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Motherhood: A Natural Instinct or a Social Construct?

Motherhood in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Kim Vo

Master's Thesis

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Inspired by my personal journey as a mother, this thesis analyzes the portrayal of motherhood and the roles of women in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* through the lenses of Adrienne Rich's concept of Motherhood and Catherine Acholonu's Motherism. Complementary theories include African Feminism and Womanism. The aim is to explore how motherhood is depicted as both a natural instinct and a social construct, dynamically shaped by cultural and historical contexts, and to examine the societal expectations and challenges faced by women in post-colonial Nigeria.

The research employs content analysis, utilizing sequences from the novel to support the theoretical frameworks. The analysis underscores the dual nature of maternal experiences, revealing that motherhood exists at the intersection of instinct and social influence. This balance is context-dependent, shaped by individual circumstances and broader societal expectations. The study highlights the centrality of women in sustaining life and community during conflict, emphasizing their nurturing, protective, and resilient roles. It also delves into the sacrifices entailed in motherhood and the impact of patriarchal ideologies on women's identities.

The findings suggest that Adichie's portrayal of motherhood challenges traditional gender roles, presenting it as a fluid and transformative experience that defies binary classifications. Love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation emerge as core values of maternal roles, demonstrating their significance beyond biological or societal constructs. The thesis concludes that *Half of a Yellow Sun* offers a nuanced commentary on gender roles and women's empowerment, inviting readers to reconsider the roles and expectations placed upon women and the recognition of their invaluable contributions.

Keywords: Motherhood, Motherism, Maternal resilience, African Feminism, Womanism, Gender Roles, Post-colonial Nigeria, Chimamanda Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun (The Sun)*

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1 Introduction

As a mother of a three-year-old daughter, I have experienced firsthand the societal expectations and challenges that come with motherhood. This personal journey has inspired an exploration of the multifaceted nature of motherhood and women's roles in literature. Historically, women – especially mothers – have often been neglected and undervalued, with motherhood perceived as either a purely natural instinct, an inherent aspect of womanhood, or a rigid societal construction. This perception is deeply intertwined with cultural and societal norms that shape and define maternal roles, often leaving women's contributions unrecognized. However, motherhood exists as a dynamic interplay between instinct, personal choice, and social influence, shaped by individual circumstances and cultural expectations. Although every human is born from a woman, this does not inherently make every woman a mother. It is a socially recognized institution with its own rules and legal statuses, which can be given up, shared with others, or done entirely by individuals beyond biological mothers. While motherhood is inherently female, mothering transcends biology and is not exclusively so (Silva [1996] 2013, 12).

This thesis analyzes the portrayal of motherhood and the roles of women in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (henceforth *The Sun*) (*The Sun* [2006] 2017), employing Adrienne Rich's concept of *Motherhood* and Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's *Motherism*. These theoretical frameworks form the foundation of this study, supported by concepts of African feminism and Womanism. Content analysis is employed to analyze the maternal experiences portrayed, drawing on key sequences from *The Sun*, highlighting how cultural and historical contexts shape the portrayal of motherhood and the societal expectations placed on women. This novel was explicitly chosen for Adichie's nuanced portrayal of strong, multifaceted female characters who reflect the importance of motherhood and women's roles. The heart of my analysis lies in the question: What does it mean to be a mother in a society that often undervalues women's contributions? I argue that societal undervaluation of women significantly shapes maternal experiences, as portrayed in *The Sun*.

By uncovering the various stereotypes of motherhood, how motherhood can be understood as both an inherent instinct and a construct, and how the cultural and historical constructs influence maternal roles, this thesis seeks to highlight the complexity of these experiences. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a celebrated Nigerian author, has earned international recognition for her detailed portrayal of African experiences and identities. *The Sun* has been

described as “a masterpiece in balancing truth and fiction” (Jordison 2020), making it an ideal framework for exploring themes of motherhood. The novel explores the lives of its characters, challenging the traditional theories of motherhood by situating maternal roles within the complexities of individual and societal circumstances.

The foundation of this thesis is rooted in the presumption that being a woman does not inherently mean becoming a mother, and maternal experiences are continuously shaped by social and cultural contexts and personal experiences. *The Sun* illustrates the complexities and diverse representations of motherhood against the backdrop of the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, challenging simplistic notions of maternal roles. The war’s influence on gender perceptions underscores the struggles of women, often marginalized and deprived of their rights, as they navigate a society that fails to recognize their worth (Moses and Kumar 2021, 3214). Factors such as race, social class, and sexuality play a significant role in shaping how women are perceived and treated. Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (henceforth *Born*) (*Born* [1986] 1995) brought much-needed attention to motherhood, initially focusing on white, middle-class mothers’ experiences, but later acknowledged the exclusions of her original work, admitting it left out the significant experiences of “Black, Asian, Indigenous, and queer mothers” (Powell 2024, 18). By building on scholarly perspectives and my personal experience as a mother, this thesis examines societal expectations and challenges women and mothers through the diverse representations in *The Sun*, including characters such as Olanna, Mama, and Amala, among others.

Motherism, a theory developed by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, emphasizes the central role of motherhood in African societies and its influence on women’s identities. Acholonu argues that Western constructs of patriarchy and matriarchy fail to align with African social structures, where women hold considerable power in spiritual realms despite men dominating social-political domains. Motherism aims to empower African women, particularly mothers, by celebrating motherhood as integral to African identity, contrasting sharply with some African and most Western feminist perspectives that often regard motherhood as a hindrance to women’s liberation, a view rooted in white universalist feminism (Garuba 2021, 109). For example, Olanna’s nurturing role towards her husband’s houseboy, Ugwu, and her adoptive daughter, Baby, reflects the communal aspect of motherhood central to Motherism, while Kainene’s transformation into a caregiver during the war demonstrates the adaptability and resilience of maternal roles in African societies.

While Rich's concept of Motherhood and Acholonu's Motherism are the primary frameworks, their connection to Feminism cannot be ignored. As motherhood is closely tied to gender, feminist theory addressing the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies complements this study. However, given the broad scope of Feminism, this thesis focuses explicitly on African feminism and its subtheme, Womanism. These perspectives emphasize communal bonds and confront patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality, highlighting the broader significance of mothers and women in *The Sun*.

Having established the importance of motherhood in societal constructions, the next chapter, Chapter 2, will outline the theoretical framework, providing the foundation for analyzing maternal roles in *The Sun*. Chapter 3 examines the novel's portrayal of *Motherhood* and *Motherism*, exploring how different characters experience these roles. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes with reflections on the implications of these findings for understanding motherhood and gender roles in literature. By uncovering the complexities of maternal roles, this thesis contributes to a broader discussion on feminist theory and the representation of motherhood in literature.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework for analyzing *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The framework is organized as follows: Section 2.1 provides an overview of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (*Born*, x), focusing on how characters navigate societal expectations of motherhood versus their personal experiences, highlighting the tension between societal norms and individual agency. Rich's distinction between institutional motherhood and the lived, personal experience of mothering is crucial for understanding how societal norms shape the experience of mothering for each mother.

Section 2.2 examines Catherine Acholonu's theory of Motherism, rooted in African Feminist thought. This framework emphasizes the positive, community-building aspects of motherhood and nurturing in women's identities and societal roles, complementing the critiques of institutional motherhood. Finally, Section 2.3 examines African Feminism and Womanism, offering additional insights into maternal and gender roles within the novel's context. These theories provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of motherhood and its implications within the context of *The Sun*.

2.1 Adrienne Rich's Radical Motherhood

The relationship between motherhood and feminism has evolved significantly over time. Historically, feminism paid little attention to motherhood, but contemporary feminist theory increasingly addresses maternal experiences and challenges of mothers (Powell 2024, 16). Research on motherhood and maternal theory indicates that personal individuality, self-governance, and freedom are intertwined with complex social and relational networks, shaping the maternal identity (Takševa 2018, 180). This intersection of motherhood and feminism often reveals tensions, particularly when addressing maternal roles within patriarchal societies (Takševa 2018, 177-178).

Rich presents the seemingly straightforward yet profound idea that women are just as inherently human as men. Rich argues that neither gender is defined solely by biology or genetics. Instead, our lives are shaped by a combination of experiences, randomness, external forces like nature, personal choices, and, most significantly, the societal structures we live within (*Born*, xv). These diverse experiences shape unique identities and varying degrees of personal power, allowing mothers to challenge, critique, and resist male-dominated restrictions in different ways. Mothers may submit to or resist oppressive structures in ways

that are not universal (Takševa 2018, 183). By actively questioning the institution of motherhood, feminist mothering develops and demonstrates parenting practices based on a (feminist) mother's personal insights, meanings, and mothering experiences. Feminist mothering practices have the potential to drive social change by challenging, illustrating, and utilizing alternatives to the traditional patriarchal norms of motherhood (Green 2019, 39).

Rich's *Of Woman Born* highlights motherhood's complex, dual nature, where women are both romanticized and exploited. Rich differentiates 'motherhood' as an institution that is shaped by patriarchal structures, which are defined and controlled by men and profoundly oppressive to women. On the contrary, 'mothering' is defined by women themselves and represents their personal and potentially empowering experiences of raising children as a mother's personal, lived experience (Green 2019, 37; Jiao 2019, 541-542; O'Reilly 2019, 20). Institutional motherhood can be oppressive as it is supported by various social norms such as "the gendered economy, religion, business, medicine, education, law, and the media" (Green 2019, 37), often marginalizing women and contributing to their exploitation and poverty (Powell 2024, 16). By distinguishing between the institutional aspect of motherhood and the personal experience of mothering, Rich enabled a new understanding of feminist mothering as inherently political and a form of resistance to traditional motherhood (Green 2019, 37-38).

The feminist counter-narratives of motherhood aim to conceptualize and establish a view of mothering that empowers women, contrasting with the oppressive nature of the patriarchal institution of motherhood (O'Reilly 2004, 10). Recognizing motherhood as both an institution and an experience not only critiques the traditional institution but also reveals crucial insight: the potential for mothers to find empowerment through mothering. By assigning agency to mothers and valuing their "motherwork," this perspective emphasizes maternal power and agency within motherhood for the first time. It opens up new avenues to explore the diverse experiences of women in parenthood, their emotional responses to mothering, and their relationships with their children (Green 2019, 37; Jiao 2019, 541-542).

In contrast to earlier feminist theories that often saw mothers as victims of patriarchy (Green 2019, 38), by blending feminism with parenting, feminist mothering challenges patriarchal norms, especially those surrounding motherhood, offering alternatives emphasizing agency and independence within these structures (Green 2019, 36). By exploring how feminist mothers understand, challenge, and intentionally resist the institution of motherhood, they develop and exemplify parenting practices based on their knowledge, interpretations, and

lived experiences of feminist mothering (Green 2019, 38). Since patriarchal motherhood is a social construct that is not inherent or inevitable, it can be questioned and changed (O'Reilly 2019, 20).

Feminist historians argue that motherhood is *not* inherently natural or biological but a cultural practice that evolves with economic and social changes. This means that the experience of motherhood varies across different times and locations and that there is no single, universal way to experience it (O'Reilly 2004, 4-5, italics as in the original). Studies on motherhood recognize the oversight that the concept of mothering is not a uniform, universal, or static experience. The theory of Motherhood is constructed on the presumption that “the lived experience of being a mother” can vary significantly, even among mothers with similar cultural backgrounds and traditions. This concept significantly impacts how identity, experience, and agency are understood in both motherhood and feminism studies (Takševa 2018, 182-183).

Having established Rich's foundational theory on motherhood's dual nature, the following section explores Acholonu's African Motherism. This perspective shifts the focus to the cultural significance of motherhood in African societies and its influence on women's identities and societal roles. Acholonu's Motherism provides a nuanced lens for analyzing maternal experiences in *The Sun*, offering insights into the intersection of motherhood and African identity.

2.2 Catherine Acholonu's African Motherism

This section examines Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's Motherism, emphasizing its foundational principles and impact on African feminism. Positioned as a uniquely Afrocentric alternative to Western feminism (Sotunsa 2009, 231), Motherism highlights the centrality of motherhood and nurturing in African societies, underscoring their profound influence on African women's identity and experiences (Garuba 2021, 109). Acholonu defines Motherism as a feminist theory deeply rooted in motherhood, a cornerstone of African philosophies (Khutia 2020, 187).

Introduced in her 1995 book *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, the concept draws inspiration from philosophers such as Philomena Steady, Alice Walker, and Ama Ata Aidoo (Etim 2020, 5; Khutia 2020, 187). Though this analysis relies on secondary references due to limited access to Acholonu's original work, the cited authors provide

valuable insights into her theories and their broader implications. At its core, Motherism celebrates women's nurturing, life-giving, and community-oriented roles, which are viewed as essential qualities central to empowerment and societal transformation (Khutia 2020, 187). This framework advocates for balanced gender relations and a humanistic approach to life, promoting love, patience, and cooperation as tools for societal transformation. Furthermore, its multidimensional vision incorporates the protection and sustainability of the environment (Khutia 2020, 187; Maparyan 2012, 63-64) and positions motherhood as a central part of African identity (Garuba 2021, 109).

Acholonu challenges Western constructs of patriarchy and matriarchy as unsuitable for describing African social structures. She rejects the patriarchy's male-dominant paradigm and introduces the terms 'patrifocality' and 'matrifocality' to more accurately describe African socio-cultural contexts. These terms reflect dual-sex hierarchies in which men and women have significant and complementary societal roles, emphasizing the collaborative roles of men and women in society without implying gender domination (Garuba 2021, 109).

According to Acholonu, Motherism recognizes that in African culture, economic power often outweighs gender, allowing individuals to hold power based on wealth and achievements regardless of their gender. Age and seniority frequently play significant roles over gender in determining social power. These perspectives show that, while gender duality is valued in African culture, power transcends gender, as it is recognized as an independent entity, irrespective of whether it is expressed through a male or female body (Maparyan 2012, 63-64). Acholonu further asserts that economic opportunities are open to all genders, enabling respect and power to be earned through merit rather than prescribed roles (Garuba 2021, 109).

Motherism is rooted in humanism, celebrating women's essential nature, particularly mothers, and advocates for love, patience, and cooperation between genders. It provides a holistic vision for societal transformation, emphasizing collective well-being and societal harmony. This philosophy rejects divisive ideologies and views love as a unifying force capable of overcoming hatred and adversity (Khutia 2020, 187).

In addition, Motherism enriches feminist discourse by incorporating African perspectives and experiences, creating a more inclusive and diverse understanding of women's rights and empowerment. Promoting motherhood as central to African identity stands as a testament to African women's resilience, guiding their ongoing struggle for equality and justice.

2.3 Complementary theories: African Feminism and Womanism

In addition to Rich's concept of Motherhood and Acholonu's Motherism, this thesis incorporates African Feminism, which provides critical lenses for understanding the lives of women in *The Sun*. African feminism addresses the unique challenges faced by African women, offering a framework to explore the societal and cultural dynamics that shape their roles. Meanwhile, Womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker, amplifies the voices and experiences of women of color and their fight against both racial and gender oppression, making it particularly relevant to the novel's portrayal of characters such as Olanna and Kainene. Together, these perspectives complement the analysis by providing deeper insights into the broader roles of women and the necessity of challenging patriarchal norms and societal expectations.

2.3.1 African Feminism

Feminism encompasses diverse interpretations influenced by factors such as location, cultural norms, religious beliefs, geographical contexts, and personal viewpoints. Despite these variations, it universally advocates for women's rights, aiming to identify, establish, and protect their rights and opportunities in society (Odinye 2022, 1). The overall idea of feminism, or the feminist tradition, is marked by significant ideological differences across various socio-cultural settings. While we all share a common human identity, the specific concerns, needs, anxieties, ambitions, and aspirations of every individual, group, and community are always unique to their own (Chidammodzi 1994, 51). The *All African (People's Revolutionary Party)* aptly states:

A society without women can be compared to humans without air. Africa without African women is like a mango tree without roots. The indispensable role that African women play in the development of society in general and community, in particular, cannot be matched or debated. (All African [People's Revolutionary Party AAPRP], 2021)

Western feminism and African feminism are not synonymous in their ideologies. During the 1960s, feminism gained a receptive audience in Africa, encouraging a reassessment of women's roles in society (Joshi 2016, 224). Unlike Western feminism, African feminism acknowledges the societal contributions of both genders. It addresses issues such as the involvement of men in acts of violence against women, which manifest in forms such as rape,

domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and cultural restrictions (Odinye 2022, 8). According to Joshi (2016, 2224) and Odinye (2022, 8), African feminism includes various subcategories such as Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, Nego-Feminism, and Radical Feminism, each tailored to the unique experiences of African women within their cultural contexts (Odinye 2022, 8).

The third wave of feminism laid the foundation for African feminism, creating new platforms to address African women's distinctive challenges (Odinye 2022, 4-5). Many African scholars, uncomfortable with the term "feminism," criticized the term for its Eurocentric bias and developed alternative frameworks to reflect the realities of African women. Nigerian female academics, in particular, significantly influenced this movement (Coetzee 2017, 5). These African feminist ideologies emphasize the importance of grounding the women's rights movement in African experiences to ensure its effectiveness (Chidammodzi 1994, 51).

African feminism also inspired African women's literature. Particularly in Africa, the status of feminism has sparked many debates and controversies about which variant, among multiple variants theorized by African female writers, is the most suitable for the African socio-cultural context (Garuba 2021, 107). Scholars such as Mekgwe (2024, 13) and Coetzee (2017, 4) discuss the emergence of African female writers in the 1970s to counter the misrepresentation of African womanhood in the literature of that era (Mekgwe 2024, 13). Early African feminists were cautious about adopting the term 'feminism' because they believed it centered around white, Western women, overlooking and disempowering the particular challenges faced by African women. They argued that Western feminists contributed to their oppression through racism and cultural imperialism (Coetzee 2017, 4). African feminist writers and activists aim to prove their relevance to the African context (Mekgwe 2024, 15).

A core belief of African feminism is recognizing that oppressive experiences are culturally specific and deeply personal, tied to the individual's cultural environment. African feminists argue that the subjugation of women in Africa significantly differs from Western experiences, as it often stems from ingrained cultural philosophies. These feminists reject Western radicalism, focusing instead on addressing cultural oppression and challenging the use of heterosexuality to reinforce male dominance. The fight for equality by African women has been labeled radical. Their battle for equality in male-dominant societies shows that their protests are deeply rooted in liberalism, which can also be seen as a form of resistance.

Therefore, African feminists are fighting against all kinds of restrictions, domination, and violations of human rights (Odinye 2022, 7).

The theorization of African feminism involves redefining feminist discourse to reflect the unique experiences of African women, moving away from Western universalist frameworks (Garuba 2021, 107). By positively acknowledging African women's lived realities, African feminism articulates a unique feminine consciousness in literature. It celebrates an intuitive approach toward understanding the experiences of women and girls, a perspective that is unique to African feminism and deserves appreciation and respect (Odinye 2022, 8). This perspective is essential for addressing ongoing discussions about race, power dynamics, and the need to align feminism with African socio-cultural contexts (Mekgwe 2024, 16).

2.3.2 Womanism

Womanism emerges from African feminism, explicitly addressing the struggles of African women in colonial and postcolonial times. Various scholars emphasize its unique distinctions from early African Womanism, which include the inclusion of men in the struggle against dehumanization brought by colonialism, Western supremacy, and racism; the prioritization of motherhood, childrearing, and kinship; a focus on tangible experiences and struggles rather than abstract theory; and serious consideration of context and positionality. Womanism also recognizes that African women's struggles often occur within the context of multiple oppressive or hegemonic structures, including patriarchy, socio-economic exclusion, religious fundamentalism, colonial and racist regimes and policies, and corrupt political systems (Coetzee 2017, 7).

In the early 1980s, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, along with Clenora Hudson-Weems in 1987, introduced the term "Womanism" to describe a form of feminism more fitting for the African context. African feminists argue that women's oppression varies significantly across cultures due to the continent's diversity of cultural and political views, especially considering Africa as a single continent (Chidammodzi 1994, 44). Feminist theories center on the genuine experiences of women within their specific societies, rejecting the notion that the experience of all women is universal (Odinye 2022, 6). Consequently, many African feminists prefer "womanist" over "feminist" due to their unique cultural and political context (Chidammodzi 1994, 43).

The tangible question is, why do African feminists prefer Womanism over feminism? The preference for Womanism stems from its alignment with African women's lived experiences, addressing their unique challenges in ways that Western feminist ideologies often fail to capture (Chidammodzi 1994, 44). While African feminists recognize the global importance of feminism in advocating for gender equality, they argue that Western frameworks require contextualization to reflect African women's realities. Rather than rejecting feminism entirely, this critique highlights the need to adapt feminist ideologies to suit diverse cultural and historical contexts (ibid.). It is important to note that not all African women identify as Womanists, nor do all Western women exclusively embrace "general" feminism. Similarly, not all women universally endorse or resonate with the broad definitions of feminism, which underscores the importance of understanding women's diverse perspectives and experiences (Chidammodzi 1994, 47).

A defining feature of Womanism is its proposition of creating a better world without resorting to the extremes often associated with Western feminism. Although Womanism differs from Western feminism principles, it has achieved significant progress in the fight against gender-based discrimination (Chidammodzi 1994, 46). Ogunyemi's Womanism emphasizes the mutual support between African men and women in their fight against racial bias and exploitation (Garuba 2021, 108). Ogunyemi argues that fostering a unified philosophy of life acceptable to both men and women is more effective than engaging in a politically charged struggle for women's liberation, independence, and equality against men (Ogonwa and Asuzu 2021, 32). Womanism does not separate the opposite sex from their oppression but sees the challenges they face as mistreatment that all African people suffer from, men, women, and children all together as a nation. For Womanist, the African man is not the foe or the problem but an ally in overcoming the difficulties caused by colonialism and neocolonialism (Garuba 2021, 108).

The prosperity of Womanism largely depends on addressing the specific issues African women face, including their anxieties and dreams, ambitions and aspirations, and their potential and proficiency (Chidammodzi 1994, 49). Womanism advocates unity among women without antagonizing men, recognizing the mutual dependence of both genders. It embraces the roles of women as wives and mothers, valuing femininity, upholding dignity, and celebrating being a woman. This careful approach avoids the extremes often attributed to Western feminism, making Womanism a movement that is more culturally and widely accepted (Chidammodzi 1994, 46).

This section completes the theoretical framework applied to analyze *The Sun*. Rich's concept of Motherhood illuminates the tension between societal expectations and personal empowerment within motherhood. Acholonu's theory of Motherism underscores the nurturing and communal aspects of motherhood in African societies. African feminism and Womanism complement these perspectives by emphasizing the shared struggles of African women and men against intersecting oppressions. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of motherhood and its implications as portrayed in the novel, which will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

3 Motherhood Unveiled: Analysis in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

In this chapter, I analyze *Half of a Yellow Sun* using the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 2, supported by passages from the novel. Section 3.1 introduces the novel's main themes and characters, while Section 3.2 delves into Motherhood and Motherism, incorporating the approaches of African Feminism and Womanism. This analysis explores the complex interplay of motherhood, gender roles, and societal expectations, offering a nuanced understanding of the novel's portrayal of mother's experiences.

3.1 Setting the Stage: Overview of *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Authors of Motherism aim to reshape history by correcting negative stereotypes about African women perpetuated by male-dominated narratives. Feminist criticism widely acknowledges that literature has historically been male-dominated, particularly in patriarchal societies where male education was prioritized over women's. This dominance led to a misrepresentation of women in African literature, marginalizing them and denying them their rightful place in history (Etim 2020, 2).

Chimamanda Adichie's second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, published in 2006, is widely considered one of her finest works, having won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2007. The novel is praised for exploring themes such as moral responsibility, the end of colonialism, ethnic allegiances, class, race, and the ways love can both complicate and simplify these themes (Khutia 2020, 186). While inspired by the Nigeria–Biafra War of 1967–1970, Adichie emphasizes that she has “taken many liberties for the purpose of fiction,” presenting imaginative truths rather than a literal recounting of war events (Etim 2020, 3).

The narrative intricately weaves the experiences of Nigerian civilians caught in the crossfire, presenting their struggles through the perspectives of Olanna, Ugwu, and Richard. This multi-perspective narrative captures the civil turmoil and massacres in post-independence Nigeria, highlighting Biafra's fight for independence and the disturbing violence that followed (Nwokocha 2019, 225-226). Structured into four sections, the novel alternates between the early and late 1960s: the first section introduces the characters shortly after Nigeria's independence, while the second moves forward four years, focusing on Olanna's and Kainene's relationships amidst the war. The third section revisits a critical event three years earlier, exploring Olanna's emotional response to Odenigbo's betrayal with Amala and her decision to sleep with Richard, Kainene's boyfriend. The fourth and final section examines

the war's impact on the characters, including Olanna's struggle with the loss of privilege, Ugwu's conscription, and Kainene's disappearance.

Twin sisters Olanna and Kainene, the central female characters, embody the complexities of modern African women. Both sisters are educated and independent, holding master's degrees from foreign universities, but their personalities diverge sharply. Olanna is warm and gracious, her approachable beauty echoing traditional expectations of femininity. She is described as having a "softer face and the smiling graciousness and the fleshy, curvy body that filled her black dress." (*The Sun*, 60). In contrast, Kainene is depicted as masculine, distant, and cold, rejecting societal norms of "cultivated demureness" expected of wealthy women (*The Sun*, 57): "Kainene looked even thinner next to Olanna, almost androgynous, her tight maxi outlining the boyishness of her hips." (*The Sun*, 60), and "[i]n fact, she was not pretty at all" (*The Sun*, 57). Kainene's wry remark encapsulates the tension between their identities and appearance: "Kainene and Olanna. Her name is the lyrical *God's Gold*, and mine is the more practical *Let's watch and see what next God will bring*" (*The Sun*, 58, italics as in the original).

These strong and complex female protagonists represent the modern African woman, juxtaposed against traditional roles embodied by their mother and reinforced by societal expectations. Their father, Chief Ozobia, is a powerful Igbo businessman with a reputation for owning "half of Lagos" ([2006] 2017, 59). Nevertheless, his wealth does not shield the twins from the societal pressures of navigating gender norms and expectations.

African women authors often emphasize female perspectives, using narratives that focus on women's experiences in society. Their works typically feature proactive, outspoken, and ambitious female protagonists who challenge societal norms and contribute to community development (Garuba 2021, 115). Etim (2020, 2) argues that Nigerian female writers reimagine history to correct the marginalization of women's contributions in male-dominant narratives and the crucial role Nigerian women have played in their society's development and survival. Flora Nwapa, as quoted by Garuba (2021, 115), describes this feminine focus in African literature, stating:

The woman writer cannot fail to see the woman's power in her home and society. She sees her economic importance both as mother, father and trader. She writes stories that affirm the woman, thus challenging the male writers and making them aware of woman's inherent vitality, independence of views, courage, self-

confidence, and, of course, her desire for gain and high social status. (Garuba 2021, 115)

This statement highlights the mission of African female authors to reconstruct cultural traditions and histories from a female perspective, advocating liberation and empowerment. Through the use of oral narrative techniques such as “irony, repetition, dialogues, riddles and proverbs, use of images of animals, metaphysics (the world of the spirits)” (Garuba 2021, 115), these authors illustrate the ways male-dominated societies suppress and exploit women. By challenging patriarchal ideologies and deconstructing stereotypical portrayals of women, African female writers highlight the resilience and empowerment of women – socially, politically, and intellectually (ibid.).

The rich and multidimensional portrayals of women in *The Sun* demonstrate Adichie’s commitment to challenging patriarchal narratives and redefining African womanhood. Through characters like Olanna and Kainene, Adichie highlights women's evolving roles in postcolonial Nigeria and lays the groundwork for exploring one of the most profound aspects of their identities – motherhood. The novel’s nuanced depiction of motherhood unfolds within this complex interplay of societal expectations, personal agency, and historical turmoil.

3.2 Motherhood: A natural calling or a Social construct?

This section examines how Adichie portrays motherhood as both a natural calling and a social construct shaped by societal norms. In *The Sun*, motherhood is deeply embedded in the narrative, illustrating the challenges and complexities women face. By analyzing the characters’ experiences and the societal expectations imposed on them, this section reveals Adichie’s nuanced representation of motherhood and its significance within the broader themes of gender roles and women’s empowerment in post-colonial Nigeria.

Through her characters, Adichie highlights women’s nurturing, protective, and resilient roles, portraying them as essential to sustaining life and community during times of conflict. Olanna embodies the core values of Motherism: love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation. Her compassionate actions, such as adopting a child, reflect societal expectations of women as inherently maternal and self-sacrificing. The “mother’s voice” concept in maternal narratives provides a framework for understanding Black women’s identities. These narratives explore how Black women, particularly mothers or those in maternal roles, navigate their sense of self by challenging, accepting, redefining, and resisting societal norms. This approach broadens

the scope of maternal storytelling, shaping both the narratives of Black mothers' narratives and, ultimately, their identities as Black women (Craddock 2015, 33).

Rich distinguishes motherhood and mothering as two different concepts: "motherhood" as an institutionalized societal construct and "mothering" as a personal experience and identity (O'Reilly 2019, 19). Rich critiques how patriarchal systems manipulate motherhood, transforming women's reproductive abilities into mechanisms of control. Institutionalize motherhood demands maternal "instincts" over intelligence, selflessness over personal growth, and relationships over the development of one's own identity (*Born*, 42). As Rich argues, this societal institution has become the cornerstone of many social and political systems, reinforcing patriarchal power (*Born*, 13) as it relies on institutionalized motherhood for its survival, presenting motherhood as a natural and unquestionable truth (*Born*, 43). Olanna exemplifies these mothering values by balancing physical and emotional care with ethical awareness and self-sacrifice to meet individual and collective needs, embodying the personal and societal dimensions of motherhood during wartime (Maparyan 2012, 62).

In many African societies, traditional male-dominated family structures heavily influence women's roles, often presenting motherhood as a transformative experience that shapes identity from pregnancy through motherhood. Feminist discussion on the evolution of motherhood and mothering suggests that these roles are shaped more by cultural and social factors than by inherent traits (Silva [1996] 2013, 12). Rich critiques how patriarchal systems diminish a woman's ability to create life as a source of power, framing their reproductive abilities as a mere duty to serve their husbands (*Born*, 120). Western feminist views often portray motherhood as a conflicted experience, where women find themselves caught between feelings of misery and joy, torn between embracing full-time motherhood and rejecting it at the same time (Silva [1996] 2013, 10). By contrast, Black women tend to view mothering as a source of empowerment rather than oppression (O'Reilly 2004, 11).

The concept of "intensive mothering" positions maternal love and self-sacrifice for her children as paramount, often prioritizing caregiving responsibilities over any personal ambitions or responsibilities. This ideology perpetuates the "double shift" phenomenon, where women are expected to balance domestic duties with professional roles, reinforcing the belief that men are less capable of parenting and, therefore, more suitable for employed working roles (Green 2019, 38). As mothers pursue opportunities beyond caregiving, such as employment or social relationships, they often experience conflicts between their roles,

struggling to meet the demanding societal expectations of motherhood. Despite scholarly acknowledgment of these challenges, societal expectations around intensive mothering and gendered caregiving continue (McKinney and Meinersmann 2022, 597). These expectations demand that mothers suppress their own identities, while “powerless responsibility” deprives them of the authority and agency to create and define their own mothering experiences (O’Reilly 2004, 7).

Motherhood extends beyond its mere biological functions, encompassing a broad spectrum of roles and responsibilities that influence societal norms and practices. When examined through cultural, social, and psychological lenses, motherhood reveals the capacity to drive social change (Maparyan 2012, 62). For instance, mothers often serve as primary caregivers and educators, shaping the values of future generations. This nurturing role can be a powerful tool for promoting social justice, equality, and community cohesion. By challenging traditional gender norms and recognizing mothers’ contributions, society can foster more inclusive and equitable frameworks that address social issues and positive change. Kainene’s optimistic statement: “‘The world will turn around soon, and Nigeria will stop this,’ [...] ‘We will win.’” (*The Sun*, 390) reflects the hopeful resilience of women seeking to reclaim their voices and influence.

Acholonu (1995) similarly emphasizes that a Motherist can 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” (Etim 2020, 5). Such nurturing activities include loving, caring, teaching, listening, guiding, problem-solving, sharing, and inspiring, challenging traditional gendered constructs of motherhood. This redefinition positions mothering as a holistic approach to fostering social and ecological transformation (Maparyan 2012, 62-63). While the concept of motherhood is constitutionally female, mothering is not exclusive to women (Silva [1996] 2013, 12).

Second-wave feminism challenged traditional roles like motherhood, framing them as sources of female oppression, advocating for reproductive autonomy, and rejecting institutionalized gender roles (Takševa 2018, 178). While intensive mothering – the patriarchal expectation that women provide all-encompassing care – dominates patriarchal constructs, it denies mothers agency in shaping their roles, reinforcing powerlessness and subjugation, marginalizing and invalidating those who do not or cannot conform to such standards (O’Reilly 2004, 7). Rich (*Born*, 125) critiques patriarchal systems for confining women to

roles dictated by male authority, depriving them of autonomy and alternative perspectives. In *The Sun*, diverse maternal roles illustrate the complexities of motherhood, such as Amala's rejection of motherhood and Olanna's adoption of her child. These portrayals challenge the traditional constructs of motherhood, aligning with theories that redefine 'mother' as a practice rather than a biological or social identity (O'Reilly 2019, 22).

Motherhood, despite its cultural and legal recognition, is neither universally defined nor confined to biological mothers. While nurturing actions, such as ensuring the well-being and optimal development of her child(ren), are traditionally associated with biological mothers, these can be performed by anyone, regardless of "sex, gender, or sexual orientation" (Maparyan 2012, 62-63). These caregiving practices can extend beyond familial bonds, encompassing humanity as a whole and even nonhuman beings. This inclusive approach marks a significant transformative shift in maternal studies by redefining 'mother' from a noun to a verb, effectively detaching the concept of mothering from gender constraints (O'Reilly 2019, 22). In *The Sun*, Ugwu's character embodies this reimagined notion of mothering through his compassionate and nurturing relationship with Baby. His actions, such as bathing Baby and later as he "dried Baby with a towel and then hugged her" (*The Sun*, 124), demonstrate how caregiving, traditionally associated with mothers or women in general, transcends gendered expectations and redefines maternal roles, expanding beyond traditional boundaries tied to the female gender.

Rich critiques patriarchal motherhood as perpetuating two damaging features: first, the belief that mothering is an inherent trait exclusive to women, making (biological) mothers solely responsible for raising children, and second, holding mothers entirely accountable for childcare without granting them control over the circumstances of their mothering. This ideology views motherhood as a natural and essential part of a woman's identity (O'Reilly 2004, 5), creating an experience of "powerless responsibility," where societal norms dictate the self-sacrificing role of mothers, leaving them with minimal agency to define their experiences (O'Reilly 2004, 7). The concept of activist mothering transcends traditional biological definitions, allowing individuals of any gender or sexual orientation to embody Motherist principles to conduct social change (Maparyan 2012, 62). This approach challenges patriarchal frameworks, as described by Maparyan (2012), emphasizing the importance of nurturing as a transformative and empowering act rather than a restrictive role confined by gendered expectations.

According to Western African traditions, particularly Yoruba and Igbo cultures, motherhood manifests in various forms, such as spiritual or traditional mothers (Mama/Arize/Ugwu's mother), forced mothers (Amala), childless mothers (Olanna), and community mothers (Aunty Ifeka) (Maparyan 2012, 62). The novel underscores the central role of women in ensuring family and community survival, portraying them as the backbone of their families and communities despite the chaos of war. This aligns with Motherist principles, depicting women as life-givers and sustainers whose nurturing roles extend to communal support during the Biafran War.

Each type of mother contributes uniquely to social change. While children undoubtedly need love and care, it is the cultural norms, not the children themselves, that dictate that mothers should bear the sole responsibility for providing it. This means that how women are mothers is always shaped and governed by the patriarchal structures around them, with the patriarchal institution of motherhood fully controlling and dictating women's roles as mothers (O'Reilly 2004, 7). As Rich argues, mothers do not set the rules of their roles; they merely fulfill them (O'Reilly 2004, 6). This expansive view of mothering is exemplified through characters such as Olanna, Kainene, Ugwu, Odenigbo, and Richard, who prioritize communal well-being over traditional gender roles (Etim 2020, 8-9). These characters demonstrate the transformative potential of nurturing roles in driving societal progress, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of the novel's diverse forms of mothering in the subsequent sections.

3.2.1 Traditional Motherhood: Clutching to the Cultural Norms

In traditional beliefs, a mother's primary role is to ensure the continuation of her family line. Despite expressing devotion, strength, and self-sacrifice, she is often expected to remain silent, excluded from political discussions, and dependent on others for survival (Jiao 2019, 547). The novel's second part focuses on the Biafran War and its impact on the Igbo region, highlighting the transition from traditional to modern societal values. This period, shaped by strong cultural norms, influenced views on education, gender roles, and women's societal position. Adichie uses this backdrop to challenge the marginalization of women by creating characters like Olanna and Kainene, who defy traditional norms. These challenges become particularly evident during the war, where the contrasting actions of educated and uneducated characters of both genders underscore Adichie's advocacy for higher education, particularly for women (Feghabo 2022, 47-48).

The novel portrays traditional African women through characters like the twin's mother, Odenigbo's uneducated, rural mother (Mama), and Arize, their cousin in northern Nigeria. Additionally, the rural women Olanna encounters during the Civil War embody traditional roles shaped by patriarchal norms. Adichie critiques traditional femininity through these portrayals and emphasizes the importance of women's intellectual empowerment (Feghabo 2022, 48).

Mama, Odenigbo's mother, embodies the protective and self-sacrificing qualities of traditional motherhood, firmly anchored in Igbo culture. Her efforts to preserve cultural traditions and protect her son's future often conflict with modern conceptions of motherhood. For instance, her insistence on continuing the family name illustrates these deeply ingrained values as "they do not want somebody to carry on our family name, but we will defeat them" (*The Sun*, 239). Though marked by selflessness, Mama's expression of maternal love is shaped and constrained by cultural expectations, spotlighting the tension between traditional and modern motherhood.

Her traditional worldview assumes that education for women undermines their primary roles as wives and mothers. Mama remarks, "her parents sent her to university. Why? Too much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that. It gives a woman a big head and she will start to insult her husband. What kind of wife will that be?" (*The Sun*, 98). This view aligns with Joshi's (2016) argument that traditional African education teaches girls to become obedient wives and nurturing mothers, granting them social value through these roles (Joshi 2016, 227). Mama's perspective reflects the patriarchal frameworks. Takševa expands on this, arguing that patriarchal frameworks naturally define femininity and motherhood. This perspective suggests that the roles of a mother and a good mother relate to being a wife, and a good wife as that, along with the associated oppression and powerlessness typical to patriarchal domestic and social settings (Takševa 2018, 179).

Arize, the twin's cousin, embodies adherence to traditional values and societal expectations, particularly those surrounding early marriage and childbearing. When Olanna shares her independence and desire to work as a teacher, Arize responds with bewilderment, highlighting her contrasting perspective: "It is only women that know too much Book like you who can say that, Sister. If people like me who don't know book wait too long, we will expire.' [...] 'I want a husband today and tomorrow, oh! My mates have all left me and gone to husbands' houses'" (*The Sun*, 41) Her statement reflects the weight of societal pressures on young

women, confining them to strict paths, prioritizing securing husbands and fulfilling traditional roles. Through Arize's point of view, the narrative underscores the tension between conformity to these expectations and alternative aspirations, as represented by Olanna's defiance of such norms.

In traditional societies, a woman's worth is often tied to her perceived purity and ability to bear children. Mama embodies this notion when she asserts: "These girls that go to university follow men around until their bodies are useless. Nobody knows if she can have children" (*The Sun*, 98). Her focus on chastity reflects the patriarchal control over women's sexuality, a dynamic critiqued by Rich. Rich argues that patriarchal systems diminish female divinity, reducing women's sacredness to their reproductive roles. These structures confine women within societal constructs, positioning them as the property of fathers or husbands, with an emphasis on virginity and purity to secure paternal certainty in reproduction (*Born*, 119). Thus, Mama's perspective reflects the broader societal mechanisms prioritizing women's reproductive value over their individuality and autonomy.

Adichie further illustrates these gendered expectations through her critique of societal norms in her TEDx talk in 2013:

[w]e teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man. Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Now marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support but why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don't teach boys the same? We raise girls to see each other as competitors not for jobs or accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for the attention of men. We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. ("We Should All Be Feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | TEDxEuston.", 2013)

Adichie's assertion highlights the systemic pressures faced by women, from the expectation to prioritize marriage to the policing of their sexual autonomy. This critique underscores the unequal standards for men and women, shaping how femininity is socially constructed and enforced.

Olanna, however, challenges these traditional norms, representing a modern perspective. Her confrontation with Odenigbo about his mother's behavior illustrates this tension: "Why is your mother's behaviour acceptable because she is a village woman?" (*The Sun*, 101).

Odenigbo's response – "Of course she will feel threatened by an educated woman living with

her son. Of course you have to be a witch. That is the only way she can understand it” (ibid.) – reveals his intersection of progressive education and profound cultural traditions. While Odenigbo is portrayed as enlightened, his worldview remains firmly anchored in Igbo values, emphasizing the complexities and conflicts between traditional and modern worldviews. Within such patriarchal constructs, mothers are often confined to their reproductive and caregiving roles, finding their reason for existence in their sons. As Rich (*Born*, 187) observes, maternal figures are often viewed as controlling, heart-suffering, guilt-ridden, and guilt-provoking by their sons, reinforcing the societal constructs that limit women’s autonomy.

Mama’s disdain for Olanna stems from her perception that educated women are ruined as they deviate from traditional societal expectations of womanhood. In many cultures, the mother-in-law occupies a taboo-like space, often becoming a potentially harmful replacement for both a wife and a mother, as seen in the dynamic between Mama and Olanna (*Born*, 186). Upon meeting Olanna, Mama immediately voices her disapproval, calling her “abnormal” as Olanna “did not suck your mother’s breasts” and accusing her of witchcraft (*The Sun*, 96-97). These remarks reveal the generational and ideological divide between traditional motherhood, grounded in deeply entrenched superstitions and patriarchal norms, and the modern ideals Olanna embodies. While Mama’s worldview reflects the restrictive expectations placed on women, Olanna’s resilience reinforces the struggle to assert individuality within these constraints.

These traditional expectations often demand that women remain at home, devoted to domestic roles rather than pursuing education or independence. The ideology that women’s primary purpose is childbearing and marriage is instilled at a very young age, as evidenced by Arize’s belief that her role is defined solely by her ability to produce children. Arize encapsulates this perspective when she declares: “Is it sewing that will give me a child? Even if I managed to pass to go to school, I would still want a child now” (*The Sun*, 41). Her statement illustrates the societal pressures and the limited choices presented to girls in rural areas and traditional settings, where pervasive gender inequality and poverty often limit their choices and lead to early marriages and motherhood (Bohren et al. 2023, 3).

Mrs. Ezeka embodies these beliefs and is described as “timid and barely educated, the kind of wife his village had found him” (*The Sun*, 340). Mama’s traditional worldview further reflects these values, as she remarks that

I do not mind where the woman my son will marry comes from. I am not like those mothers who want to find wives for their sons only from their own hamlet. But I do not want a *Wawa* woman, and none of those Imo or Aro women [...] I wonder who told them we are all the same Igbo people. (*The Sun*, 98)

Traditional Igbo society closely associates female sexuality with chastity and purity before marriage. Historical records suggest some flexibility within the gender norms, allowing for some degree of sexual freedom (Nwokocha 2019, 226-227), such as access to reproductive choices like the contraceptive pill and abortion in the 1970s. These options marked a significant shift in societal norms and women's autonomy (*Born*, xiii). However, at the same time, societal expectations strongly emphasize premarital abstinence and restraint (Nwokocha 2019, 226-227). Romantic physical gestures, such as handholding and kissing, were uncommon, as maintaining female virtue before marriage was highly valued. Although secret encounters occasionally occurred, sexual activity and childbearing were expected solely within the confines of marriage (*ibid.*). Even today, these traditional norms continue to influence societies, often restricting women's autonomy and limiting their freedom to make choices about their own bodies and relationships.

The strained dynamic between Mama and Olanna represents the broader generational and cultural conflicts within the family and societal expectations of motherhood. Mama's rejection of Olanna symbolizes the societal pressures placed on women to conform to traditional roles and the challenges faced by those who defy them. Mama advocates for parentally arranged marriages and strict sexual conduct, perceiving educated women as corrupted by Western ideals, viewing them as disrespectful towards their husbands and, thus, unsuitable as wives. She arranges for Amala, an illiterate village girl, to marry Odenigbo, believing that an uneducated woman would be more subservient and pliable than an educated one. However, Amala's outright refusal of motherhood challenges Mama's assumptions, demonstrating that her radicalism is inherent rather than externally influenced (Nwokocha 2019, 228).

Mama's instinct about Olanna's inability to conceive reflects the profound invisible bond between mothers and their children. Rich (*Born*, 36) describes this connection as deeply personal and impossible to replicate, formed through both the simplest and most intangible bonds. Mama accuses Olanna of using witchcraft to control Odenigbo: "This is why I came. They said she is controlling my son," Master's mother said [...]. 'No wonder my son has not married while his mates are counting how many children they have. She has used her

witchcraft to hold him” (The Sun, 97). Her beliefs in witchcraft and traditional medicine lead her to consult a local *dibia*¹, illustrating the intersections of superstition and cultural traditions:

‘I will not let this witch control him. She will not succeed. I will consult the *dibia* Nwafor Agbada when I return home; the man’s medicine is famous in our parts.’ Ugwu stopped. He knew many stories of people who had used medicine from the *dibia*: the childless first wife who tied up the second wife’s womb, the woman who made a neighbour’s prosperous son go mad, the man who killed his brother because of a land quarrel. Perhaps Master’s mother would tie up Olanna’s womb or cripple her or, most frightening of all, kill her. (The Sun, 98)

Olanna’s discovery of Odenigbo’s infidelity with Amala, his mother’s housegirl, marks a significant turning point. While his betrayal breaks Olanna’s heart, she ultimately forgives him: “Olanna [...] sat thinking about how a single act could reverberate over time and space and leave stains that could never be washed off. She thought about how ephemeral life was, about not choosing misery. She would move back to Odenigbo’s house” (The Sun, 245). Her forgiveness reflects her internal struggle, as she wishes “she could love him without needing him. Need gave him power without his trying; need was the choicelessness she often felt around him” (The Sun, 101).

Odenigbo’s betrayal leads Olanna to seek vengeance by sleeping with Richard, Kainene’s boyfriend. Infidelity, particularly when committed by women, does not necessarily challenge societal norms but can serve as a way to reconcile a woman’s lower societal status with her desire to assert power and autonomy, both as a woman and a mother (Jiao 2019, 546). In many African societies, aunts are often regarded as “mothers” due to their roles in social mothering (Craddock 2015, 91). This dynamic is illustrated through Auntie Ifeka, who offers guidance to Olanna after Odenigbo’s betrayal. Olanna turns to Auntie Ifeka instead of her own mother, reflecting her stronger bond with her aunt. She even confesses,

for a brief guilty moment, that Auntie Ifeka were her mother. Auntie Ifeka was as good as her mother, anyway, since it was Auntie Ifeka’s breasts that she and Kainene had sucked when their mother’s dried up soon after they were born. (The Sun, 39)

¹ In the novel, *dibia* refers to a person of medicine – a native doctor, medicine person, diviner, or medicine practitioner. For instance, Ugwu observes Mama putting something into Odenigbo’s food as “medicine from the *dibia*” (The Sun, 214). The term encompasses roles such as spiritual guidance, traditional healing, and medicinal practices, which are deeply rooted in cultural traditions (Nkōwa okwu, 2025).

This relationship underscores the multifaceted nature of mothering and the emotional complexities that accompany it.

Aunty Ifeka exemplifies empowerment by reflecting on her journey from insecurity to self-assurance. She advises Olanna, recounting her experience of overcoming fear and reclaiming her autonomy in her marriage:

‘When your uncle first married me, I worried because I thought those women outside would come and displace me from my home. I now know that nothing he does will make my life change. My life will change only if I want it to change.’ [...] ‘He is very careful now, since he realized that I am no longer afraid. I have told him that if he brings disgrace to me in any way, I will cut off that snake between his legs’ (*The Sun*, 226).

Her powerful statement – “‘You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me?’ [...] ‘Your life belongs to you and you alone, *soso gi* [only you] [...]” (*The Sun*, 226; italics as in original, translation added) – captures the theme of autonomy and empowerment. Recognizing mothers as individuals with their own experiences and agency can foster maternal empowerment, positively influencing both mothers and daughters (Jiao 2019, 551).

While Olanna’s act of retribution brings her a sense of liberation, it inflicts deep emotional pain on her twin sister, Kainene. Kainene’s reaction – “‘You fucked Richard.’ [...] ‘You’re the good one.’ Kainene’s voice was controlled. ‘The good one shouldn’t fuck her sister’s lover’” (*The Sun*, 254) – highlights the interpersonal consequences of Olanna’s choices. Although she regrets hurting her sister, Olanna reflects on the act itself as transformative: “‘She did not have to be the wounded woman whose man had slept with a village girl. [...] She could be a woman taking charge of her own life. She could be anything’” (*The Sun*, 227-228). This complex interplay between personal empowerment and relational consequences showcases the multifaceted nature of infidelity in the novel.

The Igbo culture’s acceptance of polygyny, which permits men to have multiple wives and concubines while expecting their loyalty, provides a backdrop for the recurring theme of infidelity (Joshi 227). Olanna’s struggles with Odenigbo’s unfaithfulness, including her suspicions during the war, reveal the emotional toll of betrayal: “‘Olanna slept outside and dreamed of Alice and Odenigbo on the bed in Nsukka, their sweat on her newly washed sheet’” (*The Sun*, 385). These challenges are mirrored in her parents’ relationship. Pressured

by her mother to confront her father's infidelity, Olanna feels complicit in its perpetuation, "as if she had asked him to go ahead and cheat on her mother but to do it considerately. It angered her" (*The Sun*, 218). Her mother's concern over societal perceptions reflects the established male dominance within traditional family dynamics: "What troubled her mother was not the mistress, she knew, but the significance of what her father had done: buying the mistress a house in a neighborhood where Lagos socialites lived" (ibid.). Paradoxically, such acceptance reinforces the patriarchal structures (Jiao 2019, 546).

The narratives in *The Sun* expose how infidelity and societal norms operate within the constraints of traditional motherhood. While traditional expectations impose strict roles on women, these roles often fail to account for the complexities of individual desires and circumstances. This tension becomes even more pronounced when women are forced into motherhood or must navigate unwanted maternal roles, challenging cultural rigor and redefining the scope of motherhood itself. The following section delves into the reluctant and forced motherhood portrayed in the novel, exploring the struggles of women who must confront societal pressures in opposition to their own needs and realities.

3.2.2 The Reluctant and Forced Motherhood: Navigating Unwanted Roles

Not all women become mothers. While every individual is born from a woman, this does not mean that motherhood is universal or inevitable, even for those who give birth (Silva [1996] 2013, 12). Rich (*Born*, 13) points out that for many women, becoming a mother has historically been less a matter of choice and more of societal expectations and pressures, leaving them with limited autonomy over this life-changing role. In *The Sun*, the theme of reluctant and forced motherhood is explored through Amala's experience, shedding light on the struggles and societal pressure placed on women. Although Amala's narrative is not presented directly, her struggles are revealed through the perspectives of other characters, such as Olanna and Ugwu. Amala is portrayed as a withdrawn, subdued figure who "spoke so seldom that her voice always surprised Ugwu by how childishly high it was" (*The Sun*, 239-240).

In rural settings, women are often depicted as subservient and voiceless, their roles predetermined by societal traditions that uphold childbearing as their primary function (Ogonwa and Asuzu 2021, 31). Narratives of Black female characters reclaim suppressed voices, empowering them to challenge forced silences and claim their identities. These stories act as both resistance and empowerment, redefining women's roles within their communities

(Craddock 2015, 33). Rich notes that women have historically not only raised children but also contributed significantly to productive labor (*Born*, 44). This dual responsibility, long undervalued, underscores the societal expectation of women's subservience and reveals the patriarchal structures that confine them (*Born*, 49). In many African societies, gender roles are strictly defined, reducing women's worth to degrading and undervalued roles such as housekeeping, prostitution, and petty trading. This systematic marginalization, perpetuated by male-dominated traditions, often mirrors a form of slavery, with little disruption even during colonial influence (Ogonwa and Asuzu 2021, 31).

Rich (*Born*, 33) frames patriarchal motherhood as a socially constructed institution parallel to systems like rape and slavery – creations of human society rather than universal truths. Rich advocates for women's autonomy over their sexuality and reproductive choices, emphasizing the need to disconnect societal expectations from women's control over their own bodies (*Born*, xvi-xvii). Beyond its reproductive function, the female body can be seen as a symbol of both domestic and national power struggles (Jiao 2019, 547). While pregnancy is a natural biological process for women, it does not automatically equate to motherhood. Society expects women to transition into maternal responsibilities seamlessly. However, the concept of motherhood is intertwined with a complex mix of biology, culture, and politics. As such, motherhood is predominantly a cultural construct rather than simply a natural or biological function (Roifah 2021, 179).

Amala, an uneducated village girl working for Mama, is manipulated into disrupting Odenigbo's relationship with Olanna. Her sexual encounter with Odenigbo, described as taking place under coercive circumstances, highlights the lack of agency she experiences. Initially portrayed as obedient and naïve, Amala complies with Mama's demands. The circumstances, open to interpretation, range from objectification and rape to Amala asserting her autonomy as a sexual being. However, Odenigbo seeks to avert responsibility, claiming "that he had been drunk, that Amala had forced herself on him, that it had been a brief rash lust" (*The Sun*, 225). This incident underscores the gendered power imbalances and limited autonomy granted to women like Amala. Rich argues that a woman's worth is often tied to her ability to bear children, and women who refuse motherhood are considered not just emotionally questionable but also dangerous. By rejecting motherhood, they are seen as failing to contribute to the continuation of life (*Born*, 169).

Amala's rejection of motherhood emerges as a direct response to the circumstances of the child's conception and the societal pressures imposed upon her, mainly by Mama. By refusing to embrace the maternal role, Amala validates her agency, reclaiming control over the outcome of her coerced interaction with Odenigbo (Nwokocha 2019, 228). While she consents to sex, she vehemently resists motherhood, as evidenced by her belief that "[i]f you eat plenty of hot peppers, they will remove pregnancy" (*The Sun*, 240). Ugwu reflects on her actions, questioning "why she had gone along with it if she did not want the baby. She had gone to Master's room herself, after all, and she must have known about Mama's plan" (ibid.). This highlights the layered complexity of Amala's agency and her ability to consent to sex while simultaneously rejecting societal expectations tied to motherhood.

Kainene's reaction to Amala's pregnancy – "[i]sn't it against the tenets of socialism, though, impregnating people of the lower classes?" (*The Sun*, 247) – draws attention to the societal inequities surrounding motherhood. Her critique challenges cultural narratives that reduce marginalized women to mere vessels for childbearing, reinforcing the systemic lack of agency they endure. In a society that often values women solely for their ability to bear children, Amala's refusal challenges deeply ingrained norms that strip women of independence and power (Jiao 2019, 547). While motherhood is frequently considered a paramount virtue for Nigerian women, Amala provides a rare depiction of a woman who defies normative expectations, reclaiming her power by rejecting maternal expectations (Nwokocha 2019, 228). Adichie juxtaposes ideological values against lived experiences, exposing the hypocrisy inherent in societal norms that exploit women like Amala. By framing motherhood as an imposed expectation rather than a chosen path, Kainene's critique becomes a piercing reminder of the broader issues of class and gender inequity throughout the novel.

Amala's narrative vividly portrays the complexities of reluctant and forced motherhood. Her body language conveys her internal resistance: "She sat with her knees pressed together, her eyes focused on the pile of newspapers on the centre table, her face blank" (*The Sun*, 247). Despite gaining validation through her pregnancy in Mama's eyes, Amala views her role with disinterest, rejecting the delight tied to motherhood. Following her failed self-abortion attempt, "[s]he was huddled in the mud like a pathetic animal, chewing slowly, tears streaming down her face" (*The Sun*, 240). She refuses to bond with the baby upon birth, rejecting the maternal role entirely. Olanna observes: "As she and Odenigbo turned to leave, she noticed that Amala did not turn, did not move, did not do anything to show she had heard" (*The Sun*, 249). The nurse points out her detachment: "You know her mother has refused to

touch her,' the nurse said [...]. 'She has not touched her at all. We are using a wet nurse'" (ibid.).

Amala's rejection of motherhood starkly contrasts with the expectations imposed upon her and reveals the intricacies of forced motherhood. The depth of her struggle unfolds in a significant moment in the narrative:

Amala mumbled something. Finally, she turned her face towards them and Olanna looked at her: a plain village girl curled up on the bed as if she were cringing from one more furious blow from life. She never once looked at Odenigbo. What she must feel for him was an awed fear. Whether or not Mama had told her to go to his room, she had not said no to Odenigbo because she had not even considered that she could say no. Odenigbo made a drunken pass and she submitted willingly and promptly: He was the master, he spoke English, he had a car. It was the way it should be. [...] Olanna was watching her. Perhaps it was hate she felt for Odenigbo. How much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice? (*The Sun*, 250)

Adichie's portrayal of Amala as "cringing from one more furious blow from life" underscores her complete lack of agency. Her silence and compliance are shaped by systematic oppression and deeply ingrained societal hierarchies rather than personal choice. The line "she had not even considered that she could say no" illustrates the profound internalization of power dynamics, reflecting Amala's conditioned submission to authority figures like Mama and Odenigbo. Olanna's reflection – "how much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice" – emphasizes society's failure to recognize and validate the experiences of marginalized women. Craddock notes that silencing voices effectively erases identity, rendering individuals invisible. By centering Amala's muted presence, Adichie compels readers to confront the weight of such erasure while challenging the traditional notion of motherhood as inherently empowering or desired (Craddock 2015, 32).

The absence of Amala's voice exemplifies the systemic silencing of women, stripping them of agency over their own bodies and choices. The silencing is evident in scenes like Odenigbo demanding Amala to eat "in a voice that was too loud" (*The Sun*, 250), with Mama reinforcing his command: "'Did you hear what my son said?' [...] 'He said you should eat'" (ibid.). Mama's influence permeates the situation, orchestrating the circumstances from the outset, as Olanna observes: "'Amala has refused to eat,' [...] 'Gwakwa ya. Tell her to eat.' Olanna sensed Odenigbo's discomfort" (ibid.).

Mama's dominance is further acknowledged by Odenigbo, who claims that "Mama planned this from the beginning. I see how she made sure I was dead drunk before sending Amala to me. I feel as if I've been dropped into something I don't entirely understand" (*The Sun*, 231-232). His admission that "[t]his would not have happened if my mother did not have a hand!" (*The Sun*, 240) reinforces the power imbalance that silences Amala's voice and agency. The intersectional theory highlights how intersecting oppressions create "double jeopardy," where individuals like Amala face exacerbated societal marginalization (Bohren et al. 2023, 5). Craddock (2015, 32-33) argues that the invisibility of silenced voices amplifies oppression, calling for recognition and empowerment to redefine family and motherhood beyond traditional constructs.

The societal structure not only silences women but also perpetuates cycles of oppression across generations. Mothers, victimized by societal ideals, are expected to sacrifice for their sons, while daughters are taught to sacrifice for their brothers or husbands, mirroring their mother's experiences. As a victim of the ideal mother constructed by society, the mother continues this cycle by making her daughters victims, too (Jiao 2019, 547). Rich contrasts the fleeting role of men in conception with the transformative impact on a woman's life, arguing that decisions surrounding motherhood – ranging from abortion to rejecting the child – are inherently challenging and socially charged. These pressures shape maternal identity, often leaving permanent changes in a woman's body, mind, and future (*Born*, 12). Amala's narrative exemplifies forced motherhood, challenging cultural narratives that reduce women's worth to their reproductive roles. Her rejection of motherhood becomes a bold assertion of autonomy, reframing maternal experiences while simultaneously experiencing privilege and disempowerment (Bohren et al. 2023, 3).

The persistent demand for Black women to conform to narrow mainstream categories overlooks their unique experiences, ensuring that their needs remain unmet (Crenshaw 1989, 149-150). Amala's story distinctively portrays the complexities of reluctant and forced motherhood, challenging societal norms that reduce women's worth to their reproductive roles. Her rejection of motherhood transcends mere refusal; it becomes a bold act of defiance against patriarchal systems that seek to silence and control women.

Through Amala's silence, Adichie highlights the erasure of marginalized voices in traditional frameworks, underscoring that motherhood is neither universal nor inevitable. This perspective sets the stage for a deeper exploration of maternal roles beyond biological

boundaries as *The Sun* examines the nuanced experiences of childless mothers and their transformative impact on redefining maternal identity.

3.2.3 The Childless Mother: Redefining Maternal Bonds

Rich (*Born*, 119) critiques the patriarchal family structure, comparing it to a hierarchy where the husband has the most power, while the wife and children exist in subordinate, dependent roles equivalent to workers under a boss. This traditional model suppresses women's identities and natural creativity, confining them within oppressive frameworks. Feminist mothering seeks to dismantle these structures, challenging "the oppressive patriarchal institution of motherhood, including the ideologies of intensive and sacrificial mothering," and redefining mothering as a feminist and inclusive activity (Green 2019, 39).

While traditional perspectives frame mothering as private and neutral, feminist mothering underscores its cultural and political dimensions. It critiques societal expectations that reinforce traditional family structures and insists on redefining motherhood in ways that empower women (*ibid.*). These societal pressures are echoed by Olanna's neighbor Edna, who remarks: "Look at you. You're the kindest person I know. Look how beautiful you are. Why do you need so much outside of yourself? Why isn't what you *are* enough?" (*The Sun*, 232, italics as in the original). Edna's words reflect the judgment women faced by women who fail to conform to traditional notions of "good" mothering, often leading to internalized shame and self-doubt (McKinney and Meinersmann 2022, 597).

Rich critiques the patriarchal system's impact on women's evolution, arguing it emerged from a complex mix of frustration, need, and power. This system redirected women's natural creativity and strength against them, restricting their potential growth. Rich calls for reclaiming women's autonomy and restoring their development to their own hands (*Born*, 126-127). For many African women, motherhood is a deeply significant achievement they strive for, closely tied to their identities and self-worth (Joshi 2016, 227). However, Craddock (2015, 10) emphasizes the need to expand perspectives beyond private motherhood to advance African women's empowerment and agency. This shift is exemplified by Olanna, whose highly educated background allows her to navigate her own journey toward embracing motherhood.

Olanna's experience challenges traditional narratives of motherhood, illustrating the tension between societal expectations and personal desires. Initially, Olanna is indifferent to having

children as “she did not have that fabled female longing to give birth, [...] she had never seriously thought of having a child” (*The Sun*, 104). However, her perspective gradually shifts, driven by her longing for a deeper connection with Odenigbo, and “the longing in the lower part of her belly was sudden and searing and new. She wanted the solid weight of a child, his child, in her body” (ibid.). Mama’s pointed remarks deeply affect Olanna, as they “ripped a hole in her safe mesh of feathers, startled her, snatched something away from her” (ibid.). These emotional conflicts propel her towards considering motherhood: “The thought came to her slowly: She wanted to have Odenigbo’s child” (ibid.). Her journey, shaped by both external pressure and cultural norms, reveals the intersection of societal expectations and individual identity.

In many African societies, childbearing validates womanhood and often serves as a source of power and authority (Craddock 2015, 88). Women unable to conceive are frequently labeled “barren” or “childless.” terms that diminish their identities, while no equivalent terminology for men, such as “nonfather” (*Born*, 11). Joshi (2016, 227) contends that infertility is often regarded as a woman’s greatest misfortune, with the blame solely on her shoulders. Similarly, Rich (*Born*, 119) highlights the historical view of infertility as a curse, reinforcing a patriarchal framework where women’s worth is intrinsically tied to reproduction. These expectations profoundly shape Olanna’s internal struggles, leaving her grappling with feelings of inadequacy and insecurity: “She felt something [...] while waiting for the gynaecologist: convinced that something was wrong with her body and yet willing him to tell her that all was well” (*The Sun*, 223).

Despite these struggles, Olanna’s narrative offers a critique of traditional motherhood as an institution. In a society that places immense value on motherhood, Olanna’s infertility challenges her sense of identity, forcing her to confront feelings of inadequacy. Distinguishing between the institutional aspect of motherhood and the personal experience of mothering reveals motherhood’s dual potential: the potential for mothers to find empowerment through mothering. Rich describes feminist mothering as inherently political – a form of resistance to traditional norms (Green 2019, 37-38). The pervasive role of traditional beliefs within Igbo society further intensifies these dynamics. Mama’s superstitions, for example, reflect the cultural emphasis on fertility. Ugwu observes Mama rubbing something on Amala and reflects whether “Mama had indeed gone to the *dibia*, the medicine would be for Olanna not Amala. It may be, though, that the medicine worked on

women and Mama would have to protect herself and Amala to make sure that only Olanna died or became barren or went mad” (*The Sun*, 214, italics as in original).

Womanism provides a compelling lens through which to examine Olanna’s journey, emphasizing the holistic identities of African women and celebrating self-improvement, resilience, and independence. This framework highlights the importance of positioning struggles within cultural contexts and pursuing self-recovery (Odinye 2022, 6; Ogonwa and Asuzu 2021, 32). It also addresses overlooked issues, including the lack of choice in becoming a mother, harmful practices like circumcision, the mistreatment of infertile women, and cultural norms that silence them (Chidammodzi 1994, 46).

Women’s sacrifices for motherhood are often invisible, gaining visibility only when unmet or made in unconventional ways that challenge ideological limitations. In patriarchal societies, being a woman is synonymous with being a mother (Roifah 2021, 183). Like Olanna, not all women can conceive, yet they can reclaim their identities and achieve empowerment through alternative maternal roles, as Olanna does by adopting Baby (Craddock 2015, 89). Her choice to adopt embodies Womanist ideals, redefining maternal roles with love, acceptance, and forgiveness. Despite the societal stigma surrounding infertility and adoption, Olanna embraces Baby as her own, reflecting Motherist principles that prioritize communal nurturance and care (Etim 2020, 10). Her nurturing personality allows her to fulfill maternal instincts on her own terms: “‘We’ll keep her,’ Olanna said. She startled herself by how clearly she had articulated the desire to keep the baby and how right it felt. It was as if it was what she had always wanted to do” (*The Sun*, 251). By welcoming Baby, Olanna reconstructs her identity as a mother and envisions a hopeful future:

She could raise a child, his child. She would buy books about motherhood and find a wet nurse and decorate the bedroom. [...] She had not felt sorry for the child. Instead, holding that tiny, warm body, she had felt a conscious serendipity, a sense that this may not have been planned but had become, the minute it happened, what was meant to be. (ibid.)

African feminists encourage the connection between motherhood and women’s empowerment, asserting that the struggle for equality must encompass the key roles of motherhood and mothering in women’s identities and self-definition (Craddock 2015, 89). Olanna’s journey reflects this transformation, evolving from a victim of societal expectations to a powerful, self-determined individual. Rich (*Born*, 33) describes motherhood as a

transformative experience, awakening both physical and emotional dimensions. For Olanna, motherhood becomes a source of strength, redefining her identity beyond traditional gender roles. Her decision to adopt Baby allows her to find empowerment amidst struggles with infertility, affirming that motherhood transcends biological limitations.

Olanna's decision to adopt Baby is initially met with skepticism, highlighting the cultural stigma surrounding adoption. Kainene questions this choice, asking how Olanna will explain Baby's origins as she grows up. Baby affectionally refers to Olanna as "Mummy Ola" or Mummy Olanna," reflecting Olanna's commitment to truth. Resolving to be honest, Olanna plans to explain: "The truth: that Amala is her mother. And I'll have her call me Mummy Olanna or something, so that if Amala ever comes back, she can be Mummy" (*The Sun*, 252). Although hesitant at first, Kainene ultimately offers her support, telling Olanna: "'It's very brave of you to do this.' [...] Kainene's approval, something she had never felt before, was like sweetness on her tongue, a surge of ability, a good omen. Suddenly, her decision became final; she would bring the baby home" (ibid.). This moment deepens the importance of validation from loved ones, empowering Olanna's resolve to embrace motherhood on her own terms.

The cultural apprehension around adoption is further reflected in their mother's reaction. Over the phone, her mother speaks with a grave voice, "the solemn tone that would be used to talk about somebody who had died" (*The Sun*, 251). Her mother advises Olanna against raising Baby, asserting:

'Nne, you will have your own child soon. It is not right for you to raise the child he had with a village girl he impregnated as soon as you travelled. Raising a child is a very serious thing to undertake, my daughter, but in this case it is not the right thing.' [...] There was truth in her mother's words, she knew, and yet she knew, also, that the baby had looked like she had always imagined her and Odenigbo's child would. (ibid.)

Despite this discouragement, Olanna's decision to adopt Baby becomes a deeply personal choice, rooted in her aspirations for motherhood rather than external expectations for the reason that "it was more about herself than it was about him" (*The Sun*, 253).

Even Odenigbo questions Olanna's choice, fearing that Baby's resemblance to him may evoke resentment: "You'll look at her sometimes and hate me" (ibid.), he says, reflecting his doubts. Nevertheless, Olanna rises above societal assumptions, demonstrating that motherhood transcends biological connections and is rooted in love, care, and acceptance.

Mama's initial plan to eliminate Olanna by orchestrating Amala's encounter with Odenigbo ultimately backfires after Amala gives birth, revealing her as a powerless woman, constrained by her own struggles and limited agency, channeling her frustrations into controlling and manipulative behaviors. Rich (*Born*, 38) describes this phenomenon of how women often channel their frustration into motherhood as a focused outlet for resilience and a means to assert control amidst life's injustices placed upon them. This dynamic emerges poignantly during the hospital visit, where Mama's restrained demeanor contrasts sharply with Olanna's growing sense of empowerment: "Olanna had expected Mama to dance and look at her with mocking eyes, but the lined face was dour, the smile as she hugged Odenigbo was strained" (*The Sun*, 248). Olanna, meanwhile, begins to assert herself, taking control of the situation: "'Mama, *kedu?*'" [...] She wanted to seem in control, to determine how things would proceed" (*ibid.*). This moment signals a shift in power dynamics as Olanna moves toward reclaiming agency in the face of Mama's manipulation.

On their way home, Olanna learns that Mama does not want to keep the baby because it is a girl, reflecting institutionalized gender biases in patriarchal societies, where sons are for their perceived social status and family legacy (*Born*, 119). This preference is evident when Mama shares her hopes: "When this baby boy comes, I will have somebody to keep me company and my fellow women will no longer call me the mother of an impotent son" (*The Sun*, 238). Despite this bias, Olanna defies traditional norms, embracing Baby as her daughter with unwavering determination.

Treating Baby as her own, Olanna forms a bond that serves as both emotional solace and a source of healing after Odenigbo's betrayal. This bond is tenderly illustrated when Baby comforts Olanna during a vulnerable moment:

Olanna went into the bedroom and began to cry. Baby climbed onto the mattress beside her and hugged her. 'Mummy Ola, don't cry; ebezi na,' Baby said, and the warm smallness of Baby's arms around her made her sob louder. Baby stayed there holding her, until she stopped crying and wiped her eyes. (*The Sun*, 414)

Through this relationship, Olanna redefines motherhood, discovering strength and purpose amidst societal challenges. Rich captures the essence of motherhood as an experience requiring endless care and preparation. This knowledge is often assumed to be innate but, in reality, learned (*Born*, 191).

Initially, Olanna struggles to find a suitable name for Baby, simply calling her “Baby.” Over time, her affection deepens, as seen in the way she lovingly refers to Baby as “my child” (*The Sun*, 398), “my baby” (267), and “her child” (344). These moments reflect Olanna’s evolving emotional connection and maternal identity. Symbolically, Baby represents Biafra, and Olanna’s role as her adoptive mother mirrors her connection to the emerging nation. By naming Baby *Chiamaka* – meaning “*God is beautiful*” (*The Sun*, 254, italics added) – after the war, a name suggested by Kainene, Olanna highlights both the end of the war and the hope for renewal and new beginnings. Her journey encapsulates the broader themes of collective healing and shared responsibility, underscoring the transformative power of motherhood in redefining individual and communal identities.

Olanna’s maternal role deepens her sense of purpose, marking profound serendipity: “She had not felt sorry for the child. Instead, holding that tiny, warm body, she had felt a conscious serendipity, a sense that this may not have been planned, but had become, the minute it happened, what was meant to be” (*The Sun*, 239). Her sense of agency contrasts sharply with Amala, who remains constrained by traditional expectations. While Olanna resists cultural norms through actions such as adopting Baby and actively contributing to the war effort, Amala’s rejection of motherhood reflects her struggle against imposed roles within her limited context. The backdrop of the Biafran War amplifies these opposing narratives, with Olanna’s nurturing role becoming increasingly significant and Amala’s constrained choices highlighting the challenges women face during crises.

For Olanna, motherhood and mothering provide her with a renewed sense of worth, transforming her identity and creating a deeper connection to life. Olanna’s growing bond with Baby not only redefines her understanding of motherhood but also emphasizes the broader communal aspects of caregiving and shared responsibility, paving the way for an exploration of how these themes extend into the concept of *othermothering* and *shared motherhood*.

3.2.4 The Community Mother: Othermothering and Shared Motherhood

Whether biological mothers or women stepping into maternal roles out of love, necessity, or work, they have always been central to the care of children (*Born*, 12). While biological mothers are traditionally expected to nurture their children, African communities have long acknowledged the limitations of placing full responsibility on one individual (O’Reilly 2004, 11). To address these challenges, community mothering and othermothering emerged as

collective caregiving strategies, empowering Black mothers and enriching their lives (ibid.). These approaches create a caregiving network that extends beyond biological ties, ensuring shared responsibilities within families and communities (Takševa 2018, 184).

Throughout history, women have played a profound role in caregiving, with “mothering” extending beyond biological ties to include nurses, teachers, foster mothers, and stepmothers (*Born*, 12). Among these caregivers, othermothers have been integral to the foundation of Black motherhood, assisting biological mothers by sharing parenting responsibilities – a role embodied by Chioke, Ugwu’s father’s second wife, and Aunt Ifeka. This collaborative act of nurturing often includes contributions from the very young, elderly, unmarried, and infertile women, fostering an interconnected network of care (ibid.). Othermothering illustrates that love and care are not confined to biological mothers. A caregiver, such as a grandmother, aunt, older sister, or someone outside the immediate family, can become the child’s emotional mother, as Aunt Ifeka is for Olanna, offering a level of affection and support that may even surpass that of the biological mother (*Born*, 199).

Community mothers, often women beyond childbearing years, extend caregiving roles to entire communities as a collective survival strategy (O’Reilly 2004, 11). In *The Sun*, communal care networks, especially during the Biafran War, underscore the necessity of shared caregiving. Ugwu’s protective instinct during an airstrike reflects the principles of othermothering. His immediate response to safeguard a child and the child’s disoriented mother exemplifies caregiving beyond traditional maternal roles:

Ugwu did not know why he had done what he did. Perhaps it was because Olanna had already grabbed Baby and run ahead of him, and his hands were free. But he reached out and pulled the child from the woman’s embrace and ran. [...]; his mother had no choice but to follow. The planes were strafing and, just before Ugwu shoved the child down the bunker, a bullet flew closely past. (*The Sun*, 400)

This moment highlights how caregiving becomes a collective responsibility, especially crucial during crises, where protection and survival are community efforts. African feminist theory celebrates motherhood as a shared responsibility, valuing its role alongside other community work (Takševa 2018, 184).

In *The Sun*, Olanna epitomizes othermothering, particularly in her relationship with Baby and Ugwu. By adopting Baby, Olanna redefines traditional notions of motherhood, while her bond with Ugwu reflects her Motherist principles that prioritize love and care over biological ties.

For Olanna, Ugwu is not merely a houseboy becoming a cherished member of her family. Her profound sense of responsibility is evident when she sacrifices all her money to bribe soldiers to protect him: “I bribed that soldier with all the money that I have” (*The Sun*, 352). Despite her anger over Ugwu’s reckless actions, Olanna’s protective instincts shine through, illustrating the depth of her maternal care. Ugwu reflects on her actions with a mixture of gratitude and unease: “Ugwu’s relief made him dizzy. [...] Olanna did not say a word to him as they walked home, and he sensed her silent fury only in the force with which she unlocked and threw open the door” (ibid.). Her chastisement – “[y]ou are so stupid you do not deserve the luck you had today,” and spoke only a little to him in the next days” (ibid.) – symbolizes the complexity of their relationship. These moments highlight Olanna’s nurturing nature, balancing fierce love and discipline, and further reflect the layered dynamics of maternal care.

At the beginning of the story, Ugwu’s perception of Olanna is clouded by prejudice. He assumes she is demanding and unpleasant: “Master had never complained about his work before. It was this woman’s fault, this woman that Master considered too special even for him to cook for” (*The Sun*, 22). However, his impression changes dramatically upon hearing Olanna’s voice: “Master’s English was music, but what Ugwu was hearing now, from this woman, was magic. Here was a superior tongue, a luminous language, the kind of English he heard on Master’s radio, rolling out with clipped precision” (ibid.). This transformation in Ugwu’s view reflects Olanna’s ability to transcend biases and foster meaningful connections. By dismantling Ugwu’s preconceptions, Olanna embodies Womanism ideologies, which celebrate care and nurturing as transformative forces within relationships and communities. Her relationship with Ugwu challenges traditional notions of motherhood as a static or inherent role (Takševa 2018, 181). Olanna’s maternal care becomes an intentional and empowering act of choice. Ugwu’s evolving admiration for Olanna sets the foundation for a bond built on mutual respect, reshaping Ugwu’s understanding of care and interconnectedness.

As the narrative progresses, Olanna’s maternal instincts deepen her relationship with Ugwu, embodying the principles of othermothering. This caregiving ideology emphasizes collective empowerment and ensuring that all children receive physical and emotional care, regardless of the presence or availability of their biological mother (O’Reilly 2004, 11). Such caregiving reflects the collective and shared nature of maternal responsibilities within communities (*Born*, xxvii). This ideology is evident during Ugwu’s conscription, where Olanna’s maternal fear mirrors that of a biological mother:

Olanna knew, with an immediate sinking wail of feeling, that it was about Ugwu. [...] Kainene came up and held her firmly by the shoulders and said, ‘*Ejima m*, hold your heart, be strong. Ugwu has died,’ [...]. ‘No,’ she said calmly. The air was charged with unreality, as if she would certainly wake up in a minute. ‘No,’ she said again, shaking her head. [...] Olanna kept shaking her head, waiting to wake up. [...] Kainene was holding her, Baby was saying something, and a haze shrouded everything until she looked up in the sky. Blue and clear. It made the present real, the sky, because she had never seen the sky in her dreams. (*The Sun*, 381)

Although Olanna is neither Ugwu’s biological nor adoptive mother, her heartfelt refusal to accept Ugwu’s presumed death exemplifies Maparyan’s concept of a “loving ecology.” This framework emphasizes mutual accountability and interconnected care as the foundation of nurturing relationships (Maparyan 2012, 63). Olanna’s unwavering hope for Ugwu’s survival underscores the transformative power of maternal care, which goes beyond biological connections and communal responsibility, reinforcing the interconnectedness and mutual support between individuals (*ibid.*).

Collins observes that Black motherhood transcends the personal sphere, evolving into a form of social activism and a source of power. Black mothers and grandmothers serve as protectors and agents of resilience, central figures in fostering survival and empowerment. This shared approach to motherhood reflects an interconnected system of care where nurturing others becomes an extension of caring for oneself and the community as a whole (O’Reilly 2004, 12).

Olanna exemplifies these caregiving principles, particularly upon Ugwu’s return from conscription. Her unwavering support solidifies Ugwu’s place within their family, redefining both his identity and her own. Collins’s perspective on motherhood as a source of power and political resistance aligns with Olanna’s actions, demonstrating how caregiving can surpass biological ties to protect and uplift those within her chosen familial network (Collins 2004, 12).

Modern society embraces diverse family structures, including dual-income households, communal living arrangements, extended families, blended families, community-based living, stepfamilies, and multi-generational homes. These redefined concepts of family challenge traditional norms and reflect the evolving nature of caregiving (Green 2019, 39-40). This is reflected in a touching moment when Olanna and Odenigbo embrace Ugwu: “Master and Olanna wrapped their arms around Ugwu [...]. He felt acutely uncomfortable; they had never hugged him before” (*The Sun*, 396). Ugwu’s discomfort highlights the transformative power

of shared love and acceptance within their makeshift family, emphasizing the emotional complexity of children who have grown up without affection. Despite beginning his journey as a houseboy, “Ugwu came to realize [...]. He was not a normal houseboy” (*The Sun*, 17), ultimately becoming an integral and cherished part of Olanna and Odenigbo’s family.

Similarly, Ugwu’s bond with Baby, whom he has practically raised, challenges societal gender norms surrounding caregiving. According to Rich, children, regardless of being male or female, learn early that emotional connections are influenced by societal expectations of gender roles (*Born*, 199). Ugwu’s nurturing role illustrates how caregiving exceeds traditional structures, fostering deep emotional bonds that become critical during moments of crisis: “Baby clung to his hand and refused to let go and Ugwu’s whole life suddenly gathered in a lump in his throat, and he was sobbing and the tears hurt his eyes. He was angry with himself for crying” (*The Sun*, 396). These connections embody the principles of othermothering, where caregiving surpasses traditional maternal roles by fostering mutual reliance and profound emotional ties. As demonstrated in the novel, caregiving emerges as a shared responsibility, unconfined by gender or biological relations, deeply grounded in the collective need for survival and support during hardships.

Resilience also emerges as a central theme in caregiving dynamics, particularly in the aftermath of trauma. Ugwu reflects on his physical and emotional recovery: “It surprised him that it was possible for his body to return to what it had been and for his mind to function with permanent lucidity” (*The Sun*, 397). His endurance parallels the resilience of mothers, who navigate exhausting cycles of caregiving, survival, and the ongoing demands of nurturing their children. Much like the physical and emotional toll of pregnancy and childbirth, caregivers confront challenges that require perseverance and strength to endure each day for the sake of those in their care.

African feminism emphasizes women’s autonomy and cooperation, placing nature above societal constructs and underscoring the significance of children, shared motherhood, and familial ties (Mekgwe 2024, 15). Olanna exemplifies this steadfast commitment through her care for both Baby and Ugwu. Her actions demonstrate the depth of maternal resilience as she supports Ugwu’s recovery: “Olanna was always beside him, forcing him to eat and willing him to live” (*The Sun*, 397). Her caregiving extends beyond the physical needs to the emotional support, captured in a moment of quiet affection with Baby: “Olanna placed Baby down on the mattress, covered her with a wrapper, kissed her forehead, and felt the sudden

urge to cry at the thought of Ugwu” (*The Sun*, 387). These interactions illustrate the power of love and care in sustaining hope, even during miserable circumstances. Through these relationships, resilience emerges not only as an individual strength but also as a communal force.

During the war, Kainene complements Olanna’s approach to raising Baby, offering varied experiences and introducing her to life’s harsh realities. While Olanna seeks to shield Baby from all harm, Kainene challenges this approach, emphasizing the importance of resilience: “‘Chiamaka should see life as it is, *ejima m*,’ Kainene said [...]. ‘You protect her too much from life.’ ‘I just want to keep my child safe,’ Olanna said” (*The Sun*, 389, italics as in original). Their contrasting approaches illustrate the diversity within shared motherhood, where caregivers balance protection with exposure to prepare children for the complexities of life. For instance, while Olanna disciplines Baby and “shouted at her and pulled her ear,” Kainene allows Baby to collect shrapnel, even encouraging her to “eat a lizard leg” (*The Sun*, 388). These differences in parenting styles demonstrate how mothers can support each other, broadening a child’s worldview through complementary perspectives.

This dynamic aligns with feminist historians’ argument that motherhood is *not* inherently natural or biological but rather a cultural practice shaped by economic and social change (O’Reilly 2004, 4-5, italics as in the source). Motherhood, therefore, varies across time and place, with no single, universal way to define or experience it (O’Reilly 2004, 4-5, italics as in the source). Olanna and Kainene’s shared caregiving defies traditional maternal norms, emphasizing how communal motherhood adapts to meet the needs of both the child and the circumstances. Their complementary approaches challenge the inflexible notions of parenting, showcasing motherhood as a flexible and evolving practice that thrives on mutual support and diversity.

Ugwu also emerges as an unconventional maternal figure in his relationship with Baby, further demonstrating the adaptability of caregiving roles. His nurturing instincts are evident as he worries about Baby’s meals: “He worried that Baby would go hungry and Master would not know that her fried plantains were in the oven” (*The Sun*, 144). After the war, as Baby begins to assert her independence, Ugwu’s role shifts: “‘I can do it myself,’ Baby said, and so he stood by and watched her bathe herself for the first time. She splashed some water on him, laughing, and he realized that she would not always need him” (*The Sun*, 424). This moment heartbreakingly captures the bittersweet nature of caregiving, as caregivers must eventually

let go as children grow and assert their independence. Ugwu's growth as a caregiver showcases the emotional depth and life-changing impact of love and care within unconventional family structures.

Through *The Sun*, motherhood is redefined as a dynamic and inclusive experience, transcending biological bonds and embracing the interconnectedness of caregiving within unconventional family structures. These varied caregiving roles demonstrate the empowering potential of maternal care to foster survival, strength, and mutual reliance during times of hardship.

As caregiving becomes both a deeply personal and communal act, the narrative illuminates the ways in which motherhood intersects with resilience and shared identity. This foundation leads to an exploration of how maternal bonds evolve amidst conflict, revealing the profound impact of caregiving in war zones where survival itself becomes a collective act of love and resistance.

As caregiving proves both a deeply personal and communal act within unconventional family structures, the narrative underscores the resilience and adaptability required in times of hardship. This foundation of shared motherhood and mutual support becomes even more critical in the face of conflict, where the demands on maternal care intensify. The following section delves into the unique challenges and profound transformations of motherhood during times of war, exploring how caregiving evolves amidst the chaos of conflict zones.

3.2.5 The Mothers of War: Motherhood in Conflict Zones

The novel challenges the misconception that women did not contribute to significant historical events in African society, affirming that women have consistently played crucial roles throughout Nigeria's history (Etim 2020, 8-9). By focusing on women's contributions during the Biafran War, *The Sun* offers a captivating discourse highlighting overlooked female agency in historical struggles. Olanna and Kainene's decision to remain in Nigeria during the war, despite their mother's urging to flee to Britain, reflects their profound dedication to their country, people, and loved ones. Their resilience and sacrifices portray the life-changing power of motherhood in conflict zones, where the challenges of war magnify the weight of responsibility and caregiving.

Their decision to stay in Nigeria is a testament to their commitment. Through their efforts in teaching children and supplying food, Olanna and Kainene transcend societal expectations of

women's roles, contributing equally to the war effort alongside their male counterparts like Kainene says: "We are all in this war, and it is up to us to decide to become somebody else or not" (*The Sun*, 388). Their resilience and contributions underscore the profound impact of caregiving as a source of strength and survival.

The Sun integrates these experiences within the framework of Motherism, portraying motherhood as a source of resilience, sacrifice, and empowerment during the war (Ikediugwu 2013, 189-190). Motherism enables women like Olanna and Kainene to assert their identities amid the devastation of the Civil War, transcending traditional societal expectations through care, resourcefulness, education, and leadership. Their indispensable contributions extend beyond their families to their war-torn community, demonstrating empathy and strength while nurturing hope for those around them (*ibid.*). The title of the novel itself, referring to the Biafran flag, symbolizes unity amidst division:

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. (*The Sun*, 281)

Feminists aim to challenge the notion of separate societal roles for men and women by deconstructing institutionalized stereotypes (Crenshaw 1989, 155). Garuba notes that African feminism values mutual support and shared strength between women and men.

Complementary partnerships in relationships, fuelled by love and collaboration, ensure their survival before, during, and after the war. However, these relationships do not define women; their actions during the war reflect their agency and strength, driven by love for their homeland and their people (Garuba 2021, 110).

Olanna and Kainene exemplify the delicate balance between partnership and autonomy in their relationships. Richard's pride in Kainene is evident when the Swedish aristocrat Count Von Rosen remarks, "'I'm told your wife is a wealthy Igbo, one of those who stayed back to fight for the cause.' Richard had never thought of it like that, Kainene staying back to fight for the cause [...]. He felt a sudden fierce pride for Kainene." (*The Sun*, 310). Similarly, Odenigbo acknowledges Olanna's strength – "'You're so strong, *nkem*.' Those were words she had never heard from him" (*The Sun*, 392) – igniting her inner resilience reinforcing her

determination to persevere. This transformation is powerfully depicted as Olanna claims her agency:

The war would continue without them. Olanna exhaled, filled with a frothy rage. It was the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter. She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die. Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life. (*The Sun*, 280)

Olanna's identity extends beyond her relationship with Odenigbo, as her contributions to the war-torn community make her indispensable to humanity. Similarly, Kainene's relationship with Richard, though complex, reflects their shared growth and understanding while emphasizing their individuality. Both women assert themselves as autonomous beings, not mere extensions of their partners, reinforcing the importance of mutual respect and partnership in Nigerian and broader African gender discussions (Etim 2020, 10).

The burden of responsibility placed on mothers during conflict is unmatched. While motherhood already entails immense social responsibility (*Born*, 52), war amplifies these demands. During the war, women are tasked with feeding their families under brutal conditions, as seen through Olanna's experiences in refugee camps. Despite indignity and hardships, she courageously secures food for her family in an environment where people endure mistreatment by militia attempting to maintain order (*The Sun*, 268).

Scenes of desperation, like women risking physical harm to secure food, illustrate their determination and the indignity they face. Olanna's struggle is particularly poignant given her "higher status" as an educated woman from wealthy parents. Her discomfort at queuing for food reveals the tension between societal privilege and survival:

Olanna stood awkwardly among the men and women and children, who all seemed used to standing and waiting for a rusted iron gate to be opened so they could go in and be given food donated by foreign strangers. She felt discomfited. She felt as if she were doing something improper, unethical: expecting to get food in exchange for nothing. [...] The incongruity of queuing to beg food made her feel uncomfortable, blemished. (*The Sun*, 267-268).

However, as she jostles in chaotic queues for food, her resolve to provide for her family overcomes her initial discomfort, as reflected in her transformation: "Olanna surprised herself by how easily she joined in the inward rush of the crowd, how she moved nimbly from queue to queue, dodged the swinging canes of the militia, pushed back when somebody pushed her"

(*The Sun*, 271-272). These moments depict the immense burden mothers bear and their unyielding determination to protect and provide for their children, even under circumstances that strip them of societal privilege and dignity (*Born*, 52).

Motherhood, however, is not without contradictions. While it is a source of profound love and connection, the emotional toll of caregiving often results in guilt, frustration, and moments of misdirected anger. These struggles are often portrayed as dramatic and problematic throughout history, reflecting the harsh social realities of women's experiences with motherhood (Roifah 2021, 179). Olanna's fierce love for Baby is poignantly juxtaposed with her moments of frustration, which are sometimes misdirected toward the child due to the weight of societal constraints. This tension between love, anger, and guilt illustrates the broader maternal challenges in fractured societies (*Born*, 52). Rich further observes that guilt operates as a pervasive tool of social control over women, ensuring they remain entrapped within societal expectations of motherhood. This phenomenon affects women universally, imposing a burden on self-blame that is often impossible to escape (*Born*, 206).

A mother's fear of losing their child(ren) is perpetual, a relentless undercurrent in her thoughts and actions. Olanna's vulnerability is vividly portrayed during Baby's illness, for "when Baby choked and started to cry, Olanna, too, fought tears. Her greatest fear was that Baby would die. It was there, the festering fear, underlying everything she thought and did" (*The Sun*, 266). Her concern extends beyond herself to Baby's biological mother, Amala: "Tears filled her eyes. She thought about Amala. Amala had made no contact with them since the day at the hospital but she wondered now if she would be expected to tell Amala if Baby were to die" (*The Sun*, 267). These moments reflect the devastating emotional weight of maternal responsibility, reinforcing the dual burdens of love and accountability.

The universal nature of this fear is powerfully captured through Ugwu's observation of the mothers in the refugee camp: "Ugwu [...] realized, that he would never be able to describe well enough the fear that dulled the eyes of mothers in the refugee camp when the bomber planes charged out of the sky" (*The Sun*, 398). These experiences further highlight the profound psychological toll of caregiving in wartime, where the presence of loss is a constant companion for mothers.

Feminist mothering extends motherhood beyond caregiving, emphasizing the importance of teaching children about oppressive societal structures like patriarchy and racism. This approach fosters awareness of systemic power dynamics and encourages children to challenge

injustices that perpetuate privilege and oppression, such as patriarchy and racism (Green 2019, 39-40). Olanna embodies this philosophy during the war as an educator, determined to prepare children for a brighter future:

‘We will teach them mathematics, English, and civics every day’ [...]. ‘We have to make sure that when the war is over, they will all fit back easily into regular school. We will teach them to speak perfect English and perfect Igbo, Like his Excellency. We will teach them pride in our great nation’. (*The Sun*, 291).

This educational endeavor underscores Olanna’s belief in the transformative power of knowledge, not only as a tool for survival but as a foundation for resilience and hope. However, her efforts are challenged by the harsh realities of war, exemplified when a student expresses a desire to “kill all the vandals” (*The Sun*, 281). Olanna’s initial disturbance at the child’s words conveys her unease with the impact of war on innocence, while Odenigbo’s reassurance reframes this sentiment as patriotic pride. His approval encourages her to see her teaching as integral to the war effort as “his words emboldened her, as did the pride in his face. He liked that she had spoken so forcefully, for once, about the cause; it was as if she had finally become an equal participant in the war effort” (*ibid.*). This marks a significant shift in Olanna’s role as she transitions from a passive observer to an active participant in the war, illustrating how maternal roles adapt to address broader societal crises.

Olanna’s maternal strength is further demonstrated in her unwavering support for Odenigbo after he loses everything during the war, including his mother and his house. Her ability to console him in his grief highlights the dual nature of maternal love – its strength and vulnerability: “She cradled him, wrapped her arms around him, and slowly he relaxed against her. His arms circled her. His sobs became audible. With each intake of breath, they reminded her of Baby; he cried like his daughter” (*The Sun*, 314).

Feminist counter-narratives conceptualize mothering as a source of empowerment rather than oppression, challenging patriarchal constraints contrasting sharply with the oppressive nature of the patriarchal institution of motherhood (O’Reilly 2004, 10). Kainene’s maternal instincts, though unconventional, emerge through her pragmatic leadership and selflessness during the war. Despite rejecting traditional motherhood, she organizes food distribution for refugees and launches the “Plant Our Food” movement (*The Sun*, 389). Her commitment to prioritizing vulnerable women and children reflects the principles of Motherism. This is evident in her careful allocation of scarce protein tablets, where she rationalizes: “We don’t have enough, of

course, so I save them for the children. If I gave it to most people in there it would make no difference. But maybe it will for this baby. Maybe” (*The Sun*, 348).

Kainene embodies the harmonious integration of human activities and nature, central to Motherist philosophy, while her unwavering dedication highlights the selflessness akin to maternal sacrifice (Khutia 2020, 187; Etim 2020, 5). Her moral fortitude is underscored when she insists that supplies remain untouched for refugees, exemplified by her daily exhaustion: “There was a manic vibrancy about her, about the way she left for the refugee camp each day, about the exhaustion that shadowed her eyes when she returned in the evenings” (*The Sun*, 318). Her disappearance near the war’s end symbolizes the ultimate sacrifice, mirroring the selfless acts mothers make for their children.

The brutality of war fosters moments of reconciliation, as seen in Kainene forgiving Olanna despite past betrayals. At the heart of African feminism theory is the idea that women support and depend on one another to overcome whatever life throws at them (Craddock 2015, 94). Kainene reevaluates their bond amidst the war’s turmoil: “Grandpapa used to say, about difficulties he had gone through, ‘It did not kill me, it made me knowledgeable.’” [...] [Olanna answers:] ‘I remember.’ ‘There are some things that are so unforgivable that they make other things easily forgivable,’ Kainene said. [...] ‘Do you know what I mean?’ Kainene said” (*The Sun*, 347).

Despite the collective loss of Biafra’s defeat, *The Sun* ensures that the sacrifices and struggles of its people are not forgotten. Through Ugwu’s writing, the legacy of individuals like Olanna and Kainene is preserved as a testament to their endurance and humanity: “Finally, he started to write about Aunty Arize’s anonymous death in Kano and 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” (*The Sun*, 398). Through Ugwu’s storytelling, the history of the war-torn community is documented and passed on, ensuring that their experiences and sacrifices are remembered by future generations.

In *The Sun*, motherhood in conflict zones emerges as an act of extraordinary courage and resilience, encompassing self-sacrifice, leadership, and unwavering love amidst unimaginable hardships. Through Olanna and Kainene’s actions, Adichie’s text highlights how maternal roles evolved during war times, transforming caregiving into a powerful form of survival and resistance. Their contributions, from nurturing families to educating children and supporting

their communities, underscore the multifaceted impact of motherhood as a source of empowerment and hope.

Despite the burdens placed on mothers during the conflict, their endurance and sacrifices illustrate their indispensable role in preserving humanity and nurturing future generations. The novel's exploration of motherhood in wartime expands beyond personal bonds to encompass collective care and shared responsibility, framing maternal resilience as a vital force for survival and social transformation. With these powerful narratives, Adichie ensures that wartime mothers' struggles, sacrifices, and triumphs are neither forgotten nor diminished.

4 Conclusion

The thesis statement of this paper is: Are all women automatically mothers by nature? From the outset, it becomes evident that there is no singular, straightforward, universal, or simple answer to this question. This thesis has explored the interplay between motherhood and cultural expectations in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, uncovering the multifaceted nature of maternal roles and challenging the notion that being a woman inherently means becoming a mother. Once celebrated as a symbol of strength, maternal power has been diminished and redefined through societal development. As Adrienne Rich (*Born*, 68) observes, the womb, once a symbol of strength and potential, has been manipulated to subjugate women, ultimately transforming it into a source of powerlessness in patriarchal systems.

My analysis has demonstrated how Motherhood and Motherism highlight the societal undervaluation of women and how the social constructs shape maternal experiences. Through characters such as Olanna, Amala, Mama, Kainene, and Auntie Ifeka, *The Sun* reveals diverse representations of motherhood that reflect and challenge traditional notions of maternal roles. Rich's differentiation between the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood fundamentally alters our understanding of maternity. Motherhood is not a biological destiny but a social construct influenced by cultural, historical, social, and personal factors.

The application of Motherhood and Motherism highlighted the communal aspects of motherhood, while intersectionality provided insights into how race, class, and gender intersect to shape maternal experiences. These findings underscore the critical need to consider cultural and societal constructs in portraying motherhood and to challenge patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality (Jiao 2019, 541).

Through her characters, Adichie portrays motherhood as both empowering and oppressive, depending on the social context. Olanna's journey, in which she embraces motherhood on her own terms, illustrates maternal resilience and agency within the social constraints of post-colonial Nigeria. Kainene's leadership during wartime further highlights the adaptability of maternal roles, showcasing pragmatic caregiving that transcends traditional definitions of motherhood. Together, these narratives emphasize that motherhood is not an inherent or universal instinct but is deeply shaped by choice, circumstance, and social expectations.

This perspective challenges the traditional, biologically destined view of motherhood, highlighting its foundation defined by social and cultural constructs. Understanding motherhood as a socially influenced experience is crucial for advancing female agency and empowerment. By fostering awareness of mothering that actively challenges patriarchal and colonial structures, women can reclaim their power and redefine their roles within society (Jiao 2019, 541).

Adichie's integration of the concepts from Motherhood and Motherism highlights the communal aspect of caregiving while challenging patriarchal structures. The core values of Motherism – love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation – are reflected in the character's actions, demonstrating the centrality of women in sustaining life and community, particularly in times of conflict.

The Sun invites readers to reconsider the roles and expectations placed upon women by providing a nuanced portrayal of motherhood that challenges conventional narratives. This thesis contributes to feminist theory by illustrating how maternal roles extend beyond traditional definitions, calling for a greater appreciation of diverse maternal experiences across cultures and histories. Future research could explore similar themes in other literary works or examine how cultural contexts influence maternal roles. Such inquiries would contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of motherhood and drive progress toward gender equity and empowerment.

Motherhood and being a mother are deeply personal and unique experiences, varying across continents and cultural expectations. Women like Olanna demonstrate that motherhood can be embraced through adoption, while others, like Amala, challenge societal pressures by choosing not to care for their children due to circumstances such as lack of consent. These diverse representations of maternal choices emphasize that motherhood is not universal or innate but rather a nuanced construction shaped by individual autonomy and societal influences.

By honoring the diverse experiences of mothers, *The Sun* calls for a re-evaluation of societal norms, urging readers to embrace maternal roles as multifaceted and transformative. The novel reveals that motherhood is neither a universally natural instinct nor a product of societal construction. Instead, it exists as a dynamic interplay between instinct, personal choice, and social influence, shaped by individual circumstances and cultural expectations. Such recognition is not merely academic – it is a step toward building a society that values,

supports, and empowers all women, fostering an environment where motherhood can be reclaimed as an expression of resilience, love, and individuality. As Cheryl Lacey Donovan so aptly states, “Mother is a verb. It’s something you do. Not just who you are” (Donovan, n.d.). This statement captures the novel’s portrayal of motherhood as an active, transformative force that shapes individuals and communities alike.

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5 Appendices

Appendix 1: Finnish Summary

Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tarkastelen äitiyden ja naisten roolia Chimamanda Ngozi Adichien romaanissa *Half of a Yellow Sun* (lyh. *The Sun*) Teoreettisena viitekehyksenä hyödynnän Adrienne Richin *Motherhood*-teoriaa, sekä Catherine Acholonun *Motherism*-käsitettä, joka on African feminismin alateema. Täydentäviä teorioina käytän Womanism- ja African Feminism -teorioita. Tutkielman tavoitteena on tutkia väitettä, onko äitiys naisen luontainen piirre vai onko se yhteiskunnan luoma sosiaalinen konstruktio. Tämän lisäksi tarkastelen kulttuuristen ja historiallisten kontekstien vaikutusta ja miten ne muokkaavat äitiyttä, sekä millaisia yhteiskunnallisia odotuksia ja haasteita naiset kohtaavat postkoloniaalisessa Nigeriassa.

Half of a Yellow Sun on Adichien toinen romaani, joka julkaistiin vuonna 2006. Tätä tutkielmaa varten on käytetty vuoden 2017 painosta. Romaani sijoittuu Nigerian sisällissodan aikaan vuosina 1967–1970, ja vaikka tarina perustuu todellisiin tapahtumiin Adichie korostaa, että romaani ja sen henkilöt ovat fiktiivisiä, tarjoten mielikuvituksellista totuttua kirjaimellisen sotakertomuksen sijaan.

Romaanin narratiivi kerrotaan kolmen päähenkilön, Olannan, Ugwun sekä Richardin, näkökulmasta. Adichien tapa kertoa tarina monen eri hahmon näkökulmasta tarjoaa moniulotteisen kertomuksen, kattaen monia eri henkilöitä. Tarina keskittyy sisällissotaan, jossa Biafran alue taistelee itsenäisyytensä puolesta. Tarina jakautuu neljään osaan, joista kaksi keskittyy aikaan ennen sotaa, yksi sodan aikaiseen ja yksi sodan jälkeiseen aikaan. Romaanin ensimmäinen osa esittelee päähahmot Olanna, Odenigbo, Kainene, Richard ja Ugwun. Romaanin toinen osa siirtyy aikaan sodan aikana sekä keskittyy Olannan sekä Kainenen suhteisiin sekä tapahtumiin sodan aikana. Kolmannessa osassa palataan ajassa taaksepäin kolme vuotta, jossa tapahtuu tarinalle keskeisiä tapahtumia, kuten Odenigbon uskottomuus Amalan kanssa, joka johtaa Olannan kostamaan Odenigbolle ja pettämällä tätä Kainenen poikaystävän, Richardin, kanssa. Romaanin neljäs, viimeinen osa, tarkastelee sodan vaikutusta hahmoihin kuten Olannan etuoikeuksien menettämistä sodan aikana, Ugwun pakotettua asevelvollisuutta ja siitä selviämistä sekä Kainenen katoamista.

Romaanin keskiössä ovat eri hahmojen väliset hierarkkiset erot sekä erot perinteisten sekä modernien ajattelutapojen välillä. Päähahmot Olanna ja Kainene edustavat etuoikeutettuja, ylemmän luokan kansalaisia sekä modernia ajattelutapaa sekä arvoja. Adichien

naispäähahmot haastavat patriarkaalisia perinteitä sekä määrittelevät heidän asemaansa naisena yhteiskunnassa uudelleen. *The Sun* pyrkii todistamaan, että naisilla oli ja on merkittävä rooli sodassa, tuoden esille äitiyden moninaisia ulottuvuuksia, jotka haastavat perinteisiä käsityksiä äitiydestä, jotka ilmenevät valinnan, pakon ja yhteiskunnallisten olosuhteiden takia.

Tutkielmassani keskityn ensin teoreettisen viitekehyksen avaamiseen, jonka jälkeen siirryn analysoimaan eri äitiyden muotoja, joita romaanissa esiintyy. Analyysi pohjautuu kahteen pääteoriaan: Adrienne Richin Motherhood-teoriaan sekä Catherine Acholonun Motherism-teoriaan. Richin näkökulman mukaan äitiys voidaan jakaa kahteen eri teoriaan: ”motherhood”, joka on patriarkaalisen instituution luomaa, joka on naisen arvoa alentavaa sekä ”mothering”, joka on äitien itse luoma käsite ja joka kertoo heidän omista kokemuksistaan äiteinä, joka voi olla parhaimmissa tapauksissa voimaannuttavaa. Äitiydellä ei ole yhtä, yksinkertaisesti selitettävää määritelmää, vaan se vaihtelee ajan sekä kulttuurien mukaan.

Motherism-teoria perustuu afrikkalaiseen feministiseen ajatteluun, joka keskittyy äitiyden positiiviseen ja yhteisöä rakentaviin piirteisiin. Äitiys nähdään yhteisöllisenä voimavarana, jossa naiset pitävät huolta yhteisön lapsista, varmistaen, että jokaisesta lapsesta pidetään huolta, olivat he sitten siskoja, tätejä, opettajia tai joku muu perheen ulkopuolelta. Afrikkalainen kulttuuri on jo pitkään ollut tietoinen, että äitiyttä ja sen tuomaa taakkaa ei jätetä yhden henkilön harteille, vaan äitiys nähdään yhteiskunnallisena vastuuna. ”Yleisen” länsimaisen feminismin mukaan, äitiys koetaan naisille hidasteena, kun taas afrikkalaisen feminismin mukaan äitiys on voimavara, jonka avulla naiset voivat ilmaista itseään sekä itseluottamustaan.

Richin sekä Acholonun teorioiden lisäksi hyödynnän myös African feminism- sekä Womanism-teorioita, mahdollistaen kattavan analyysin romaanista. Nämä teoriat tuovat lisäsyvyyttä analyysiin, jonka avulla äitiyttä sekä sukupuoliroolien monimuotoisuutta pystytään tarkastelemaan tarkemmin. Näiden teorioiden kautta tarkastelen, kuinka yhteiskunta asettaa naiset alentaviin rooleihin, jotka rajoittavat heidän itsenäisyyttään sekä toimijuutta.

Teoreettisen viitekehyksen jälkeen siirryn romaanin analyysiin. Teemat ovat jaettu seuraavasti: Perinteinen/vanhanaikainen äitiys, Vastahakoinen/Pakotettu äitiys, Lapsettomat sekä adoptioäidit, Yhteisölliset äidit sekä lopuksi Sota-ajan äidit. Analyysi äitiyden eri

muodoista alkaa osiolla, joka käsittelee yleisesti äitiyttä ja keskittyy erityisesti näkökulmiin, onko äitiys luonnollinen osa naiseutta vai onko se yhteiskunnan luoma käsite.

Perinteinen/vanhanaikainen äitiys keskittyy pääosin Odenigbon äitiin, Mamaan, joka edustaa tätä äitiyden muotoa. Hänen arvonsa ovat vahvasti sidoksissa perinteisiin sekä uskomukseen, että poikalapset ovat arvokkaampia kuin tyttö lapset. Maman arvot sekä perinteiset uskomukset sotivat vahvasti Olannan moderneja arvoja vastaan. Heidän suhteensa on alusta alkaen sotaisaa sekä latautunutta. Maman uskomusten mukaan hyvä vaimo ja äiti on kouluttamaton, sillä hänen näkemyksensä mukaan koulutettu nainen on vaarallinen, sillä he haastavat aviomiehiään eivätkä tottele ja ole alistuvassa roolissa. Mama keplottelee palvelijansa harrastamaan seksiä Odenigbon kanssa, tavoitteena erottaa Odenigbo ja Olanna. Pettämisen teema toistuu tarinassa niin Odengibon ja Olannan välillä kuin myös Olannan vanhempien sekä muiden hahmojen kautta.

Mama ei kuitenkaan onnistu tavoitteissaan, vaikka Amala tuleekin raskaaksi vain yhden yön jälkeen. Hänen suunnitelmansa kääntyy häntä vastaan, kun synnytyksen jälkeen käy ilmi, että lapsi on pojan sijaan tyttö, mikä johtaa Amalan lisäksi myös Maman hylkäämään lapsen. Amala hylkää lapsensa heti syntymän jälkeen, eikä suostu ottamaan tähän mitään yhteyttä. Lapsen hylkääminen johtaa analyysin luontaiseen siirtymiseen Pakotetun äitiyden pariin.

Tarinassa Amalalla ei ole ”omaa ääntä” vaan hänet kuvaillaan muiden hahmojen kautta. Amala esitetään pikkuisesta kylästä tulevana hiljaisena, nöyränä palvelijana, jolla ei ole mitään omia oikeuksia, ei edes omaan kehoonsa. Amalan hahmo edustaa yhteiskunnan alistettuja naisia, joilla ei ole toimijuutta tai mitään oikeuksia omaan itseensä tai elämäänsä. Amala harrastaa seksiä Odenigbon kanssa Maman kannustamana, mikä vertautuu raiskaukseen. Riippuen näkökulmasta, Amala voidaan kuitenkin myös nähdä vahvana hahmona, joka määrää omasta kehostaan ja harrastaa seksiä Odengibon kanssa omasta halustaan, omien halujensa johtamana. Hän kontrolloi omaa kohtaloaan kieltäytymällä äitiydestä ja pyrkii keskeyttämään raskautensa omatoimisesti. Hänet voidaan siis nähdä seksuaalisena hahmona, joka hallitsee omaa elämäänsä, riippumatta siitä, mitä elämä tuo.

Kolmas osio käsittelee lapsettomia sekä adoptioäitejä, keskittyen erityisesti Olannaan. Tarinan alussa Olannalla ei ole haluja äitiyteen, kunnes Maman provosoimana hänen ajattelutapansa hiljalleen muuttuu. Olanna ei kuitenkaan pysty saamaan lapsia, eikä hän tule raskaaksi monista yrityksistä huolimatta. Olannan kyvyttömyys saada lapsia korostuu, kun Amala tulee

raskaaksi vain yhdestä kerrasta, todentaen, että vika ei ole Odenigbossa. Lapsettomuus haastaa Olannan minäkuvaa sekä itseluottamusta.

Hänen päätöksensä adoptoida Odenigbon sekä Amalan tyttölapsi, Baby, todistaa hänen toimijuuttaan modernin maailman hahmona, joka haastaa vanhoillisia ajattelutapoja sekä niiden mukana tulevaa stigmaa adoptiosta. Olannan äiti kyseenalaistaa hänen päätöstään, yrittäen saada Olanna luopumaan ajatuksesta, peläten mitä yhteiskunta ajattelee hänestä ja hänen tyttärestään, joka adoptoi miehensä uskottomuudesta syntynyttä lasta. Olannan kaksoissiskon Kainenen hyväksyntä kuitenkin vahvistaa hänen päätöstään adoptoida Baby. Olannan päätös adoptoida ei perustu Odenigbon miellyttämiseen, vaan se on ennen kaikkea häntä itseään varten. Olannan äidilliset vaistot eivät rajoitu pelkästään Babyyn vaan ne ulottuvat myös Ugwuun, Odenigbon palvelijaan, korostaen äitiyttä, joka on biologisten rajojen ylittävää.

Analyysin kolmas teema, yhteisölliset äidit, käsittelee äitiyttä, joka perustuu yhteisölliseen vastuuseen ja rakkauteen. Tämä osio keskittyy pääosin Olannan ja Ugwun väliseen suhteeseen, mutta tarjoaa näkökulmia myös sukupuolta ylittävään äitiyteen, joka on nähtävissä Ugwun hahmon kautta. Ugwu käytännössä kasvattaa Babyyn todistaen, että äitiys ei ole sidottu sukupuoleen eikä biologisiin suhteisiin, vaan äidin roolissa voi olla kuka vain sukupuoleen katsomatta. Ugwun suhde Babyyn korostaa myös äitiyteen kuuluvaa haikeutta päästää lapsista irti, kun sen aika tulee.

Vaikka Ugwu aloittaa perheessä palvelijana, hänen roolinsa ja merkityksensä korostuu sodan myötä, hänen lojaalisuutensa taaten hänen paikkansa Olannan perheessä. Tarinan yksi merkittävistä tapahtumista on, kun Ugwu pakotetaan osallistumaan sotaan ja Olanna luulee tämän kuolleen sodassa. Tämä tapahtuma symboloi äitiyden mukana kulkevaa pelkoa, joka ei koskaan helpota tai mene pois.

Analyysin viimeinen teema, Sota-ajan äidit, keskittyy Olannaan sekä Kainaneen, sekä heidän toimijuuteensa sodan aikana. Heidän päätöksensä jäädä sodan keskelle, sen sijaan, että he olisivat lentäneet Englantiin turvaan, todistaa heidän uskollisuuttaan kotimaalleen sekä kansalleen. Olanna toimii sodan aikana opettajana, kun taas Kainene ottaa roolikseen pyörittää pakolaisleiriä ruoan sekä muiden materiaalistien tarpeiden toimittajana. Siskonsa tavoin Kainenekaani ei ole kiinnostunut äitiydestä, mutta sodan puhjettua hänen luontaiset äidinvaistonsa tulevat esille, kuten esimerkiksi tilanteessa, jossa hän pitää huolta, että

proteiinitabletteja säästetään erityisesti lapsille, sillä niitä on vain rajallisesti ja lapset hyötyisivät niistä enemmän kuin aikuiset.

Half of a Yellow Sun tarjoaa monipuolisen sekä kattavan kuvan äitiydestä, joka haastaa perinteiset ajattelutavat sekä kutsuu lukijaa pohtimaan, millaisia odotuksia sekä rooleja yhteiskunta naisille asettaa. Romaani osoittaa, että äitiys ilmenee monissa eri muodoissa, riippuen ajasta, paikasta sekä kulttuurista. Tutkielman tuloksena äitiys voidaan tulkita sukupuolen sekä biologisten suhteiden ylittävänä käsitteenä, jota ei voi pelkistää yksinkertaiseen ja yksiselitteiseen määritelmään. Äitiys ei ole synnynnäistä, jokaisessa naisessa asuva piirre, vaan kontekstista riippuen, se on yhteiskunnan luoma konstruktio.