

Adichie's Commitment to Female Biological Experiences in African Literature

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Abstract

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) challenged African women writers to be committed about women and their biological experiences in wife repudiation and widowhood in her article entitled "The Female Writer and Her Commitment". In view of this challenge, this article examined Adichie's portrayal of female biological experiences in *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah*, the short story entitled *Imitation* and *The Visit*. The theoretical framework used in this article is African Feminism. It is established that in *Purple Hibiscus*, adolescent sexuality is expressed within the ambience of Igbo socialization in which sexual matters are discrete and respected. The expression of female sexuality in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is audacious, portraying cohabitation which has no merit in Igbo culture in spite of the ravaging civil war setting. The representation of sexual expression in *Americanah* through the adolescent peering between Ifemelu and Obinze is too detailed for the emotional health of the Igbo adolescent because it disrupted a legal family. *Imitation* and *The Visit* negotiated the African family so that the husband and the wife will complement each other while female sexuality is not compromised. It could be concluded that through her prose fictions, Adichie has responded adequately to Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's challenge to African female writers. Finally, this article recommends that woman's biological experiences should be fundamental and respected in romantic and family love relationships.

Keywords: female biological experiences, essence, female body

1. Introduction

Commitment is the writer's method of challenging political, ethical, social, and religious concerns through his works. At times the writer may engage the society about these issues through his direct intervention as an intellectual. The problem of the writer's commitment in African Literature has been addressed in the past by Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wathion'go and others in the African literary canon. Jean Paul Sartre's thesis on the commitment of the writer is that the contemporary writer needs to be committed while utilizing his language or her language (Qtd. in Georgiou Iou 2007). Molara Ogundipe-Leslie challenged African women writers to be committed about women and their biological experiences especially in the event of wife repudiation and widowhood in her article entitled "The Female Writer and Her Commitment". Quoting from that article, Ogundipe-Leslie's position on female biological experiences is that:

... Much remains to be said in the area of female biological experiences. Even the sensitive and beautiful *So Long a Letter* (1981) by Mariama Ba does not explore the personal, physical areas of women's relationships in their loves. There, Ba becomes very abstract and poetic, almost mystical. What did Ramatoulaye feel to be sexually abandoned? How did she feel at nights? How did Aissatou survive in New York as the critic Femi Ojo-Ade has asked (p.9).

In Ba's second novel *Scarlet Song* (1986), Ba is still poetic in the abandonment of Mireille by Ousmane. There is no emotion in the description of Mireille's female biological experiences or simply, female sexuality, except that her western female sexuality is flattened by the black woman's sexuality. Mireille is first and foremost a woman, her skin does not in a way diminish her female essence. It is passionately stated that Mireille could not assuage Ousmane's desire for his kindred woman "provocatively adorned with aphrodisiac potency of the *gongo* powder, the suggestive wiggle of an African woman's rump wrapped in the warm colours of her *pagne*" (p.112). This description of the black woman's sexuality is rather dramatic. In *Becoming*, Michell Obama records her first kiss with her husband, Barrack Obama, the 44th President of the United States of America, romanticizes him in endearing expressions as quoted here: "I loved the slow roll of his voice and the way his eyes softened when I told a funny story" (p.113). Women long for this, in their love lives.

2. The Female Body

The female body is not a thing. It is her essence and should be approached with stateliness if not splendour. Richard Mckeon (2001), confirms that Aristotle locates the essence of a thing as that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore, constitutive of a thing thus:

Each thing itself, then, and its essence are one and the same in no merely accidental way, as is evident both from the preceding arguments and because to know each thing, at least, is just to know its essence, so that even by the exhibition of instances it becomes clear that both must be one (p.790).

Moreover, some essentialist philosophers conceive essence “as an underlying, unchanging property or attribute that determines identity, and causes outward behaviour and appearance” (encyclopedia.com; May 14 2018). Woman’s physiological property is a category of her essence. This is ontological and should not be excluded or ignored in defining woman’s personality. There should be no chasm between woman’s physiological property and her essence.

3. What Some Female Writers Before Adichie Have Done

Flora Nwapa is the foremost African female writer with the publication of *Efuru* in 1966. In this novel Nwapa recognizes and extols woman’s biological experiences while crafting an eponymous, adolescent female character called Efuru. The character tumbles the table of traditional marriage rites and begins marital life in the opposite direction because her man is ill equipped to pay the bride wealth immediately (pp.7-8). Her natal relatives compromise their mission of her eviction from Adizua’s house when they discover how happy she is, living with Adizua. The spokesman of the delegation tells Efuru:

We shall go, our daughter, the spokesman said. You seem to be happy here and we wonder why your father wants us to bring you home. We shall tell him what we have seen. But your husband must fulfill the customs of our people (*Efuru*,p 9).

Although tradition is important, Nwapa locates female biological experience above tradition so that Efuru does not lose her man to a richer groom that may have no place in her heart. Nevertheless, Nwapa is not as vocal as the women writers after her as regards woman’s biological experiences. The following will suffice to emphasize that African women have become more vocal than their forebear in discussing female sexuality in their literary art. Emelia Oko (1997) demonstrates woman’s demand for the satisfaction of her biological experiences thus:

Female power resides in ideal constructs contrary to Aristotelian denigration of woman. Efuru is a woman better than the average, beautiful, hard-working, successful, a philanthropist, but she demands only a little thing from the world: woman’s fixation on emotional satisfaction (pp. 33-34).

Although, some African critics like Charles Nnolim (2006), blames Nigerian writers of the 21st Century for writing what is not profound (p.5), Iniobong Uko (2006), extols Nwapa and her descendants for creating strategies in which women portray “the explosive issues of African women’s independence, sexuality, resilience, and tenacity” (p.88). Promise Okekwe (2002), is more pungent than Nwapa in expressing woman’s biological experiences in the play entitled *Zita-Zita*. The main character, Zita, bearing the title name of the text, denounces her husband’s virility while maximizing female biological experience thus:

All night ... his wine threatened time without number to burst like the wine skin, but she contained him as she needed to contain herself (p.83).

In Julie Oko’s drama, *Edewede* published 2000, the protagonist, Edewede organizes the women to rise in protest against female circumcision which places men at an advantage in sexual relations (pp. 37-47). It is important to note that these female writers respect Igbo sexuality by referring to the reproductive organs with local synecdoche and metonymy. For example, the expression “his wine” as used by Okekwe, means male reproductive system (*Zita-Zita*, p. 83).

4. Female Sexuality in Adichie’s Prose Fictions

Adichie’s characters range from female, adolescent, secondary school students in *Purple Hibiscus* to graduate and working class, adult women in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah*, the short story entitled *Imitation* and *The Visit*.

While sexuality is one of the many existentialist questions which should not be ignored in Literature and the Humanities, cultural precepts should not be allowed to shroud the biological and physiological experiences of women in African Literature. In this regard Adichie has scored exceptional marks by responding to Ogun-dipe –Leslie’s questions in these prose fictions: *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah*, and the short story entitled *Imitation*, and the novella entitled *The Visit*.

Adichie is, therefore, not portraying a novel subject, ostensibly, she is coming on the heels of other Nigerian and African women writers to engage global trends in her rendition of the biological experiences of women. What is remarkable is the detailed description of female experience in romantic relations orchestrating the complementarity of the male and female human species in that relationship. For example:

Nkem looks forward to when she will wake up at night to hear snoring beside her; when she will see another used towel in the bathroom ... And she would wear whatever heady new perfume he'd bought her to bed, and one of the lacy nightdresses she wore only two months a year (*Imitation, The Thing Around Your Neck* pp. 25& 38).

While burdening her writing with female sexual experiences, Adichie should observe some restraints in describing sexuality because the Igbo worldview sees sexual relationships as sacred. Evelyn Nwachukwu Urama (2009), submits that: "Sexual relationships are seen as sacred and should not be discussed openly. In some parts of Igboland, the reproductive organs are mentioned with respect (p.3). Let it be noted that every part of Igboland respects the reproductive organs and mentions such parts of the body with profound respect. Ify Amadiume's treatment of woman to woman marriage was defined by gender discrimination but Amadiume was cautious in expressing sexual relations among the subjects. Aspects of Igbo philosophy about sex could be inferred from what Okwudiba tells Obiora in *Americanah* as he cautions Obiora not to repudiate Kosi because he, Obiora, wants to marry Ifemelu (his childhood friend) who has returned from the United States of America recently:

Look, The Zed, many of us didn't marry the woman we truly loved. We married the woman that was around when we were ready to marry. So forget this thing. You can keep seeing her, but no need for this kind of white-people behavior. If your wife has a child for somebody else or if you beat her, that is a reason for divorce. But to get up and say you have no problem with your wife but you are leaving for another woman? *Haba*. We don't behave like that, please (*Americanah*, p.474).

5. Adolescent Sexuality in *Purple Hibiscus*

According to WHO, adolescence is the most poorly understood stages of life course, during which interest in sexuality intensifies (www/who.int). Adolescents or teenagers are young people aged between thirteen and nineteen with clusters of significant others whose behavior they seek to imitate more than that of their families (Dick, "Managing Gender, 2018 p. 202). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili finds a significant other in Fr Amadi (an indigenous priest) rather than in Fr Benedict (the missionary). She finds merit in Fr Amadi's religiosity in an attempt to repel her father's undemocratic parenting principles. In Kambili's estimation, Fr Amadi does not devalue her because of her inadequacies (pp 242- 244).

Adichie's treatment of adolescent sexuality is ascetic in *Purple Hibiscus*. As Ehijele Femi Eromosele (2013) submits that Adichie did not dwell on explicit description of the act ... Kambili's growing sexual awareness is not expressed erotically but in a simple, innocent, and chastely manner (p.102).

For example, on the value Kambili places on Fr Amadi's letters, she tells Amaka:

I always carry his latest letter with me until a new one comes. But I don't carry his letters because of anything lovey-dovey. I carry them around because they are long and detailed, because they remind me of my worthiness, because they tug at my feelings (pp. 306-307).

This is characteristic of puberty and early adolescence when children idolize and have crush on an opposite sex quite unknown to them. Kambili's crush stems from long circumspection by her father, Eugene Achike. Eugene Achike's parental pattern is influenced by the type of spirituality that formed his youthfulness and adolescent behaviour. He rather directs the behaviour of his children through a work plan technically called schedule (*Purple Hibiscus*, pp.132&142), to keep them away from *adolescent sin*. This type of socialization isolates them from people, especially their peers. They do not have other social relationships beyond their own home setting. The brief holiday at Auntie Ifeoma's home blazes the trail of self-identification and self-redefinition for both Kambili and Jaja. According to Angela Ngozi Anusiem-Dick (2009), Auntie Ifeoma's residence:

Is filled with laughter, jokes, anecdotes, understanding, love and warmth to the surprise of Kambili. Although, Auntie Ifeoma is firm and clear about behavioral expectations from her children, she respects their opinion (p.103).

In this novel, adolescent sexuality is expressed within the ambience of Igbo socialization in which sexual matters are discrete and respected and what sociologists theorize about adolescent changing bodies (Richmond –Abbot, pp.160-161).

6. Sexual Audacity in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Sexuality in *Half of a Yellow Sun* portrays cohabitation which is evil in Igbo culture, the exigencies of the war setting notwithstanding. As discussed earlier, the Igbo culture is ascetic in discussing sexual behaviour. Nevertheless, it is explicit in gender roles in which men and women are assigned specific roles. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Odenigbo and Olanna live as a married couple without the appropriate marriage rites. Although the war impinged on the consummation of that rite Odenigbo's Mother, Mama, makes it explicit that a woman and a man do not live together in one house except they are married according to Igbo cultural precepts. She tells Ugwu: "[Olanna] is not your madam, my child. She is just a woman who is living with a man who has not paid her bride price (p. 212).

Nevertheless, glimpses of erotic pleasure that mortify Igbo sexuality inundate the pages of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The response in these relationships tend to be defined from male perspectives. For example, Ugwu is the narrator of the available biological experiences between him and Chinyere and between him and Nnesinachi (pp.175&177). These sexual experiences belong to rural adolescent behaviour tied with taboos. There is no overt expression of these experiences. Ugwu simply reminisced over these encounters. The sexual experience between Olanna and Richard in which Olanna betrays both Kainene her twin sister and Odenigbo, is narrated from the woman's perspective without pleasure (p. 234) because Olanna tends to be retaliating what Odenigbo did. The insertion of the story of Odenigbo's sexual relations with Amala is used to counterpoise as well as interrogate the impropriety of the relationship between Olanna and Odenigbo. Through, Mama, the spokesperson of Igbo marriage tradition in this novel, Amala has been properly married and brought to Nsukka to live with Odenigbo. However, it is in a drunken pass to satiate his mother's thirst for a male grandchild in perpetuity that Amala conceives and delivers a baby girl (p.250). Mama's desire for somebody to bear her family name is crushed. She rejects the child because she is a girl. Olanna on her own part accepts the child because of her socialist egalitarianism theory: her belief in equality and common good (p. 253). Profoundly, Baby's presence authenticates her choice to be barren so that Odenigbo will continue to seek and have sexual satisfaction with her and she will have nothing to fear as long as motherhood is postponed.

Lack of trust and betrayal in sexual relationships in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is seen by Nnolim as the parallel relationships among the ethnic groups in Nigeria during the Nigeria – Biafra war that spanned 1967-1970:

Northerners betray their Igbo neighbours and friends by killing them in an orgy of massacres ... Biafra betrays Nigeria by its act of secession, and the Nigerian government betrays the Igbos living in the North by refusing to prosecute or punish the rampaging Northerners guilty of the crimes. The Yoruba betray the Igbo by harassing and even killing the Igbo among them in Lagos ... (p.148).

Why Adichie has chosen to be radical about sexual expression could be blamed on her sojourn in diaspora. That is why Chimalum Nwankwo tells her to be "careful when she steps on the intellectual and cultural gas pedal on feminism" (sunnewsonline. com/ chimalum).

Sexuality in *Half of a Yellow Sun* introduces the concept of willful childlessness which is very strange in Igbo cosmology and ultimately interrogates perpetuation and male preference in Igbo culture. Bearing and nurturing children is the bedrock of Igbo community life and every woman yearns for that. Although it is not explicit why Olanna chooses to remain childless, her interior motive is laid bare in this dialogue with Odenigbo:

Are we still trying to have a child? ...

Olanna said nothing. A foggy sadness overwhelmed her, thinking of what they had allowed to happen between them and yet there was the new excitement of freshness, of a relationship on different terms. She would no longer be alone in her struggle to preserve what they shared; he would join her. His certainty had been rocked (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 245).

Love, companionship, heterosexual union of one man and one woman underpins Olanna's choice to defer child bearing or remain childless. This theory is expounded more in *Americanah*, where Kosi is left to mourn the ruins of her four years of legal marriage to Obinze who flees to live with Ifemelu without the appropriate marriage rites as demanded by Igbo tradition (*Americanah*, p. 477).

7. Adolescent Sexuality in *Americanah*

In *Americanah*, adolescent sexuality is deified. It was configured as an act of the gods. Therefore, it was an act of the gods that Ifemelu and Obinze will be peers and friends on the occasion of Kayode's hasty party attended by the ten juvenile confreres-Obinze, Ifemelu, Ginika, Emenike, Yinka, Ranyinudo, Ahmed, Priye, Osahon and Tochi. Here is a telling submission by the narrator: "The gods, the hovering deities who gave and took teenage loves, had decided

that Obinze would go out with Ginika.” (p. 55). Before the party started kayode acted the matchmaker for Obinze and Ginika but the gods did not approve it. Moreover, the gods did not pair Obinze and Ginika, rather the gods allowed them to work according to their human intellect. Unlike Eze Ulu of Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, Ginika does not interpret the silence of the gods as acquiescence rather she submits to the gestures of the adolescent actors and accepts the loss of Obinze to Ifemelu in these words: “Ifem, he was looking at you from the beginning ...”. She concludes by teasing Ifemelu about stealing her guy without even trying (*Americanah*, p.64).

As long as this teenage sexual experience lasted Ifemelu and Obinze occupied themselves with exchanging and reading novels, learning their local languages by swapping proverbs (p.62). When Ifemelu travels to the United States of America, she is encumbered by racial segregation and the burden of migration that rupture this adolescent romance. The act of the gods re-unites them in Lagos, Nigeria where the romance is renewed. In the process, Obinze’s wife Kosi, loses her legitimate husband to Ifemelu to consummate the acts of the gods.

The representation of sexual expression in *Americanah* is portrayed through the adolescent peering between Ifemelu and Obinze. *Americanah* is too detailed for the emotional health of the Igbo adolescent. Buchi Emecheta cautions that Igbo sexuality is sublime, only shameless, modern women overtly express the pleasure thereof (*The Joys of Motherhood*, p. 124). Although Ifemelu and Obinze are advancing to adolescent freedom they are not old enough to “set their own curfews” as Obinze’s Mother reprimands them (*Americanah*, pp. 72-73). Obinze’s Mother seizes the opportunity of Ifemelu’s visit to underscore the sacredness of Igbo sexuality and gender inequality. She concludes that the woman suffers more in responsibility in the consequences of adolescent sexual adventure (*Americanah*, pp.72-73).

Adichie’s task in *Americanah* tends to reflect Audre Lorde’s commitment in African-American identity who states: “It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others-for their use and to our own detriment” (quotefancy .com/quote 980). Herein lies Adichie’s commitment in underscoring how the adolescent woman expresses her sexuality. While this expression negates Igbo cultural norms, the subjects conceal their action only to discuss their exploits in the privacy of their meeting arena as respect for the culture. Olanna’s preference for romantic love and companionship rather than customary-legal marriage bond in *Half of a Yellow Sun* resonates in the break-up of Obinze and Kosi’s four-year-old marriage in *Americanah*. Kosi’s recourse to Nego- feminism exposes her to a more damaging ridicule from Obinze according to the narrator:

And now Kosi was sinking to her knees before him and he did not want to comprehend what she was doing. Obinze, this is a family, Kosi said. We have a family. She needs you. I need you. We have to keep this family together. Kosi, I love another woman. I hate to hurt you like this. It is not about another woman, Obinze. Obinze backed away ... He left and went into his study (*Americanah*, p.465).

8. Sexuality in *The Visit* as Feminist Deconstruction and Gender Inversion

Feminist deconstruction refers to transposition of gender roles and transvestism to upturn gender roles in the society. Transvestism is used to swap gender roles in the family of Obinna Ofoegbu and Amara Ofoegbu. First and foremost, Amara is a woman but she initiates courtship at the night party that ultimately leads to marriage. A girl does not initiate courtship in Igboland. Secondly, Amara stalls Obinna’s poetry writing career by wittingly turning Obinna into the home maker. Gradually, she becomes the financial head, rising in her career as a banker, hosting and heading conferences for her bank. In this novella too, Adichie celebrates women through a Non-Governmental Organisation NGO, that attracts government social security for pregnant women with a document to attest to that. Amara Ofoegbu is one of the beneficiaries as these engrafted words testify: *In Gratitude to Amara Ofoegbu, Whose Body Has Done the Work of Keeping the Human Species Alive* (p.16).

In *The Visit*, there is no explicit expression of sexuality rather the female character, Amara overturns gender roles by making herself the financial head of the family while her husband, Obinna becomes the homemaker and children minder. While Obinna is aggrieved by the transposition of roles, he prefers to grieve in solitude, hiding his disappointment to his friend, Eze who has returned from the United States of America. This narrative is compelling:

Obinna didn’t want to argue with Eze. He was tired. There were things disrupted inside him that he wanted to be calm again. He wanted to stop thinking of what could have been, of another life he could have had. He wanted Eze to leave the next day, to go to the East and get his herbal treatment and return to America. And he wanted Amara to come home (p.22).

In *The Visit*, infidelity in marriage is conceded by the unemployed husband so that he does not lose his place in the family. It is a misfortune that has to be embraced for the sake of the family and children, especially. This is an

innovation in African feminist discourse, even Obioma Nnaemeka's *nego feminism* would glower at this. Nego feminism, according to Nnaemeka (2004) is an African feminist theory that emphasizes negotiation and compromise between men and women in Africa, especially in Igboland. In *The Visit* Adichie's feminist impulse is to make men unlearn the attitude of punishing women simply because they are women and make the society reconsider marital roles so as to accommodate the fast changing economic roles of men and women in the African family. Finally, Adichie deserves applause for crafting characters that do not file for divorce in *The Visit*.

9. Conclusion

In this article, Adichie has responded adequately to Ogunjide- Leslie's questions about female biological experiences in her article entitled "The Female Writer and Her Commitment". Essentialist philosophers conceive essence "as an underlying, unchanging property or attribute that determines identity, and causes outward behaviour and appearance". The female body is not a thing. It is her essence and it should be treated with reverence. Nwapa and other African female writers after her (Nwapa), fashioned literary strategies through which women portray latent but shrouded issues of concern to African women. In *Purple Hibiscus*, adolescent sexuality is expressed within the ambience of Igbo socialization in which sexual matters are discrete and respected. The expression of female sexuality in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is audacious, portraying cohabitation which is evil in Igbo culture, the exigencies of the civil war setting notwithstanding. The representation of sexual expression in *Americanah* is portrayed through the adolescent peering between Ifemelu and Obinze. Female sexuality in *Americanah* is too detailed for the emotional health of the Igbo adolescent. Besides, the expression of sexuality in *Americanah* disrupts the Igbo family structure which negates the principles of African feminism. Kosi's recourse to Nego- feminism in *Americanah* does not save her marriage as Ifemelu and Obinze resume their romance in Lagos without the appropriate marriage rites.

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