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Sexuality and Sensuality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

The discourse of sexuality and sensuality has been one of the major concerns in Africa literature, especially Nigerian literature where there are diverse cultural representations. Scholars have been able to identify, through the gender discourse, the portrayal of women's sexuality and sensuality in African literature, but only few have taken into consideration the expressiveness that should accompany female sexuality and sensuality. The paper attempts to demystify the mystery that is 'sex' and to bring to limelight the embargo that society places on the concept of sexuality and sensuality, especially towards women in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It is achieved, however, through the examination of characters in the text and how sexuality and sensuality as an ideology informs their thoughts, feelings and actions. The theoretical framework of the paper pays attention to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis to examine the characters' sexuality and sensuality.

Keywords: Sexuality, sensuality, Adichie, ideology, bildungsroman, psychoanalysis

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a seminal work in contemporary African literature, celebrated for its portrayal of characters navigating the complexities of life during Nigeria's Biafran War. Among the many themes explored in the text, sexuality and sensuality stand out as particularly significant, as Adichie deftly deconstructs stereotypes surrounding the agency of women in expressing their desires

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and navigating their identities in a society fraught with political turmoil. In the text, Adichie presents a diverse cast of female characters, each struggling with societal expectations, cultural norms, and personal desires in unique ways. Through the lens of their sexuality and sensuality, Adichie challenges prevailing narratives that seek to confine women to narrow roles and deny them agency over their own bodies and desires.

One of the most striking aspects of Adichie's portrayal of sexuality and sensuality in the text is her refusal to shy away from depicting the complexities and contradictions inherent in human desire. From the passionate love affair between Olanna and Odenigbo to the clandestine encounters of Ugwu and his lover, Chinyere, Adichie paints a vivid picture of intimacy in all its forms. Through these relationships, she explores the ways in which sexuality can be a site of both liberation and oppression, depending on the social, cultural, and political context in which it unfolds. Adichie's portrayal of female sexuality in the text challenges traditional notions of femininity and womanhood. Through characters like Olanna, Kainene, and Ugwu's lover, Chinyere, Adichie presents women who refuse to be confined by societal expectations or reduced to mere objects of male desire. Instead, these women assert their autonomy and agency, using their sexuality and sensuality as tools of resistance against the patriarchal structures that seek to control them.

Drawing upon Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the paper examines Adichie's portrayal of sexuality and sensuality in the text and considers how the female characters resist and subvert traditional psychoanalytic interpretations of female sexuality. In other words, the paper explores how Adichie's diverse portrayal of sexuality and sensuality in the text serves to deconstruct stereotypes and challenge prevailing narratives surrounding women's agency and desire. Analysing the experiences of characters like Olanna, Kainene, and Ugwu's lover, Chinyere, the paper examines the ways in which Adichie presents female sexuality as a dynamic and multilayered aspect of identity, capable of both subverting and perpetuating power dynamics within society. Through close textual analysis and engagement with relevant scholarly literature, the paper unpacks the various ways in which Adichie's portrayal of sexuality and sensuality in text contributes to conversations surrounding gender, and resistance in postcolonial African literature.

Critical Perspectives on Sexuality and Sensuality

The most defining feature of Adichie's characterisation in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is the utmost display of sexual and sensual freedom. The deliberate visualisation of

sexuality and sensuality, its unpretentious projection through the characters' thoughts, feelings and actions has turned to be a dominant characteristic elevated to the status of a narrative subject. For Adichie, the display of sexuality in her novels "is more of a rule than a taboo; it has emerged from the provinces of the sacred...being broken in artistic conversations" (Onukaogu & Onyerionwu 174).

Adolescent characters in the text are entangled in the crisis of maturing sexual interest. There is lively interest in the opposite sex at this stage. Sigmund Freud's psychosexual theory of personality development locates this sexual instinct at the onset of puberty during which the libido becomes active once again, making the adolescent to develop a strong sexual instincts directed to heterosexual pleasure rather than the self-pleasure of the phallic stage. Freud's psychosexual theory maintains that libido is part of id and it is the driving force of all behaviour. It is this driving force in the genetic stage that leads the adolescent into sexual experimentation, the type that is seen in the characters of Ugwu, the thirteen years old boy, and Chinyere, the young house help.

The assertion is given relevance by the unrestricted involvement in sex-related issues by most of the adult characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. According to Sigmund Freud in Mcleod (2015), the conscious mind consists of all the mental processes an individual is aware of at any particular point in time. The awareness includes the individual's thoughts, feelings and actions. The exhibition of sexual and sensual thoughts, feelings and actions by these characters is a proof of the workings of the human conscious mind; an exploration of the sexual instincts stored in the conscious mind.

However, Osofisan (2009) opines opines that the literary works of older generation of Nigerian writers quite seldom explore romantic love and sex as thematic preoccupation except a mention in metaphoric language without an instance of a memorable kiss. He furthers his argument in contrast to the 21th century Nigerian writers whom he accuses of "unbridled surrender to the goddess of Eros..." (Osofisan 42). Obviously, the representation of the older generation of Nigerian writers as seemingly "Puritans" by Osofisan tends to exclude Cyprain Ekwensi who belongs to that crop of writers. Evidently, most of Ekwensi's fictions engage sexuality and sensuality as thematic thrust and feature female characters as sexual initiators.

Nnolim (2009) arguably presents a better classification for these writers, either old or young, who project sexuality and sensuality as a narrative subject. He classifies them as writers of the "fleshy school". In his argument, Nnolim asserts:

> The fleshy school of writers are those whose main characters are in dire pursuit of the flesh, writers for whom the excitements and satisfactions of the body are far more important than the sanctity of the soul; for whom the pleasures of the flesh are of more moment than the essence of the spirit (232).

In accordance with Nnolim's argument,Oloworekende (2019) maintains that "the recollections of pre-colonial communities indicate that sexuality is absent from communal discussions and is only discussed in vague terms that did not leave room for sexual curiosity or expression" such that the language of sex is stripped from everyday communication. But in recent times, authors are more daring and explicit in the portrayal of sexuality and sensuality in their works. Ikpe's (2004) study of human sexuality in Nigeria suggests that women are not viewed as sexual beings; that women are seen only as a tool for procreation which is only allowed in the bond of marriage as pre-marital sex is a taboo. Communities turn blind eyes towards the frolicking of men outside the terms of marriage while women are expected to keep their virginity until they are married. Strict penalties are threatened and often applied on those who deferred this rule.

In furtherance, Adeleye-Fayemi (1994) posits that though there are assertive and proactive modern writers who are more vocal about sexuality especially regarding women in society, yet there are some restrictions that view the open discussion of "sex and sexuality" as a taboo but should be used instead in metaphoric analogy. In her words:

> ...popular culture in Nigeria has not been able to facilitate a progressive agenda for Nigerian women. Instead, in almost all forms of popular culture, women are derided, ridiculed, objectified, or rigidly categorized in accordance with male power and control as mothers, wives, good-time girls, and at best, as romanticized queens and goddesses. Representations of women in popular culture are a direct reflection of how they are perceived in society (Adeleye-Fayemi 1-2).

Inasmuch as stories and talks on sexuality existed in oral literature, it could only be discussed, however, in the context of marriage. But modern writers are now of the opinion that a man or woman should express his/her sexuality in any context deemed fit without fear of judgement and prejudice. Evidently, the ideology reflects in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Adichie's Sexual and Sensual Ideology

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* has carved a niche for itself globally as a narrative of human beings. It may not have been possible if not for the concurrent ideology of character-humanisation which runs through it. The humanisation of the characters through the unpretentious projection of their sexuality and sensuality brings to bear Adichie's ideological stance on the total exploration of the humanity of characters in prose fiction. According to her, the utmost aim of any committed writer should be the realisation of the characters' humanity and the representation of their emotional contours unequivocally.

Adichie is not found among the clique of artists who are pretentious or withdrawn from freely exploring the subject of sexuality and sensuality in their literary works but she is of the group who believe that "sex" should "be freed from the sacredness that it has been immersed in for so long..." (Onukaogu & Onyerionwu 181). The subject of sexuality should be a thing freely explored by writers. The implication of the admittance is that she questions the verisimilitude of a sex scene that is suggestive rather than descriptive. She furthers her argument stating that a writer must endeavour to draw a demarcating line between his personality and his writing personality. Therefore, a writer who feels uneasy with the subject of sexuality and sensuality should not bother to accompany his characters into their inner room.

A critical examination of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* reveals how she transfers her ideologies and beliefs into the text. As a feminist who believes in gender equality, Adichie empowers her female characters to speak for themselves, and demand what they believe they deserve. Often, Adichie employs the use of bildungsroman to develop her characters from the state of innocence to experience, naivety to awareness, or childhood to adulthood.

Textual Analysis

Half of a Yellow Sun presents itself as a narrative instrument of determining the workings of the human sexual instincts. The character of Ugwu comes to mind in examining the maturing sexual instincts in an adolescent. The consciousness of the teenage Ugwu is occupied with mental pictures of the girl, Nnesinachi, from his hometown whom he desires. His lack of willpower to bring his sexual desires into materialisation conjures these sensuous images in his mind in a manner that the images bring him sexual satisfaction when he touches himself. Adichie captures descriptively the inner workings of the teenage Ugwu's mind in relation to his exhibition of his maturing sexual instincts:

> They- her breasts- were the images saved for last on the many nights when he touched himself, slowly at first and then vigorously, until a muffled moan escaped him. He always started with her face, the fullness of her cheeks and the ivory tone of her teeth, and then he imagined her arms around him, her body moulded to his. Finally, he let her breasts form; sometimes they felt hard, tempting him to bite into them, and other times they were so soft he was afraid his imaginary squeezing caused her pain (Adichie 9).

As the narrative progresses, Ugwu develops both physically and mentally. He also attains sexual maturity, moving from merely fantasising to having a quick sex with Chinyere, the neighbouring house girl. Having been conscripted into the Biafran army, Ugwu whose psychological stability has been bastardised by the gory events of war is seen exploiting sexually a defenceless bar attendant with the help of his soldier colleagues. Though, Ugwu lives to regret this action. His conscience haunted him.

The character of Richard, Kainene's lover, who has failed to actively prove his sexuality with her ends up fantasising his desires for her as "he felt a similar physical pain when he desired her, and would dream about being inside her, thrusting as deep as he could, to try and discover something that he knew he never would" (Adichie 65). Onukaogu and Onyerionwu argue that these mental pictures which take control of the consciousness of these characters stand to manipulate, to stir their sexuality. Therefore, Olanna's moaning at night which Ugwu hears and his exploring of her underwear which hangs in the bathroom finds a way to stir sexual images in his mind. Olanna and Ugwu are presented as the most sexually alert characters in the narrative, a medium through which their thought processes, feelings and actions are revealed. Olanna, like Ugwu and Richard, demonstrates the workings of the human conscious mind. The assertion is true to her mind being occupied with erotic images when Odenigbo's friends visited. Their visit orchestrates a suspension of an ongoing sexual act between the couple. Adichie captures Olanna's state of mind in a more revealing way:

> ... Olanna watched Odenigbo raise his glass to his lips and all she could think of was how those lips had fastened around her nipple only minutes ago. She surreptitiously moves so that her inner arm brushed against her breasts and closed her eyes at the needles of delicious pain. Sometimes Odenigbo bit too hard. She wanted the guests to leave (Adichie 49-50).

However, sexual and sensual thoughts, feelings and actions are basically human instincts which seek total expression in spite of social norms that serve as hindrance

to their full exploration. Especially, the female gender's sexual and sensual expression is suppressed and censored by social norms. Their sexuality is socially conditioned to be at the receiving end. In other words, the female gender is socially conditioned not to speak freely about sex let alone to seek sexual and sensual exploration unless the male gender makes the first move. The social orientation is neutralised by the female characters encountered in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The major female characters in the text portray sexual liberty. They are the initiators of sex and not the passive participants. It is the sexual liberty that motivates Chinyere to sneak "across the hedge of Ugwu's Boy's Quarters for hasty thrust in the dark" (Adichie 12). Olanna and her sister, Kainene, are also seen at different instances taking the lead in sexual encounters with the opposite sex. In the relationship between Richard and Kainene, it is she who first suggest the possibility of sex a few days into their relationship when she opts to get them "a private suite" (Adichie 61) in her father's hotel. Also, it is Olanna who initiates the avoidable sex with Richard. She invites him to "come, sit on the floor with me..." (Adichie 234).

Aside being the initiators of sex, the female characters in the text display vulgarity freedom in contrast to societal construct. The freedom of vulgarity is well epitomised in the discussion that ensued between Olanna and Alice, the somewhat introvert young Asaba girl. She tells Olanna about her army Colonel man-friend whom she feels is not sexually active:

> 'And he could not do.'
>
> 'What?'
>
> 'He would jump on top of me, moan *oh-oh-oh* like a goat, and that was it.' She raised her finger.
>
> 'With something this small. And afterwards he would smile happily without even wondering, if I had known when he started and stopped. Men! Men are hopeless!'
>
> 'Not all of them. My husband knows how to do, and with something like this.' Olanna raised a clenched fist (Adichie 336).

Another instance of vulgarity by a female character is when Kainene interrogates her sister, Olanna, for having sex with her man, Richard:

> 'You fucked Richard.'
>
> Olanna stood up.
>
> 'You're the good one.' Kainene's voice was controlled.
>
> 'The good one shouldn't fuck her sister's lover' (Adichie 254).

Olanna, in her response to Odenigbo's defence mechanism for his infidelity, asks about the copulation frankly. Adichie's portrayal of sexuality challenges conventional norms and stereotypes, particularly through her depiction of female characters who assert their agency and autonomy in navigating their desires. Characters like Olanna and Kainene defy traditional gender roles, engaging in relationships that are characterised by passion, complexity, and agency. Adichie refuses to reduce these women to mere objects of male desire, instead presenting them as fully realised individuals who actively shape their own destinies.

Through their experiences, Adichie deconstructs the notion that female sexuality is inherently passive or submissive, and challenges the predominant patriarchal assumptions about gender and power dynamics in intimate relationships. However, Adichie portrays sensuality as a deeply human and universal aspect of existence. Through her vivid descriptions, she captures the visceral and emotional dimensions of desire, which engages with the complexities of human intimacy. Foregrounding the experiences of her characters and allowing them to navigate their desires in their own terms, Adichie challenges prevailing narratives surrounding sexuality and sensuality, and defies patriarchal categorisation and representation.

Conclusion

The paper has successfully illuminated the motif of sexuality and sensuality in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which portrays the characters as complex individuals who exhibit a range of human instincts and desires. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, it has demonstrated how Adichie's ideological perspective influences her character creation, particularly in her depiction of female characters that are granted agency and autonomy in exploring their sexuality and sensuality. Humanising her characters and allowing them to express their desires freely, Adichie challenges societal norms and stereotypes, and presents the text as a narrative that celebrates the multi-layered nature of humanity. Ultimately, the text serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of acknowledging and embracing the full spectrum of human experiences, including those related to sexuality and sensuality.

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