

# UNDERSTANDING ADICHIE THROUGH ATWOOD'S FOUR BASIC VICTIM POSITIONS

<sup>1</sup>Dr. S. Poornima,<sup>2</sup>Dr. C. S. Arunprabu,<sup>3</sup>Dr. K. Kaviarasu,

<sup>1</sup>*Research Associate, Department of English, National College, Trichy, India, ORCID: 0000-0002-1563-495X, [poornaselviarunprabu@gmail.com](mailto:poornaselviarunprabu@gmail.com)*

<sup>2</sup>*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Science and Humanities, Kattankulathur Campus, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India, ORCID: 0000-0003-0414-9614, [prabupoornima@gmail.com](mailto:prabupoornima@gmail.com)*

<sup>3</sup>*Assistant Professor, Vivekananda College, Agasteeswaram, Kanniyakumari, India, ORCID: 0000-0002-5273-4407, [kaviarasu.kk@gmail.com](mailto:kaviarasu.kk@gmail.com)*

Margaret Atwood in her seminal work titled *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* proposes Four Basic Victim Positions to analyse the mental attitude of the Canadian writings regarding their unique thematic choice. These positions are conceptual models that group works of art dealing with the story of victims. She says, "I here propose to regard novels and poems as though they were expressions of Positions..." (Surv 37).

The Position One is the Denial of Victimhood. This position is taken by the individuals who are afraid to recognize themselves as victims for the fear of losing privileges they possess. Position Two is the Passive Acceptance of Victimhood, where the individuals acknowledge the fact that they are victims but they try to explain their victimization with the fake excuses such as fate, or biology, or economics, or any other vast sources like tradition or culture. Position Three is the Repudiation of the victim role. In this position characters recognize that they are victims but they refuse to accept the assumption that their role is inevitable. The Fourth Position is for ex-victims or non-victims. Atwood says that people who are able to reach this position enjoy ultimate freedom from all the constraints. Creative activities of all kinds are possible since the internal and external causes of victimization is totally removed in this stage

This paper argues that the well-acclaimed Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie's works such as *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Americanah* and a short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* not only comply the four basic victim positions, but also share Atwood's concern for the seeking ultimate liberation of the human beings from the oppressive structures of the society. Adichie's thematic concern on each work shows Nigerian women's attitudes and strategies towards their survival through exploring the female protagonists' attitudes rejection, resignation, repudiation and liberation in their given situations.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the attitudes of the protagonist Kambili and her mother Beatrice who disagree and conceal physical and emotional abuses of the religious fanatic father Eugene through their self-deception and willful ignorance for belongingness. Though Kambili

and Beatrice are badly affected by the punishments inflicted by Eugene, they remain calm and silent, even more, they “deny their victim experience” (Svl 32). Beatrice strives her best to enfold her name and her family’s name in the society, concealing the verity of her situation. She wants to preserve the value and position of the family in their umunna, as she unconsciously supports the patriarchal privilege of her husband despite his domination at home.

Beatrice’s characterization as a conventional Nigerian woman who respects and approves of male superiority at home. Beatrice’s adoption of the family guardian role obscures her self-knowledge about her own victimization of her husband. In the other sense, it is a “bad faith” (Michelman 50), a woman refuses to identify as a free subject, and who pretend to be determined or restricted by the external circumstances. According to Okuyade, Mama Beatrice is “an embodiment of the traditional African woman . . . content with the economic security her husband guarantees.” (Changing 255). It is clear from this view that Beatrice gives preference to an economically safer life than to walk out of Eugene’s ill treatments. She is afraid to acknowledge herself as a victim, for the fear of losing her social status and economic security she gains from her marriage with Eugene. Since the victims of Position One are “forced to account somehow for the disadvantages suffered by the rest of the people in the group by disparaging them.” (Svl 32), Beatrice is forced to count for the advantages of being with Eugene, trying to search for his positives by consciously ignoring his faults and serious lapses in his supercilious character.

She not only hides her miscarriages to her children that causes out of Eugene’s violent beatings, but praises him instead for his generosity towards them for he does not choose polygamy leaving the family destitute, even after his community people insisted him with the reason of Beatrice’s infertility to produce more children. She disapproves of Aunty Ifeoma’s radical feminist views about marriage and feels irritated by her suggestion of divorce from Eugene, and justifies her stance by normalizing violence. She abruptly ends her conversation with Ifeoma by saying, “You and your university talk!” (PH 75). Her obliqueness towards excusing his violence makes her a typical typecast African woman, and such self-depreciation is even more visible in her conversation with Ifeoma: “A woman with children and no husband, what is that... How can a woman live like that? Husband crowns a woman’s life. It is what they want.” (PH 75).

Atwood’s first basic position comprises such notions of bad faith assumed by the characters themselves, who deny the fact of their oppression. In any case she appears as the privileged Other, through whom the subject fulfils himself: one of the measures of man, his counterbalance, his salvation, his adventure, his happiness” .... (Beauvoir 262)

It is similar to the views of conventional third world women as expressed in *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair “A good wife listened to her husband and did as she said. It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to the husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is so much easier and simpler to accept one’s station in life and live accordingly.” (14). Leaving the marriage for her will make her a thankless rascal, and so, she remains with him despite all the troubles. Clearly, her confidence in her religious belief made her to trust Eugene.

Similarly, the protagonist Kambili denies her victimhood out of her innocence and belongingness. She is an innocent girl who is unable to distinguish between her father’s discipline and violence. She is conditioned and tamed to emulate the rules of her father to

show obedience and piety, and emotionally manipulated by him to feel guilty for the trivial mistakes she does and to make confession of her faults as if they were serious sins against God. As OgagaOkuyade, in her *Changing Borders and Creating Voices*, claims: “Kambili’s calm narration of Papa Eugene’s violence towards her mother shows the reader that his actions are nothing out of the ordinary and that beating one’s wife is normal.” (255), Kambili prefers to be happy and contented rather spending time in contemplating the punishments of her Papa Eugene. Kambili not only conceals his despotic punishments from others but feels annoyed with people who denies his words, and wants her to be in privilege of the dearest daughter of her father. Kambili illustrates this kind of obsessive emotional engrossment for love to be shown only to her than the others. Cheryl Stobie observes this kind of attitude as: “She feels as if she is in competition with brother, wishing that she had made the correct pious platitude that garnered paternal approval” (Dethroning 426). She feels irritated with her Auntie Ifeoma who criticizes his colonial mentality and his prejudices about paganism. She defends her actions by reflecting her father’s ideologies by disparaging pagans as heathens. Kambili is severely lashed with heavy-ironed belt by Papa for breaking the Eucharist fast by eating just ten minutes before the mass. Jaja and Beatrice are also punished for encouraging her to eat, though it is for the good cause to medicate her stomach pain. Once the execution of violence is over him is expressed in the following manner:

Crushed Jaja and me to his body. ‘Did the belt hurt you? Did it break your skin?’ he asked, examining our faces. I felt a throbbing on my back, but I said no, that I was not hurt... We went to the later Mass. We changed our clothes, even Papa, and washed our faces. (PH 102-103)

The change of clothes symbolises their self-deceiving attitude to conceal the evidence of brutality before presenting themselves to the public. It is to appear as if they are united and happy at home before the eyes of the society to maintain his father’s fame and name and never to put him down. The author puts Kambili’s act as “self-abnegation for belongingness.” (Power 26).

It is argued that it is a self-deception of Beatrice to believe it’s her own fault to be infertile, and to show extreme gratitude and devotion for her husband who beats her near to death. And it is a self-deception of Kambili to assume herself guilty that she deserves punishments for her even trivial unintentional mistakes she does, and to idealize her father as self-righteous a Godlike figure who has the power and right to punish. They both are willfully ignorant of Eugene’s abuses on themselves and of each other’s sufferings. Beatrice’s preoccupation with wifehood and Kambili’s obsessive love and belongingness to her father obscure their self-knowledge about their own victimization further causing the denial of their victimhood.

*The Thing Around Your Neck* is a short story collection that divulges a holistic expression of Position Two situation: “To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology... the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.” (Svl 33). Each and every story subtly captures the lives of Nigerians, especially women who struggle to identify their roots in a displaced space. The stories from the collection can be grouped in the Basic Victim Position Two, since the victimization of personal and intimate experiences are excused with other fake, unchangeable causes. Such idea alleges the mental state of the characters to be unable to move to the other two positions since they feel the need to be victims of such conditions in their life, which remain them to be locked forever in Position

Two. Each of the stories talks about the psychological anxiety of characters that causes out of frantic environment and the political unrest, the social and familial biases they encounter in their everyday lives they find hard to adjust with. Some of Atwood terms can be used to describe position two victims.

Chinaza in the “Arrangers of Marriage” and Kamara in “Monday Last Week” are “spiritually mutilated” (Svl 29), as they feel themselves as scapegoats for their husbands to their selfish desires to assimilate into America. They compromise their scratched dignity, lose their Nigerian identity for the price of American dream they never able to achieve. They feel paralysed and choiceless to escape their plights since they are trapped in their dependence upon their men. Nkem in the story “Imitation” attains a “crippled success”(Svl 28), who possess all the sophistications of American life, feels unable and powerless to question or confront her husband Obiora’s infidelity, passively accepts her own isolation and depression for she is locked into the victim mentality that she must show him gratitude for the life he has given.

Ujunwa in “The Jumping Monkey Hill” and Akunna in the title story “Thing Around Your Neck” are trapped between the racial stereotypes and misconceptions of the West and the East. They have the “premature resignation”(Surv38). as they remain passive and powerless that they choose to withdraw from their worst situation rather than facing them. Ujunwa decides to quit the writer’s conference headed by a white man Edward who is condescending towards Africans and African writings, who calls her story “implausible” (112). Akunna decides to return Nigeria as she struggles to make ends meet and quits the uncomfortable relationship with the white boyfriend. Both see themselves as failures in their careers and lives.

Chika in “The Private Experience” and “The Narrator in the “American Embassy” face a grim survival as Chika loses her sister in an ethnic riot and The Narrator loses her son to the government soldiers of the dictator Abacha that causes them to face the brutality and despair, futility and uncertainty of life. Nwambga in “Headstrong Historian”, which is set in the colonial era, who wants to give power to her son by giving white man’s English education to resist her own exploitive men, feels trapped into her own fate when he embraces the white man’s religion and abandons her and her tradition. She who refuses to victim to the men of her own community, becomes a victim to the white men.

As Atwood says in her *Survival*, these Nigerian women characters are “stuck between the two horns of dilemma, either they stay with the ethnic minority and be stifled, or assimilate and lose their soul.”(Surv 174). These women are vulnerable and unable to take any positive defensive actions upon their lives as they feel themselves powerless, and desperate against their own misfortunes. Though some of them try to get over from worse to better, or to fight back a little, they feel trapped inside the fists of society that is predominantly patriarchal. Since they are locked into their victim roles and have the victim mentality they cannot move to the next position.

The Position three victimhood “Repudiation of the Victim Role”(Surv 35). It is explicit in Adichie’s Orange Prize winning novel *Half of A Yellow Sun* which portrays the physical and spiritual survival of Olanna and Kainene who display the constructive anger and self-respect of Position Three to repudiate the highly conflicted milieu of the Nigeria Civil War called the Biafran War.

Olanna's characterization starts with her refusal to be the sex bait for her parents' greedy intentions to secure business deals. Though she is passive and apologetic for not being compliant to her parents' wishes, she emerges into a strong, self-determined woman by overcoming bitter experiences and situations. She abandons her privileged life for the poor but revolutionary freedom fighter Odenigbo. She refuses to carry the image of the fragile, vulnerable wounded woman, when she is shamed and humiliated by Odenigbo's mother accusing her as, infertile, abnormal woman. Her department is substantiated by the narrator: "She could be a woman taking charge of her own life. She could be anything." (HYS 228). Olanna adopts the girl baby of Amala who is manipulated and abandoned by Odenigbo's mother her having borne a girl child, which is very unconventional decision of the women of the time. As Obioma Nnemaka says, adoption is indicative of the woman's eagerness to mother while rejecting the physical, sexual and emotional abuses." (PM 5). By adopting her baby, Olanna rejects the emotional abuse, thereby rejecting the role of infertile woman and she stands for the voiceless women like Amala, who are silenced and oppressed by the patriarchal society. She does not escape to England like her mother to avoid the problems of war, rather she stays in Nigeria after witnessing the brutal atrocities of war and the bombing of hungry people, and the deadly kwashiorkor, malnutrition that afflicts children. Olanna refuses to be a pitiful war victim, waking from the nightmare of death caused of war. Incongruity of death makes individuals to realise the evanescence of life. She could observe the difficulties of the people around her with a broad mind. War exonerates the individuals' mistakes, and dilute their faults like memories. Her practical, honest way of approach leads to "constructive actions" of Position Three. (Atwood 34). She comes out of the underground where they have been hiding for bomb raids, pushed from extreme fear to extreme fury she asserts to herself that "She would no longer exist limply waiting to die... Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life." (HYS 280). She starts a school to teach children about war and the pride of her country and gives hope to the desolate women supporting them with provisions.

The other important character Kainene shows her transformation from a war profiteer to a more to a broad-minded social activist, after she witnesses the cruelties of war, she runs refugee camps, and helps establish new crops for balancing food scarcity. She decides to trade with the enemy, putting her life at risk. Kainene despite facing multiple struggles, consistently remains headstrong and resilient throughout the book.

These characters tend to break the patriarchal culture and defy suppressing social norms and gender stereotypes of their society that devalue and victimize women by dehumanizing them to mere animals of reproduction. They refuse to be silent or passive at the face of discrimination or injustice. Their unconventional and unique decision on their marriage and motherhood marks their rebellious attitude against the oppressive patriarchal society. They channelize their energy into constructive actions, demonstrating a brave and undaunted stance against war as they refuse to be victims but survivors. They assert their individuality by showing immense persistence and absolute determination to repudiate the devastating conditions that threaten their survival and look forward a hopeful future.

Adichie's *Americanah* displays the features of victim position Four. Atwood's Basic Victim Position Four is "a position not for victims but for those who have never been victims at all, or for ex-victims: those who have been able to move into it from Position Three because the external and/or the internal causes of victimization have been removed." (Surv 35). The protagonist Ifemelu as an ex-victim of racial prejudice in America, who is able to reach Position Four through her meaningful return to her own native country Nigeria.

Ifemelu's revelation of Position four is marked with her statement that "she stopped being black when she got off the plane in Nigeria" (Amer 476), which signifies that she ceased to be a victim of racial discrimination while she retrieves her identity as Ifemelu, a Nigerian and not a black African. Confronting race at different levels in the America, she feels she is forced to identify herself as a non-American Black and to adapt to America's complex racial politics.

Attaining a self-realization, she finally decides to get rid of the 'American selves', which he has accumulated over the thirteen years of living in America. She braids her hair again, for the journey home, the hair which she has once straightened for a job interview to improve chance of her employability. She stops faking American accent she has perfected by years of practice to get along with her American friends, because she finds "a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers." (Amer 173-74). She closes down her famous blog about race, which unveils the social and institutional bias against Black African women. She gives up the prestigious fellowship at Princeton university, the reason she went to America seeking education and job opportunity and she abandons her uneasy relationships that threaten to erode her originality. She chooses to brush off the things that threaten to change her originality. Her resolution to non-conformity shows her rebellious act of Position Three. In a desperate urge to clear the false identity, she rethinks the way of attaining the spiritual freedom by reclaiming her Africanness she has lost over the years of stay in America. It calls to mind the revelation of Clara's meditation to reject her femininity, in *The Edible women*: "when she gets married, her core gets invaded.... her core.....the center of her personality, the thing she's built up, her image of herself....her feminine role and her core are really in opposition. Her feminine role demands passivity from her" (EW 235). By discarding all these internal and external causes of her victimization she makes a meaningful return to her own country Nigeria, where she finally attains a spiritual freedom.

Blogging becomes an act of redemption for Ifemelu in her quest for reclaiming her identity and self-dignity. Ifemelu's blog which used to show her constructive anger to resist the racial prejudice in America, becomes a creative activity to raise voice against, resist the oppressive cultural systems and the colonial mentality of her own country Nigeria and to raise the female consciousness to honor the self-worth and value of Nigerian culture and identity. Beauvoir's states that "for a woman, there is only one way to employ her liberation authentically, and that is to project through positive action into the human society". (TSS 525). Ifemelu employs her individual freedom through her blogging to create a social awareness. Through cultural self-criticism, Ifemelu contributes for a productive change and progress in her own Nigerian society. Atwood says, "Demand for change is voiced out for the state of truly free society." (Surv 158) Atwood's says, Position Four novels that connect individual oppression with group oppression and individual liberation to group liberation, which connect social liberation. Americanah strives for such social liberation.

After tolerating, assenting, refusing and endeavouring to survive, Adichie's protagonists arise to take action and change their lives by their astuteness, dexterity and stubbornness. Adichie's protagonists possess a feminist stance, like herself, attempt for a revolutionary change in the society. They all possess the moral anger for change and the persistence to reconstruct their lives. These headstrong, troublemakers are bold, rebellious, unafraid to speak truth, broadminded, confident, striving for social and sexual liberation, and have the quest about self-discovery. Adichie indirectly suggests a meaningful return to their native place, for those who escape to western countries for survival, to create a new empowered society in their own land.

### Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. London: Harper Perennial, 2007. Print.

—. *Purple Hibiscus*. London: Harper Perennial, 2013. Print.

—. *The Thing Around Your Neck*. London: 4th Estate, 2009. Print.

—. *The Thing Around Your Neck*. London: 4th Estate, 2009. Print.

— *Americanah*. London: Fourth Estate, 2013. Print.

Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2012. Print.

—. *The Edible Woman*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969. Print.

"Dethroning the Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy, and Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*." *Literature and Theology* 24.4 (421-435): 2010. Web.

Adéèkó, Adélékè. "Power Shift: America in the New Nigerian Imagination." *The Global South: Africa in a Global Age* 2.2 (2008): 10-30. Web.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. "Fighting on All Fronts: Gendered Spaces, Ethnic Boundaries, and the Nigerian Civil War." *Dialectical Anthropology* 22.3/4 (1997): 235-263. Web.

Okuyade, Ogaga. "Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence As Character in ChimamndaAdichie's *Purple Hibiscus*." *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2.9 (2009): 245-259. Web.