“Herstory” versus “history”: A motherist rememory in Akachi Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones and Chimamanda Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun

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Abstract: This paper presents the counter-historical narratives in Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones and Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun, which are set against the more traditional and authoritative narratives in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Isidore Okpewho’s The Last Duty, respectively. The paper is based on the assumption that most male writers entrench, while most female authors write to debunk, patriarchy; hence the subtle differences noted in the depiction of historical events and gender-related issues in the works of most male and female writers. Deploying Annette Kolodny’s concept, “herstory”, which is the female version of history, this paper examines how female writers such as Ezeigbo and Adichie have attempted a re-writing of the woman’s story within the larger context of significant historical events. The paper’s theoretical bases are found in New Historicism and Motherism, with Toni Morrison’s “rememory” serving as a critical narrative strategy for a systematic recollection and critique of opposing gender discourses. The analysis of the primary texts gives interesting insights into the far reaching contributions made by African women to the growth and sustenance of their communities at every point in the evolution of the African society, as against what the privileged and authoritative male narratives would have them believe. Such invaluable contributions include partnering with men to resist colonialism and its influences, attempting a documentation of their community’s history to guard against distortion by the colonial agents and working to support their family economically, among others.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Akachi Ezeigbo and Chimamanda Adichie in The Last of the Strong Ones and Half of a Yellow Sun, respectively, revisit history to reinterpret the role of women in colonial and postcolonial African societies. This paper is a contribution to the ongoing discourse on the reevaluation of the woman as an active character in a constantly evolving story of humanity, against the dominant male discourses which tend to play down on women’s contributions in society in order to justify their current oppressed positions. Contemporary women who read this paper are likely to derive historical motivation to rise above their societally structured limitations to realise their dreams even in a male-dominated milieu.
The paper underscores the need for the female’s version of history to be recorded and critiqued for a more balanced discourse in life and in art.

Subjects: Literature; Post-Colonial Studies; Women’s Literature; Feminist Literature & Theory; Literary/Critical Theory

Keywords: Herstory; history; motherism; rememory; gender

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge in feminist criticism that the art of writing began as exclusively a male preserve not only in the western world, but also in Africa. The reason for this is not unconnected with the fact that the patriarchal nature of society emphasised male education and, for a very long time, played down on the need for the woman to be educated. In keeping with the tenet that the person who writes is the person who wins, majority of the male writers who started writing in Africa did so largely to deny women their pride of place in history. So much has been written on the stereotypical depiction of women in the works of Nigerian male writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, Festus Iyayi and Isidore Okpewho—all who have been found guilty of portraying women as femme fatal, lazy, talkative, weak and inferior to the man. However, the problematics which this paper is concerned with include how the majority of the male authors have collectively written to remove the woman from history and how the female writers have taken it upon themselves to re-write themselves back into that history. The paper asserts that the task of the Nigerian female writer is to re-imagine history in such a way as to highlight the invaluable role Nigerian women have played in the development and survival of their society. This is necessary in order to correct the impression in most male-written works which relegate the woman’s contributions to the periphery or mere marginal roles.

The implication of the foregoing paragraph is that in every imagined history, there is “herstory” and that while men write “history”, women write “herstory”. In coining the term, Kolodny believes that “literary history is itself a fiction” and so she “wishes to restore the history of women so they themselves can tell ‘herstory’” (Charles Bressler, 1994, p. 150). In a 1996 article entitled “Unearthing Herstory: An Introduction”, Kolodny advocates the gendering of human discourses beginning from those relating to the land and the environment. She sees the land as feminine and decries all desecrating actions of man towards the land and the environment metaphorically as a rape—a violation that is akin to masculinity (Kolodny, 1996, p. 175). Again, Kolodny (1975, p. 78) also believes in the generally accepted notion that men and women experience the world differently. The need to narrate herstory follows centuries of distortion meted out on the woman’s story by most male writers who were the first gender privileged enough to report the imagined history of their societies. It should be noted that Eziegbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones and Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun are texts which can be read as a reaction to male account of history. Indeed, the two works are imbued with all the characteristics of a historical novel. For one, the events described in them have their bases in the extra-literary history of the Igbo and Nigerian societies. For instance, The Last of the Strong Ones accounts for the colonial experiences of the Igbo from the female’s perspective. This sets it against Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, which can be read a male’s account of the Igbo society. Half of a Yellow Sun can be studied as a female’s angle of the Nigerian civil war narrative as against Okpewho’s The Last Duty, which can be studied as a male’s account of the Nigerian civil war.

The two female authors have explained the historicity that characterises their novels. Eziegbo, for instance, explicitly states that in researching her novels, including The Last of the Strong Ones, she had to go back to her village and dig into its history (Henry Akubuiro, 2016, p. 6). These words are validated further in the Author’s Note of the novel where Eziegbo acknowledges a number of historical sources she consulted in the course of writing the novel. According to her, “these books include: A Short History of Uga (1982) by M. M. Anaedobe and T. N. Ezenwoka; The Mustard Seed—Uga: An Ecclesial Cell in A [sic] Local Church (1987) by Uche J. B. Akam; and Traditional Church

With respect to Half of a Yellow Sun, many extra-literary historical accounts exist to attest to the fact that the Nigerian civil war actually took place between 1967 and 1970. For instance, in his Beyond the Execution: Understanding the Ethnic and Military Politics in Nigeria, Tom Mbeke-Ekanem chronicles the events which led to the war. Such events include the Ironsi’s counter coup, the massacre of the Igbo in Northern Nigeria and the declaration of the State of Biafra (Mbeke-Ekanem, 2000, pp. 9–13). Another book, Emefiana Ezeani’s In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot, among other things, presents a scathing indictment on the British and other world powers such as the United States and Russia for their roles in seeing to the defeat of the Biafrans during the war (Ezeani, 2013, pp. 68–69). Adichie herself has acknowledged that the novel ‘is based on the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967–70’ but makes a point of concession by stating that she has “taken many liberties for the purpose of fiction” and that her intent is to portray “her own imaginative truths and not the fact of the war [researcher’s emphasis]” (Adichie, 2006, p. 449).

Like Adichie, Ezeigbo also engages in the creative re-imagination of history which informs the “taking of liberties” with historical materials in order to create artistic distance between history and fiction. This can be exemplified in the characterisation and setting of The Last of the Strong Ones. Ezeigbo in an interview with Akubuo (2016, p. 6) states: “... I had to change the original setting from Uga Town to Umuga in order to create a fictional difference. Some of the characters are modeled after members of my family ... The Last of the Strong Ones has very strong characters, but those characters really existed”. Adichie (2006, p. 449) equally points out that “while some of the characters are based on actual persons, their portrayals are fictitious as are the events surrounding them”. Perhaps, the marriage bond between fiction and history is so strong that Chioma Opara (1999, p. 151) becomes convinced that “It is, indeed, difficult to divorce creativity from historicity in any literary canon”.

Opara’s assertion that history and fictional creativity are inextricably linked prompts a discussion on the theoretical basis of this research. Also known as Cultural Poetics, New Historicism became popular in the 1980s following a more or less unanimous rejection of Old Historicism in contemporary literary criticism. In Old Historicism, history had served as background to literature, with the implied assumption that history was a finished product; objective, accurate and indisputable. However, with the advent of New Historicism, this structuralist perception of history was shattered as history’s previous characteristic traits of finality, objectivity, accuracy and indisputability were called into question. Bressler (1994, p. 181) reports that for the practitioners of New Historicism, “history can never provide us with the truth”, neither can it “give us a totally accurate picture of past events nor the worldview of a group of people,” but rather history is “one of the many discourses, or ways of seeing and thinking about the world”. New Historicism, therefore, becomes an all-encompassing interpretive strategy which emphasises the interrelatedness of all human activities and does not hesitate to question its own claims, beliefs and assumptions. Among its many proponents include Stephen Greenblatt, who is widely proclaimed as the founder of the theory, Louis Montrose, Jonathan Dollimore, Jerome McGann and Catherine Gallagher. Often studied in two streams, Cultural Materialism and Cultural Poetics, New Historicism maintains that “history and literature must be seen as disciplines to be analyzed together” (Bressler, 1994, p. 184). Ann Dobie (2002, p. 174) stresses the interdisciplinary nature of New Historicism by stating that since no single approach can provide an exhaustive deliberation on any issue, literary criticism becomes a limited framework that must be complemented by such other disciplines as anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, among others.

New Historicism textualises history as well as other discourses, with all of them having a meeting point in literature. But the way these discourses come together is complex and is rooted in cultural interactions. Culture, with its many manifestations, is of interest to the New Historicist critic. This way, New Historicists believe in the intricate and inextricable relationship between an
aesthetic object and society; thus it becomes impracticable for a text to be discussed or criticised outside its milieu or cultural context. Bressler (1994, p. 187, 188) opines that “By allowing history a prominent place in the interpretative process, and by examining the various convoluted webs that interconnect the discourses found within and in its historical setting, we can negotiate a text’s meaning”. Another aspect of the theory that is of interest to this paper is its power distribution and politics. To understand the power relations in New Historicism, one must understand the concept of the “Other”. Dobie writes that for Greenblatt, people mostly define themselves in relation to who they are not; so that what they are not become the spurned, the criminalised and the demonised referred to as the “Other”. Though the “Other” signals the morality of a person’s power, it at the same time constitutes a power base on its own since the individual cannot recognise his or her power without the “Other”. Thus, in New Historicism, the “Other”, the silenced or the oppressed, cannot be ignored in any discourse because “it is by hearing the repressed discourses as well as the dominant ones that the historian is able to discover complex relationships among ideologies that eventually provide an interpretation of what stories of the past mean” (Dobie, 2002, p. 178).

In this paper, therefore, Eziegbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones and Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun constitute the voices of the “Other” which are held up for close examination against the dominant male voices in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Okpewho’s The Last Duty within the framework of historical fictional narratives. It should be noted that as far as this paper is concerned, Eziegbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones will be discussed as the “Other” in relation to Achebe’s Things Fall Apart while Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun will be discussed as the “Other” in relation to Okpewho’s The Last Duty. As already hinted, The Last of the Strong Ones will be read as a motherist response to gender issues in relation to historical events in Things Fall Apart while Half of a Yellow Sun will be read as a motherist response to The Last Duty in its perception of women and their role during the Nigerian civil war.

Motherism, a supporting framework in this paper, is an Afro-centric feminist ideology proposed by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu in her work, Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism published in 1995. After a deft and insightful review of life in traditional African societies, Acholonu is convinced that feminism is not alien to Africa. This position corroborates that of Zulu Sofola (1997) who sees the subjugation of women in contemporary African milieu as part of the Victorianism brought to Africa by the colonial masters in the 19th century, which relegated women to the periphery, promoted masculine visibility and feminine invisibility; thus fostering an enduring narrative on women’s subordination and powerlessness hitherto unknown in pre-colonial Africa gender discourses. For Sofola (52, 53), ‘The African worldview underscores the idea that both genders have the same divine source even though each has its own distinctive roles to play in the life of the community. For Clifford Nwagu (1995, p. IV) in a Forword to Acholonu’s book, “the role of the woman in the family is not subordinate, but rather complementary to that of the man”. It is, therefore, apparent from the above position that the general perception of the African woman in works by male writers has been misrepresented, jaundiced and, for the most part, biased in favour of colonial gender narratives. Motherism, therefore, rests on the folkloric deconstructive maxim that “mother is supreme” (Things Fall Apart, 107) because it is from her that all life proceeds.

Acholonu (1995, p. 110) situates the importance of the woman in African society within the context of motherhood, which she believes is “central to African metaphysics”. Indeed, Carole Davies (2007, p. 561) quotes Filomena Steady as positing that the African brand of feminism includes “female autonomy and cooperation; an emphasis on nature over culture; the centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship”—all which allow her to aver that “the African woman is in practice much more a feminist than her European counterpart”. Davies (2007, p. 563) then goes on to state that a genuine African feminism, among other assumptions, ‘recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African
people. Having stressed the points of departure and points of convergence between African and western feminism, Acholonu (1995, p. 110) states that Motherism, which is one of the strands of African feminism, is Africa’s alternative to western feminism because, for her, “Motherism denotes motherhood, nature and nurture”.

The idea of motherhood is taken both literally and metaphorically. The African woman is all that a mother stands for denotationally and figuratively. She is a nurturer, a home-maker, a partner with the man, a soldier, a leader and a defender of both her husband and her children. Acholonu (1995, p. 110, 111) defines motherism as ‘a multidimensional theory which involves the dynamics of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with nature at all levels of human endeavour. This definition fits into the framework of this paper because motherism saddles the literary artist with the responsibility of recreating and reordering history so as to correct the negative impression that has been created about the African woman in most male discourses. Of particular interest to this paper is how Acholonu defines a motherist, who she says could be “a man or a woman … a builder, a healer, not a destroyer, a co-creator with God, a lover of the child who loves and respects all men and women irrespective of colour, race, ethnicity, cultures and religions” (Acholonu, 1995, p. 112). Motherism is also a framework with a conscious historical sense. Acholonu posits that the motherist should be imbued with a deep sense of history, “ever poised to question the status quo, ever ready to promote reforms, ever ready to make personal sacrifices for the good of others” (Acholonu, 1995, p. 112). In many ways, therefore, the motherist is an activist who constantly seeks ways of restructuring society for the collective survival of all peoples. This is so because motherism is committed to the survival of the Mother Earth.

There leaves this paper with the idea of “rememory” which, as already stated, is a strategy for reading a text from the viewpoint of memory and history. Coined by Toni Morrison in her 1987 novel Beloved, rememory, according to (Rushdy, n.d., p. 303, 4) as quoted in AP Lit Bank, an online source, “is a good psychological and narrative tool which provides an outlet and an effective use for self-discovery through re-living a memory”. Madhumita Purkayastha (2013, p. 2) explicitly state that Morrison reinvented memory as rememory and conceives the term as a narrative tool for counter hegemonic storytelling and multi-perspectival discourse. Rememory is, according to Purkayastha, also a strategy for subverting a single narrative voice through the deployment of multiple voices in a story as a means of encouraging polyphony. This explains why the female’s version of events is considered a form of rememory in this paper. It should be noted that each rememory event has its own perspective; hence no two remembrances can be the same.

Theo D’hoen (2015, p. 257) sees rememory as the imaginative recreation of the past. In this paper, the primary texts will be read as a rememory of past events, a re-living of aspects of a repressed history of a particular people in keeping with the tenet and objective of rememory which is that of helping “narrative worlds [to] make recreations of past memories that need to be reiterated for a bigger impact or significance for the study or character specified” (Rushdy, n.d., p. 304, quoted in AP Lit Bank). Interestingly, the narratives noted in Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones and Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun constitute an act of rememory since both texts deal with a re-imagination, a re-creation and a re-construction of repressed history of women’s struggle alongside men in the course of liberating society from the shackles of colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism.

2. A motherist rememory of herstory in Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones

In terms of textual relations, Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones poses as a rejoinder to the issues of history and women’s role in the shaping of history raised in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. Ajayi Ebuolu (2009, p. 220) writes that “the world in Things Fall Apart is one in which patriarchy intrudes oppressively into every sphere of existence” and that “it is a world where the man is everything and the woman is nothing”. The popular indictment that Achebe and, indeed, most male writers do not create equal society for both men and women in their novels must have prompted female writers like Flora Nwapa and Zulu Sofola to begin writing as a means of returning
the woman to the centre of the narrative in a bid to correct the negative depiction of female characters. The result of this is what can be termed the feminisation of history, an invaluable ideology without which, according to Terry Eagleton as quoted in Opara (1999, p. 150), “the world is unlikely to survive”. It should, however, be noted that in Things Fall Apart, history is recorded through the framework of patriarchy, as the female characters in the novel are relegated to subservient positions and deprived of a voice.

In Things Fall Apart, therefore, the woman is the “Other”. It is through her and in relation to her that the man realises his power. A man was known as a man because he was not as weak as the woman. This is why Okonkwo is particularly upset with Nwoye who exhibits womanish tendencies. He is rather taken by Ezinma’s seeming display of manliness, and finds it difficult to accept the harsh existential reality of how a “living fire begets cold, impotent ash” (Achebe, 1958, p. 123). Women do not also appear to play very significant roles in the shaping of Umuofia’s history in the novel, or if such roles exist, they are mostly unaccounted for, repressed and ignored. A good instance is seen in the message given by the town crier in the novel: “Every MAN of Umuofia was asked to gather at the market-place tomorrow morning [Researcher’s emphasis]” (Achebe, 1958, p. 8). It is a gathering of men where important decisions in the land will be taken; so no woman is needed. Even when Ikemefuna is brought into Okonkwo’s household and his wife enquires as to how long the boy will be staying with them, Okonkwo’s snarling retort is: “Do what you are told, woman, … when did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia?” (Achebe, 1958, p. 12). The narrative voice is instructive immediately following those words of Okonkwo: “And so Nwoye’s mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions” (Achebe, 1958, p. 12). Silence defines the woman in the historicity of Things Fall Apart.

Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones, it can be assumed, comes as a reaction and as a textual response or rejoinder to the woman’s repressed history in Things Fall Apart. Instead of history, the novel aims to tell herstory. In textual hierarchies, The Last of the Strong Ones is the “Other” positioned against the dominant and seemingly authoritative voice in Things Fall Apart. However, in the New Historiasticist reading, the “Other” deserves a close examination because it is by “hearing the repressed discourses as well as the dominant ones that the [literary] historian is able to discover complex relationships among ideologies that eventually provide an interpretation of what stories of the past mean” (Dobie, 2002, p. 178). The Last of the Strong Ones, just like Things Fall Apart, accounts for life in an Igbo traditional community at the advent of colonialism in Africa. The story told in the novel revolves around important female characters such as Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chubuka, who are depicted as the strong ones in the novel. The title of the novel itself is suggestive of a nostalgic sense of history as it appears to infer as well as imply that against what society is being made to believe in contemporary times, there was a time when African and, in this case, Nigerian women were strong and could hold their own in their relationship with men and in dealing with the oppressive outsider.

As the novel opens, it is apparent that Umuga community has already been experiencing the scorching heat of colonialism. However, the women, who are aware of the short and the long term debilitating effects of colonisation, are in the forefront of fighting the menace. In this, the female characters in the novel are portrayed as visionaries who are committed to the survival of their community through a conscious attempt to document or record their shared experiences, cultural values, identity and history. It is noteworthy that the suggestion to have the zeitgeist of Umuga textualised is birthed at the gathering of umuada, association of daughters. The persona narrates:

At that memorable gathering of the umuada, I stood up and spoke on the need to possess an uncluttered memory of the change taking place in Umuga. The truth of that change would be passed on to our people and to generations unborn, before its contamination with the distorted account that kosiri and his agents were bound to present at some future date (Ezeigbo, 1996b, p. 2).
From a critical standpoint, it can be deduced that the preservation of the cultural heritage of Umuga, her history, tradition and values through oral recording ensures her immortality so that even after the monumental destruction, both physical and ontological, wrecked by the white men on the community, Umuga still emerges victorious because “her-story” survives. Thus, in that singular visionary act by the women, Umuga comes out winners in the war waged against colonial agents and institutions. This is so because in historicity, the winner is not merely the one who lives after others had perished in the textual war, but rather the one who lives to tell the story—or better put, the one whose story survives. Umuga women, thus, can be said to have a motherist vision of society in their collective wisdom to work towards the nurturing and preservation of their community. It should be kept in mind that it is this motherist ideology that drives their actions throughout the plot of the novel.

The female characters in The Last of the Strong Ones are outspoken, self-confident and self-assured. These qualities are not only displayed when they meet among themselves at the umuada and oluada (top women representatives), but they are also shown in their dealings with their male counterparts at the Obuofo (inner council committee). This is in sharp contrast to the historicity of Things Fall Apart where women at best mostly serve the purpose of decorative ornaments in physical, spiritual and ideological terms. Again, in their words and actions, the female characters in The Last of the Strong Ones are depicted as leaders imbued with intelligence, insight and foresight. They are capable of seeing the end from the beginning, not because they are oracles, like Chielo in Things Fall Apart, but because they have the intelligence or mental capacity to process available information in order to project future occurrences. It is not surprising, therefore, that even at the initial stage of the novel and in the heat of colonial oppression, these women prophesy an end to colonialism. For instance, Chieme is reported saying:

One day, Kosiri will leave us in peace ... Our people say that it is the traveller who must make the return journey and not the owner of the land. The power of the intruders is to be compared to the evening rays of the sun. Its intensity declines with the hour and soon passes away. Yes, Kosiri will depart one day (Ezeigbo, 1996b, p. 7).

As prophetic as Chieme’s words soon proved to be within the context of extra-literary history, her statement must have anticipated the physical departure of the white man but not their departure in ideological terms as can be observed in contemporary postcolonial issues that bedevil the African continent. Perhaps this statement is necessary so as to justify one of New Historicism’s assumptions that no particular discourse is finished, final and absolute, and that “truth is narratologically and culturally contingent” (Dobie, 2002, p. 176). But the point in this discourse is that Ezeigbo’s women are the strong ones while Achebe’s women are the weak ones. In the personal history of each of the central characters in the novel, one does not only come to terms with individual struggles and small victories, but one also sees how the personal history of the individual woman is tied up with the history of their community. While it cannot be said that these women are superior to the men nor that they do not experience any form subjugation in their overtly patriarchal milieu, the truth remains that they are depicted as being assertive, independent and sufficiently empowered to fight against any form of oppression.

At the Obuofo, men and women of character, integrity and notable achievement are seen deliberating on the burning issues of the day and how best to save their society from the overbearing and devastating effect of colonialism. Ejimnaka, for instance, is described as a woman of many parts, one blessed with the spirit of creativity as can be inferred from the beautiful designs she draws on the walls of her house. Chieme is an orator and a poet, whose art is well known in her community and beyond. In contemporary reckoning, she would be a world renowned poet and public speaker cast in the mould of Maya Angelou.

Of particular interest in the narratology of The Last of the Strong Ones is the fact that both men and women are seen preparing for the war with the colonial masters. The narrator records it thus:
Umuada reviewed the part women were playing in the preparation for war and made plans on their expected role if war broke out. Umuada would give total support to obuofo and would take charge of the purchase and preparation of food for the fighters. Every woman was to get involved in the war effort ...(Ezeigbo, 1996b, p. 182).

The above justifies Acholonu’s description of a motherist as a soldier and partner with the man in riding society of foreign domination and oppression. It is interesting to note that notwithstanding the fact that the men and women in the novel do have their moments of disagreement on some of the peculiar gendered issues that affect them, when it comes to opposing the colonial agents, they put their differences aside. This, indeed, perfectly fits into the general framework of African feminism which recognises the common struggle of African men and women to free themselves and their society from the chains of imperialism and class oppression before going home to sort out their differences together. It is this valuable sense of complementarity that seems to be lacking in the gender relations in Things Fall Apart, but which is explicitly captured in The Last of the Strong Ones.

Teresa Njoku (1999, p. 125) observes the strength in complementarity in her critique of gender relations in Sembene Ousmane’s God’s Bits of Wood when she writes:

At the beginning of the novel, the male and female characters are weakened by the colonial situation. As individuals, they are weak and flexible; there is the fear of the employer and his machinery, and the workers are not forcefully asserted. When, however, the workmen [and women] agree to band together against their capitalist masters, they create the “mystique” of unity, which drives away fear.

This goes to buttress the fact that the two genders can make meaningful progress when they choose to work together rather than engage in a senseless war of supremacy. The next section of the paper focuses on her-story told in Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun.

3. A motherist rememory of herstory in Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun

Steven Lynn (1994, p. 128) while commenting on the assumptions of New Historicism, observes that “if history and literature are both texts, then literature is potentially as much a context for history as history is for literature”. Lynn’s assertion is validated by an earlier declaration that history is textual. However, in this paper, the idea of history is gendered, as the paper recognises that there is “his-story” and there is also “her-story”. Whereas his-story is the dominant and authoritative voice, her-story is the “Other”, and in the New Historicist creed the two should be studied amidst other discourses in order to yield a more comprehensive meaning. Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun represents herstory—a fictional narrative that attempts a feminisation of human history. In textual terms, the work will be read against the historicity of Okpewho’s The Last Duty, which is based on the story of the Nigerian civil war, the same preoccupation as Half of a Yellow Sun.

Angela Fubara (2011, p. 241) writes that “Half of a Yellow Sun evokes the reality of Nigeria civil war (1967–1970) enveloped in imaginative literature depicting horrors of the war”, and goes on to add that “Adichie does this by the evocation of actual names, events occurrences [sic] and aftermath of war” (Fubara, 2011, p. 241). Onyeamaechi Udumukwu (2011, p. 226) avers that “the major feature of Half of a Yellow Sun is that it dramatizes the human tragedy from the perspective of the lives of the ordinary people”. It is interesting that part of Udumukwu’s paper title reads as “War’s Other Voices”. In this paper, however, Half of a Yellow Sun is seen as providing a motherist perspective on the war as well as acting as a counter historicity to the narrative in The Last Duty.

Adichie uses the characterisation of Olanna and Kainene to represent the strong ones in the novel. This contradicts the characterisation of women in The Last Duty as can be seen in the character of Aku, who is depicted as helpless and at the mercy of men and their intrigues. Olanna and Kainene, on the other hand, are confident women who are conscious of their independence and worth. The idea is that in his-story, women are likely to be written out of the historical
narrative or, at best, placed at the periphery, but in her-story, women are written to the centre of the historical narrative. So what is the “her-story” in Half the Yellow Sun? It is the story that reverses the notion of female non-participation in significant historical events in the African society. It is the story which affirms the fact that women have always stood by their men at every point in the evolution of the Nigerian society. Among the motherists in the novel are Olanna, Kainene, Ugwu, Odenigbo and Richard. In their words and deeds, these characters are shown to be committed to the nurturing and survival of their race. The most significant of these actions can be gleaned from Olanna and Kainene during the war. In the first place, they refuse to escape to Britain despite their mother’s plea that they flee to safety, but rather they choose to stay at home and face the enemy, defend their fatherland and fight for the sustenance of their people.

The action of Olanna and Kainene echoes the deeds of the women in Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones, which is set in colonial times. Thus, it is not education or any modernist enlightenment that informs their actions; it is rather in the body constitution of the Nigerian woman to do so. Again, during the war, Kainene and Olanna are seen making invaluable contributions and sacrifices just as their male counterparts. They are nothing like Aku in The Last Duty who is left behind by her husband and who stays indoors cringing with the fear of the unknown, relying on the selfish charity of Chief Toje for her survival and that of her son, Oghenovo. Listen to the following words of hers: “I see my little boy fumbling with the shirt that Toje has bought for him, and all I can do is shake my head” (Okpewho, 1976, p. 10). The pitiable state of Aku is in sharp contrast to that of Kainene and Olanna. Olanna is a lecturer in the University of Nsukka while Kainene manages her father’s business empire. These skills are deployed in the time of conflict as part of their win-the-war efforts. The narrator says this of Olanna:

About a quarter of her class attended school [owing to the air raid]. She [Olanna] taught them about the Biafran flag. They sat on wooden planks and the weak morning sun streamed into the roofless class as she unfurled Odenigbo’s cloth flag and told them what the symbols meant. 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 (Adichie, 2006, p. 287).

Kainene, for her part, utilises her business acumen in dealing with the Biafran officials, priests, the people and the refugees during the war. Honesty is her watchword and, in many instances, she acts as the conscience for the men. The following narrative depicts Kainene as the strong one: “A van delivered bags of garri to the house, and Kainene asked Harrison [her servant] not to touch them because they were for the refugee camp. She was the new supplier” (Adichie, 2006, p. 325). Kainene, who is aware of the dark side of human nature especially in war time, leaves nothing to chance as she tells Richard: “I’ll distribute the food to the refugees myself and I’m going to ask the Agricultural Research Centre for some sheet” (Adichie, 2006, p. 325). It is the motherist spirit in Kainene that leads her to acquire protein tablets to save the lives of malnourished children during the war (356). In the end, it is her effort to get food supplies for the systematically starved Biafrans that leads to her disappearance shortly before the end of the war. Kainene makes the ultimate sacrifice. She is a sacrifice for the war (Adichie, 2006, p. 421).

The relationship between the two female central characters and the men in their lives is defined by complementarity, and this is what ensures their survival before, during and after the war, apart from the sad disappearance of Kainene. Olanna’s supportive role is not only a source of comfort to Odenigbo and Ugwu, but it also provides succour to myriads of people in the war-torn community who have had cause to rely on her generosity, skill and pieces of advice for survival. The woman is not only useful to her husband; she is an indispensable asset to her community and humanity at large. The dynamism that characterises Kainene-Richard and Olanna-Odenigbo relationships compares with that of Nkem and Odili as well as Effua and Norman in Stella Osamor’s The Triumph of the Water Lily. They love their men but they are not an appendage to them in any way, neither are they selfish in their demands and expectations. This ensures that
they enjoy mutual love and respect for each other. For instance, though Nkem and Odili do not have children, “they seemed to have a unique and fulfilling relationship” (Osammor, 1996, p. 9) as observed by Effua until Nkem is able to have an issue. In the same way, sex with Richard might not be fulfilling for Kainene especially at the initial stage of the relationship, Odenigbo might be deceived by his mother into impregnating Amala, the village girl, to the greatest consternation of Olanna; but the bond of love and understanding between the couple is able to sustain their relationship.

That Olanna adopts Amala’s child and raises her goes a long way to proving the motherist ideology that guides the action of most Nigerian women. It is touching that in page 398 of the novel, Olanna calls Baby “my child”. This is the same way she cares for Ugwu, even to the point of using all her savings to save him from being conscripted into the army during the war. In teaching and nurturing Ugwu to be a teacher, just like herself, Olanna demonstrates the woman’s role as the one to raise the next generation of leaders in partnership with the men. The narrative in this work has shown that the historicity of complementarity is a necessity in the Nigerian and, by extension, African gender discourse. Ugwu goes on to emulate Richard in becoming a recorder of history. And, as already noted, history is recorded by winners. Though the Biafrans lose the war, the fact that the events of the war are recorded means that they (the people) will survive the carnage in historical terms. The narrator says of Ugwu: “Finally, he started to write about Aunty Arize’s anonymous death in Kano and about Olanna losing the use of her legs, about Okeoma’s smart-fitting army uniform and Professor Ekwenugo’s bandaged hands. He wrote about the children of the refugee camp, how diligently they chased after lizards … ” (Adichie, 2006, p. 408). Eventually, Ugwu’s writings will attain maturity due to the encouragement of motherists like Richard, himself a recorder of history, Odenigbo and Olanna. Then “his-story” and “her-story” will survive into the humanity’s collective textuality so that subsequent generations like ours could learn how “religion and ethnicity have emerged as constantly used elements in fueling crisis in Nigeria” (Gwamna, 2014, p. 1), how ‘so pervasive is the military influence that whatever happens in the political arena, reverberates in the military domain (Frank, 2009, p. 111) and how we are all victims of our greed and poor understanding of our human nature and history.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to “discover” the “her-story” in Ezeigbo’s The Last of the Strong Ones and Adichie’s Half of the Yellow Sun. The paper operates on the general understanding that most male writers tend to narrate their female characters out of the historicity of their texts or relegate them to the fringes of textual existence. Female writers, on the other hand, counter such patriarchy-entrenched narrative with characters that reflect the truths about the extra-literary historical situations at the time such events occurred. Thus, the majority of male writers narrate history while the female writers relate her-story. The paper is sustained by New Historicism and Motherism, with rememory serving as a critical strategy for the recollection of past events. Based on the analysis done on the primary texts in relation to other texts, the paper finds out that the recreation or re-imagination of history is highly gendered, and that this leads to monumental misinformation on the African woman’s role in shaping the evolution of her society and on how she should be perceived in contemporary culture. The examination of the “Other’s” history becomes indispensable if a proper understanding of the woman’s place in the contemporary cultural milieu must be comprehended. The paper, therefore, recommends that more female writers should scrutinise history in order to uncover areas where the women have been written out and to ensure the righting of the wrong so as to have a balanced view of history, which will in turn lead to a more balanced gender(ed) discourse in society. In all, the historicity of fictional narratives should be interrogated in order to correct, and avoid, the mistakes of the past.
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