. Papa picked it up.
>
> […]
>
> He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. … I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. 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. (Adichie, 2003: 193-194)

Through vivid accounts of "moments of extreme bodily pain and psychic anguish" (Hewett, 2005: 83) such as these, Adichie provides a gripping narrative of the postcolonial nation from a perspective that is almost conspicuously absent from the male-dominated cultural archive and literary canon. In this regard, Deirdre Lashgiri

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(2001: 3) argues that "[s]hifting the vantage point of the subject allows us to see forms of violence that had been invisible, or to see in unfamiliar ways. When the gaze is redefined, what it encompasses changes".

Another significant way in which Adichie provides a feminist revision of Nigeria's post-independence nationhood in this novel is her representation of Eugene's sister, a widowed university lecturer who encourages lively debate, laughter and freedom of expression among her own children. Kambili's coming-of-age is facilitated by her vacation at Ifeoma's home, where her cousins "seemed to simply speak and speak and speak" (Adichie, 2003: 120) in spite of their limited financial means. It is under Ifeoma's roof that Kambili begins to amend from the frigidity and speechlessness induced by the psychological and physical abuses she suffers at her own home. Hewett offers a particularly nuanced analysis of Kambili's plight, recalling Gayatri Spivak's (1986) influential postulation on the subaltern female subject as well as Carol Boyce Davies' contrary argument that "the problem lies in the 'selective hearing or mis-hearing' of her oppressors" (quoted in Hewett,2005: 85). Hewett points out that Kambili's situation is complex; that in addition to being silenced and not being heard, she also finds it difficult to express herself on the few occasions that she desires to communicate. All these begin to change, however, when they visit Ifeoma's home:

> The liberated voices of her cousins' household, symbolized by the rare purple hibiscus in her aunt's garden, opens up new possibilities to Kambili; to draw from Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, their polyvocal speech interrupts and contests the dominance of Eugene's monologue. Their freewheeling discourse encourages the growth of Kambili's self-awareness. As a result, the binary structure under which she had grown up begins to unravel and she begins to question her father's rigid dogmatism. … Through transgressing the precepts of her father's moralistic universe, Kambili finds her way to voicing herself, thus becoming the author of her own story. (Hewett, 2005: 86)

The questioning of the father and the subsequent discovery and assertion of self-authorship by the female subject represents the most poignant way in which *Purple Hibiscus* executes an effective feminist revision of the national narrative using the fictional domestic realm of the family as synecdoche. The lively, liberated female-led household of Ifeoma emerges as an alternative vision of the new nation where the domineering figure of the powerful patriarch is absent and where the polity may enjoy greater civic and individual freedoms. The discursive strategies of 'appropriation' and 'inversion' deployed by Adichie in this novel resonates with the work of at least two older Nigerian female novelists – Flora Nwapa (*Efuru* [1966]) and Buchi Emecheta (*The Joys of Motherhood* [1979]) – who have used similar strategies to contest the problematical portrayal of women and motherhood in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.*

Deconstructing the 'master' in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

While Adichie uses *Purple Hibiscus* to highlight the abuse of power associated with patriarchal power hegemonies and to propose alternative socio-political possibilities, *Half of a Yellow Sun* seeks to subvert some of the ideological assumptions underpinning traditional representations of the father figure as a naturally endowed custodian of society. As a background to how Adichie does this in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is important to examine what appears to be dominant attitudes towards the father figure among leading Nigerian writers in the post-military dictatorship period who tend to focus a lot on child and youth protagonists. Drawing on Achille Mbembe (2001), Valentin Mudimbe (1994) as well as Muponde and Muchemwa (2007), Chris Ouma (2009: 54) highlights how "the notion of fathers, fatherhood and paternity in African literature" has spawned "a discourse that cuts across several levels; ethnic, national and continental". And observing that the majority of Nigeria's current leading writers grew up under the military dictatorships of the 1980s and 1990s, Ouma suggests that post-dictatorship Nigerian literature "is actually informed by the idea of

childhood . . . as 'a set of ideas' that engages, though alternative memory and the father figure … . (48)." Focusing on Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, he goes further to argue that:

> The representation of childhood becomes a process of delegitimation that multiples margins … and decentralises paterfamilias authority. The decentralisation of the father figure and the quest for a multiplicity of authorities and sources of identity makes this representation of childhood amenable to postmodern consciousness, to the spirit of anti-foundationalism. (49)

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, this ideological and narrative process of delegitimsing and decentralising the father figure is evident in Adichie's portrayal of two of the novel's key male characters, the radical intellectual Odenigbo, and Richard, an English expatriate. I demonstrate how the development of these characters from positions of centrality at the beginning of the story to its periphery at the end operate symbolically to question the presumed social and political authority of the male figure on one hand, and on the other as feminist subversion of the naturalised 'master' custodian of society.

Half of a Yellow Sun is based on an actual historical event namely, the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War) of 1967-1970 and has been described as "perhaps one of the richest creative works yet to appear" on the subject of the war (Adesanmi and Dunton, 2005: 10). Adichie's (2008: 50) admission that the novel expresses "unapologetic Biafran" sympathies highlights why it has attracted a lot of critical attention in regard to rehistoricisation, post-Biafran nationalism, and identity politics (see Akpome, 2013). The novel narrates the impact of the war and its trauma on the people of Nigeria's former Eastern Region which constituted the short-lived breakaway Biafra republic. In particular, the novel follows the impact of the war on the lives and relationships of its major protagonists, a pair of young twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene and their respective lovers, Odenigbo, a mathematics lecturer and Richard, an English writer as well as Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy. At the novel's

structural core is a nexus of multi-directional and close-knit relationships among these individuals: the filial bonds between Olanna and Kainene, the romantic relationships between the two pairs of lovers and the master-servant relationship between Ugwu and Odenigbo.

Richard's interest in Igbo-Ukwu art, about which he hopes to research, brings him to Nsukka where, for some time, he joins the vibrant circle of intellectuals who regularly converge in Odenigbo's flat. At the beginning of the story, Odenigbo is portrayed as a prototype of paterfamilias authority through his apparent role as the story's chief ideologue on social, political, and historical debates. His reflections on such themes as cultural identity and postcolonial nationhood are ubiquitous throughout the early part of the novel. His relationships to Ugwu and Olanna also cast him as a virile, well-groomed and compassionate person who easily commands the respect and love of those around him. However, Odenigbo's role in the narrative begins to diminish dramatically when the comfort and stability of his idyllic middle-class class life is shattered following the outbreak of civil war. Unable to cope, he takes to excessive drinking, and when Biafra is eventually defeated, the usually debonair Odenigbo becomes psychologically broken, presenting an "undignified" and "unmasterly" image to Ugwu (Adichie, 2003: 418). For his part, Richard, is depicted as an awkward, insecure individual with only a vague sense of purpose. His planned research into Igbo-Ukwu pottery is derailed by his romance with Kainene and his later attempt to write about the war fails to materialise as this task is taken up by Ugwu. Richard's overall lack of direction means that he adds little or no value to Kainene or the story in general.

As these two dominant male characters unravel, their female partners – along with Ugw who is now a teenager – assume centre place in the narrative by displaying the kind of social leadership and agency often reserved to male subjects in cultural narratives. Both Olanna and Kainene refuse to

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flee with their parents to England as the war intensifies. In the face of untold trauma, Olanna takes over tutelage of Ugwu with whom she sets up a make-shift school for children in their war-hit town. For her part, Kainene takes over their father's vast business empire and engages in a humanitarian project to support other war victims. It is while on a daring humanitarian mission across enemy lines that she disappears, never to return. Taken together, the portrayal of these characters re-enacts the earlier-mentioned inversion of constructed gender roles in the works of Nwapa and Emecheta. More significantly, the role reversals in *Half of a Yellow Sun* enable a symbolic deconstruction of the imagined 'master' while simultaneously providing visibility and voice to previously silenced and obfuscated female subjects.

Conclusion: Post-feminist contradictions in *Americanah*

Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah* is, arguably, the most complex and overt feminist character in Adichie's three novels. Adichie has stated that she deliberately deviated from the more cautious and subtle form of social commentary her previous novels in order to offer a more directly didactic intervention on the social issues that the novel contemplates (Smith and Adichie, 2014). Ifemelu is a young Nigerian lady who emigrates to the United States where she gets a university education and becomes a successful blogger and speaker on race and immigration before returning to Nigeria. In this short section, I demonstrate how the novel's representation of Ifemelu's femininity can be understood in terms of post-feminist contradictions within the overlapping contexts of postcolonialism, migration, and globalisation.

Desperate for work soon after her arrival in the US, Ifemelu agrees to fondle the genitals of a strange man in the name of 'work'. This traumatises her and causes her to stop communicating with Obinze, her long-time boyfriend in Nigeria. During this time, she has two other romantic relationships, first with Curt, a rich white businessman, and then with Blaine, an Afrian-American lecturer. Her relationship with Curt ends

after she cheats on him with a shabby-dressed neighbour, for whom she had no real feelings. When she breaks up with Blaine, she returns to Nigeria and re-unites with the now married Obinze, who leaves his wife to be with Ifemelu. The twists and turns in these relationships – especially the sexual aspects – map Ifemelu's psycho-social development to self-assured femininity. While the encounter with the tennis coach reflects the oppressive socio-economic structures against which first-wave/classical feminism rallied, her self-loathing afterwards signals a crucial step on her path to emotional independence. As Jennifer Leetsch (2017) has also demonstrated, Adichie creatively uses Ifemelu's romantic relationships in at least three ways – as "material practice, as embodied experience, and as a discursive and textual construct" to provide "a productive interruption of [social] norms," not only in regard to gender relations but also race relations in a transnational postcolonial literary context.

Perhaps the most important moment in the reinvention of Ifemelu's femininity is her argument with Curt after confessing to him that she had cheated with their neighbour, Rob. When Curt suggested, angrily, that she had given Rob "what he wanted", Ifemelu felt insulted, retorting: "*I* took what *I* wanted. If *I* gave him anything, it was accidental" (Adichie, 2013: 288; emphasis added). Her retort is significant as it signals a rejection of the assumptions that the male is invariably in control of the female body and female sexual desire. Ifemelu's retort highlights a critical tenet of third-wave feminism, namely the assertion of feminine sexual agency through claiming ownership and control ownership, not only of female sexuality, but also of the transactional processes of sexual and romantic relations – desire, intention, and outcome. This is reinforced, symbolically, by the details of the two occasions she met Rob. It was "good" when she was in control but distasteful when he sought to take charge: "The sex was good the first time, *she was on top of him* . . . . But the second time, after she arrived at

his apartment and he pulled her into his arms, a great torpor descended on her" and she left hastily (288; emphasis added). Her subsequent relationships follow a similar pattern of 'taking' what she 'wanted' from the men in her life, on her own terms, especially when she re-unites with the married Obinze after returning to Nigeria.

Yet, an important contradiction arises from the context of Ifemelu's capricious affair with Rob which leads, expectedly, to the end of her loving stable relationship with Curt: "She loved [Curt], and the spirited easy life she gave her, and yet she often fought the urge to create rough edges, to squash his sunniness, even just a little" (287). Ifemelu's apparently wanton and experimental "play with [her] femininity" (Snyder, 2008: 179) is expressed, not only by her friend, Ginika who calls Ifemelu a self-saboteur, but also in the internal conflicts that characterise Ifemelu's attempt to rationalise the deed:

> "It was a mistake. People make mistakes. People do stupid things."
>
> She had done it, in truth, because she was curious, but she was curious, but she would not tell Ginika this, because it would seem flippant; Ginika would not understand …. She was not even sure she like him, Rob, who wore dirty ripped jeans, grimy boots, rumpled flannel shirts. She did not understand grunge, the idea of looking shabby because you could afford not to be shabby; it mocked true shabbiness. The way he dressed made him seem superficial to her, and yet she was curious about him, about how he would be, naked in bed with her. (Adichie, 2013: 287-288)

There is, therefore, a sense in which Ifemelu's sexual experimentation resonates with the problematic neo-liberal discourses of narcissist consumer cultures with renewed interest in sexuality and individualism as well as the commodification of the body in general and the female body in particular (see Gill, 2007; Gill and Elias, 2014).

This contradiction surfaces more directly in Adichie's postfeminist autobiographical essay, "We Should All Become Feminists" in which she highlights some of the sexist cultural practices by which women are discriminated

against in Nigeria. In the essay, she rejects certain African/Nigerian stereotypes of feminism that pejoratively portray it as alien to Africa. Her accounts of the discriminatory cultural practices of her lived experiences from childhood to adulthood serve to validate the classical theorisations of gender as a social construct. In this way, she echoes Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan's (2004: 64) insightful description of "the gender order" as

> a patterned system of ideological and material practices, performed by individuals in a society, through which power relations between women and men are made, and remade, as meaningful. It is through the gender order of a society that forms or codes of masculinities and femininities are created and recreated, and relations between them are organised.

In her attempt to redefine feminism for the African context, Adichie describes herself as "a Happy African Feminist" or a "Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men and Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss and High Heels for Herself and Not for Men" (Adichie, 2012:10). An immediate contradiction here is the perhaps unwitting description of femininity using the same representational codes associated, not only with sexist constructions of gender, but also with the objectification and commodification of females (see Gill and Elias, 2014). Kouamé Adou (2016) has argued in this regard that Adichie's attempt to redefine African feminism to a Western/global audience using her lived experiences of Nigerian cultural practices is weakened by the problems of cultural translation which has produced gaps in theorisation. These limitations notwithstanding, Adichie's literary works, as well as her rising profile as socio-political commentator and fashionista represent significant contributions to contemporary gender studies and feminist activism within and beyond Africa.

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