

CHILD HEALTH AND CRISES MANAGEMENT: WOMEN RESPONDERS IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

*The joy and burden of motherhood have predisposed women to taking life-saving responsibilities, especially at critical times such as emergencies and crisis periods. Crises erupt and usually disrupt the existential equilibrium, especially during war situations. Crisis such as war precipitate famine, hardship, malnutrition, sickness or eventual death. At such moments of trauma and torture, children are the major victims of the negative impact, which can be hunger, many times leading to malnutrition, sickness, all sorts of hardship. Such situations have left the women distraught, especially the child's mother having to seek help from a fellow woman. Nigerian literary texts have records of issues of child malnutrition, kwashiorkor, and severe illnesses as a result of war. Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Ada Okere Agbasimalo's *Forest Dames* depict the Nigerian-Biafran war, replete with children with debilitating health challenges as a result of the war. Researches done on these texts have various thematic issues; which though are not yet exhaustible give vent to this study which is done using a qualitative methodology of fictional analysis of the selected texts. The research is anchored on the feminist epistemology of the concept of motherhood as it x-rays women performing their maternal roles. Specifically, the study shows how some key female characters, such as Olanna, Kainene and Dora, navigate through the war, saving children whose health are in jeopardy. The paper showed women as compassionately responding to critical life situations and calls for it to be sustained for the global future.*

Keywords: Motherhood, Health Care, Responders, Compassionate, Crisis.

Introduction

Children are often greatly affected by crises at any given time of conflict or disaster. Given their vulnerability and tenderness, children's health become easily endangered during crises such as war, famine, drought, or flooding or any extreme weather situation or disaster. Protecting children's health is therefore of utmost importance. Hence, the World Health Organization (WHO), believes that "children must be given a stable environment in which to thrive, including good health and nutrition, protection from threats and access to opportunities to learn and grow. It adds that "investing in children is one of the most important things a society can do to build a better future". Unfortunately, certain societal situations, such as war and other natural or man-made factors throw up and disrupt the equilibrium exposing the

child to all forms of risks, including malnutrition, rape, illnesses, affecting both their psychological, emotional, social, mental and intellectual well-being. For instance Pan African Health Organization (PAHO), observes that “all countries face risks and potential health threats from an increasing range of hazards, including: infectious diseases, chemical and radio nuclear incidents, food contamination, and threats associated with climate change including extreme weather events and deforestation,... catastrophic events like pandemics, natural disasters and emergencies or (re-emergence) of high threat pathogenic disease. The most notable example being the covid-19 global pandemic”. Child health crisis is of big concern and desires concerted attention.

In Nigeria, the Biafra war of thirty months that saw the gruesome killings and massacre of a group of people, the Igbos in the south-east of Nigeria, presented a lot of risks and emergency situations that greatly affected the well-being and health of the child. In these emergency situations, women have shown up to be proactive and indefatigable in containing the consequent destructive tendencies such as malnutrition of the children, finding remedy within the scarce resources available to them in helping children with extreme health challenges.

As noted by Khaled Zamoum and Tevhide Serra Gorpe, “humans today are witnessing multiple serious crises, whether economic, social, environmental, but the most devastating crises are those security crises that end up with endless wars, killing thousands each year, and displacing millions of others”. The Nigeria-Biafra war creates such crisis that are devastating for the people, especially, children and their mothers.

In forging a better understanding of crises situation, Ithaar Abdul Hadi is quoted to define crisis as “an idiomatic concept used by Arabs as indication for severity and drought”. In English language, “it means a change for the better or the worse”. The origin of the word crisis in the late middle English (denoting the turning point of a disease), medical Latin, and from the Greek word 'krisis' , 'decision', and from 'kreinein', 'decide’’. (Khaled Zamoum and Tevhide Serra Gorpe). Crises situation is seen to involve a severe and urgent situation, including danger and may become a turning point to something positive. As Hadi is quoted further to state that “the Chinese mandarin character for crisis includes danger and opportunity. This idea is especially useful because it conveys the fact that we may create opportunities out of a situation that threatens us. Some western and Chinese crisis experts claim that it may mean danger and a “turning point”, which indicates a sense of possible positive outcome”. Crises management involves getting the best out of the danger and threat posed by the unpalatable event. Katherin Eastham, Donald Coates and Federico Allodi are of the opinion that “crisis occur when there is an imbalance between the difficulty and importance of a problem and the resources available to deal with it”. A crisis situation becomes dire in the life of the victims, especially the vulnerable.

Nigerian literary sphere in various texts capture crises periods as the Nigerian-Biafran war, exposing the depth of dangers and rare and disturbing opportunities for the woman by which they prove their exemplary mettle taking decisive actions for a positive change. Unarguably therefore, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Ada Okere Agbasimabo's *The Forest Dames* embody the war disasters and their untold threats to the child.

Half of a Yellow Sun and *The Forest Dames* are two very popular novels on war that have been extensively assessed and critiqued by scholars and researchers, some of which recent studies include Nurudeen Adesina Lawal and Ruth Olubunmi Adeniji's "Love Motif, conflict and Power in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*", it uses the framework of Frederich Nietzsche's Insight of Love to identify different types of love exhibited in the novel which include; "love of political power, love of material wealth, romantic\erotic love, mother's\parental love, love of art and knowledge, consisting sites of power contestations among different individuals in the post colony"(2). The paper highlights the level of relationships and the different reasons for love. On the other hand, Blessing U. Ijem and Isaiah.I.Agbo, in their work, "Challenging the Status Quo in a Patriarchal World: A Critical Linguistic Appraisal of Masculine Framing in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* examine the representation of masculinity and resistance by the female based on the patriarchal nature of the society dominated by the male. In contrast to the patriarchal nature of the society, they posit that "Adichie creates female characters who are embodiments of beauty, intelligence, industry and courage". The authors applied a critical discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics, and feminist theory stating that "the relationship between man and woman has almost always been unequal and oppressive and that is why Chimamanda Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) comes out very boldly and strongly to challenge the status quo by "manipulating her male characters to portray them in varied bad light. In fact, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a direct rebellion against patriarchy contrary to Chinua Achebe's portrayal of man and female characters in *Things Fall Apart*" (732). They concluded that the much-touted male supremacy is a cultural construct as it brings out the clear ingenuity of the female folk.

Mohd Farham Saiel in "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*: A Decolonized Narrative Against War, Conflict and Violence" shows how the civil war impacted the people and their lives, and how Adichie uses historical narratives to decolonize conflict, war and violence to the understanding of the people. The author states that "in order to comprehend and relate to the background of the novel, Adichie utilized genuine people, places and events from history, such as Gowon, the leader of Nigeria, and Ojukwu, the leader of Biafra"(24). He delved into historical perspectives of the Biafran war.

A lot of literature exist on *The Forest of Dames* by Ada Okere Agbasimalo, one of which is; Ekwueme Joekin, Zubairu Bitrus Samaila, Yakubu Samaila. "Signs and Codes in Adaokere Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*. which makes an in-depth study

of signs and codes in the text using the fusion of De Saussure's theory of sign and Barthes' theory of five codes in order to identify and explain the semiotic resources that helped to project the message of war and its negative effects on women and children. The writers deployed "signs and codes to express the pre-war, war and post-war signs within the semiotic universe of the text to project the text's message" (110). In her essay, "Parenting and the Girl Child: Issues in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*, using John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's Attachment Theory, Ulogu, N.D examined the dominant roles of the individual mothers particularly "Beatrice and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus*, and Dora in *The Forest Dames* in securing the girl-child from impending and real dangerous circumstances around her" (60). While, Good luck Chinennye Kadiri in Lexico-Grammatical Analysis of Ada Okere Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* examines the importance of language in a literary discourse adopting Leech and Shorts checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories. "The findings revealed that the author deployed more of the major parts of speech, military registers, code switching and mixing and pidginized word/expressions to excess the theme of hostility and futility of war" (1). Adaobi Olivia Ihueze in "The Fate of Nigerian Woman in Armed Conflicts Situation: An Appraisal of Adichie and Agbasimalo's Novels" using feminist and psychoanalytical theories examined "the unpleasant experiences of women in conflict zones by analyzing two female novels" (1). These and more mentioned here are majorly bordering on war, violence, grammatical usage and so on, thus leaving a gap to be filled by this particular paper: "Child Health and Crisis Management: Women Responders in Nigerian Literature" using the concept of Feminist Epistemology. The paper explores the knowledge base of the women, motivated by the political project of eliminating the oppression of women. Feminist Epistemologists are interested in how the norms and practices of knowledge production affect the lives of women and are implicated in systems of oppression. But what is Feminist Epistemology?

According to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science studies the ways in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, knowers, and practices of inquiry and justification. It identifies how dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification disadvantage women and other subordinated groups, and strives to reform them to serve the interests of these groups". Feminist epistemologists seek to understand not only *how* our social relations of gender have shaped our knowledge practices, but also whether and how these relations *should* play a role in good knowing. This paper therefore examines the roles played by key female actors: Olanna and Kainene and Dora who proved their mettle in responding to emergency situations as represented in the two texts.

Women in the War Situation

Literary artists created women who are educated, hardworking, resilience and strong. Such women are commonly nation and community builders, in spite of

cultural inhibitions, societal and family challenges. They strive to be relevant, to bring their knowledge to impact their communities. Some of these women are strongholds and great support to fellow women shown to be compassionate, empathetic and sympathetic. Chimamanda Adichie and Ada Okere Agbasimalo in their texts under review present examples of such women in Olanna, Kainene, Mrs Muokelu and Dora. These are good and kind women who in spite of the circumstances of the war surrounding them are able to respond to others' needs at such traumatic and volatile times. Hence, according to Allwell Abalaogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerieonwu, Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* “creates respectable female characters that wield sufficient material, physical and psychological strengths that enable them, not just to impact on their societies, but also to chart a direction for their progress and development” (10). The twin sisters Olanna and Kainene, and Mrs. Muokelu fall into this category. They responded to emergency situations during the war. They show their capacity “from joining in the charged discourse about the socio-economic, political, historical and cultural backgrounds to the war, to endorsing and identifying with the necessity and the spirit of the war, to actually contributing to soaking up the devastating physical and psychological pressures of the war” (Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 208). These female characters embarked specially on humanitarian services to save their communities by attending to the sick children. This class of women are also found in *The Forest Dames* namely, Dora and the others who brought themselves to 'soaking up the devastating physical and psychological pressure of war' by innovating ways of keeping the girls safe from violation and rape by the enemy soldiers.

Particularly, women play exceptional care giving role of helping other women to take care of the homes as the men have mostly all joined in the war or conscripted into the army. Thus, “the war has unleashed all forms of hardship on people, especially women and children. Men and adolescent males irrespective of their marriage statuses, voluntarily or forcefully enlisted into the home army when it was obvious to them that the war has commenced. While the men are being conscripted into the home army, the women assume their roles which further exposed them to unprecedented hardship. They are now the bread winners”. (Ekwueme Joeekin 105). These women employ their knowledge in salvaging challenges at the homefront while the men are in the warfront. Women coordinate other activities that help to keep the home going.

Child Health Challenges and Management

As the child's health challenges are key emergency issues during the war, there are records of instances. Children suffered different categories of challenges, including; health issues and food shortage leading eventually to malnutrition or kwashiorkor. The texts under discussion equally present enviable examples of how women respond and manage the crisis bedeviling the children. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the description of the scenario of hunger during the Biafran war is pathetic. Women including Olanna and Mrs Muokelu visit the relief center for food item which are not

regularly available and are scanty when available. For instance, because of the war and lack of food, Olanna's baby became sick with cough which makes her lose appetite and lose her weight. Her bad health made Olanna fear that she may not survive it, so that "on the bed, Baby stirred. Her face had lost its fat and was eerily adult, sunken and thin-skinned. Olanna watched her and feared that "baby won't make it". (*Half of a Yellow Sun* 266). The situation is bad that a common cough could cause such a havoc on Baby, which must have been caused by complications resulting from poor feeding and loss of immunity.

Such are the conditions most children in the war-torn Biafra land faced. Most of them suffer malnutrition which make them sick and susceptible to all forms of infections. Adanna, a daughter of Olanna's refugee neighbor at Umuahia is found to be suffering from kwashiorkor which is renamed "Harold Wilson Syndrome". Mama Oji tells Olanna about the child saying that the child's illness is not malaria but she keeps giving her neem medicine that does nothing for her" (338). Olanna suspecting the fact of the child's crises with swollen belly and sickly toned skin, provided milk and crayfish out of her very little stock for her neighbour, Mama Adanna, who had been treating the child with anti-kwashiorkor leaves to no avail. "Mama Adanna was cooking the leaves in the kitchen, Olanna took a tin of sardine and some dried milk from the carton Ezeka sent and gave them to her" (339). Even though she was asked to keep it secret she told others who also benefitted from Olanna's help especially, Mama Oji who earlier complained to Olanna that "three of her children have died of asthma since the war started" (326). These poor uninformed women in their limited knowledge ignorantly employ the use of herbs as a cure to their children's illness without positive results, until Olanna waded in.

Similarly, Kainene, Olanna's twin sister performs great humanitarian job in helping out in emergencies at her research center. In spite of the decay and rot in the center, Kainene remains unrelenting in responding to the deplorable health situations of the victims. For example, Kainene taking her sister Olanna round the center tells her, "I always start with the bunker. Kainene showed her the bunker a roughly dug pit covered with logs, before she began to walk towards the building at the far end of the compound "now to the point of no return" (347). Kainene provides for the war wearied and malnourished children at her refugee camp. Onukogu and Onyerieonwu observe that "Kainene's commitment and devotion to the humanitarian imperative of the war situation is incredible. Her drive is fueled by her acknowledgement of the fact that in the event of war, women and children suffer the most" (207). The women's ability to counter these challenges highlights epistemic knowledge of actions as exhibited by the women.

Children in *The Forest Dames* had their share of war crises resulting in debilitating illnesses. While some died out rightly some are rescued by the intervention of the female impacting their community. As the people move away from their homesteads from invading Nigeria enemies, some children fall victims of war crisis and died in

the process. For instance, Ijeoma's daughter died as they moved. "Orjay's wife sensed that the baby strapped to her back was now lifeless. She did not feel her daughter's heartbeat anymore, she had felt the baby slump, with tears in her eyes, and she drew her husband's attention to the development. They trooped on; he was thinking the five-year-old girl's body had stiffened". (*The Forest Dames* 93). Some other parents such as Oyoyo and Reuben, whose son Lazzie is struck with a strange illness that leaves him half dead are greatly saddened by this development as "cries of children were heard but the very weak ones like Lazzie, had no strength to cry. Amazingly, he was still alive but only just breathing" (96). The war presented the people with moving into new communities seeking for refuge. Such is the situation as the group moved into Okolochi, Dora's husband's relatives' hometown.

Dora is a strong woman who plays significant role in their movement into Okolochi. She is described as "a true example of what a real woman should be – strong and caring, prudent and reliable, hardworking and fast-thinking" (98). Dora proves to possess an exceptional courage and knowledge. She is able to contain her two year old son's, Nwamuruamu, illness. He grew so lean that people feared he would not survive, even after Dora administered some tablets to him but it keeps fluctuating, until:

Pa Zurike the old man of the Ezeala kindred, picked up his machete and went into the bush. He returned with a variety of herbs, which he asked Dora to steam and extract the juice. She complied and from then on, that became the only medication the little boy took. Morning and night, she gave him a small quantity of the mixture, most of which he spat out. Dora, like other women had a local way of forcing children to swallow liquids, especially life-saving mixtures and syrups by pinching the nostrils while simultaneously dropping the liquid into their open mouth. The child would momentarily breathe and swallow the medicine. (101).

Dora extended this magnanimous knowledge to her fellow women whose children have critical health challenges. It was her goodness and resourcefulness that attracted the kindness from Pa Zurike.

Oyoyo and Reuben, Lazzie's parents who desired their son's wellness just as Dora's son shared in Dora's emergency response as they decided to approach her for help. Dora immediately extended her support to them and gave them some of the herbal juice she used to treat her own son which made the child to get well. It however became easy to administer the medication to Lazzie because he had lived on fluids since he became ill and unable to swallow any solids. "Astoundingly, as the weeks went by the lad began to show remarkable signs of recovery and actually took everyone by surprise when he got up one day and began to walk" (102). The herbs have helped to manage Lazzie's health complications, all credit to the knowledge and compassion of Dora. The ability to apply acquired knowledge as described by the epistemologist projects the female characters outstanding qualities.

Conclusion

Knowledge is key in human endeavours. To act optimally, women in a crisis situation require to understand the nature, and limit of their inert powers, fashioned by epistemic knowledge. Crisis management requires openness and credibility so as to win the trust of the beneficiaries. Adichie and Agbasimalo present women who are compassionate, and who are respected for their genuineness, and so other oppressed women looked up to them for assistance. These women are equally swift in responding to the crisis situation occasioned by war. The Biafran war remains a reference point for expressing the trauma suffered by children. However, women are not relenting in switching roles such as containing emergency child health in crisis situations as the Biafra war. Attending to the general well-being of the children has remained paramount in the society bedevilled by war, conflicts and hunger. Thus, according to Zamoun and Gorpe, “it is inevitable to live in a crisis-free zone as citizens of the world; therefore, we suggest “crisis literacy” awareness similar to media literacy in some ways. The main concepts of media literacy can be applied to crisis literacy as well and having crisis literacy expertise will create an ability to encode and decode crisis situations in a meaningful way”. The health of the children at war times should be given attention, not just by the women but the authorities and emergency aid donors so as to save them from health fatalities.

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