

# CHALLENGING GENDERED GEOPOLITICAL NOTIONS OF SPACE IN NIGERIAN WOMEN WRITERS' FICTIONS

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## 1. Introduction

The present paper seeks to explore the conjunction of gender and space in contemporary Nigerian literature. More specifically, by examining the kitchen as a geopolitical space of resistance and empowerment as well as food symbolism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, the aim of this paper is to outline the ways in which both authors strategically blur the lines between the female private arena and the male public sphere by representing characters who subvert gendered patriarchal notions of space which legitimise hegemonic masculinity.

Several researches on gendered spaces by feminist scholars, geographers and anthropologists have indeed revealed the ways in which spatial segregation functions as originator of gender asymmetries (Rezenau 2015, 11). The organisation of space thus plays an important role in perpetuating status differences as it embodies knowledge of social relations (Spain 1992, 3-4). In this regard, Spain observes that: "the space outside home becomes the arena in which social relations (i.e., status) are produced, while the space inside the home becomes that in which social relations are reproduced" (7). This means that gender-status distinctions are enacted not only within the home but outside of it as well. The sexual division of space inevitably reduces women's access to knowledge which thereby reinforces their lower status relative to men's (Spain 1992, 4).

The confinement of the woman to the private sphere of the family and their accessibility to education is a compelling issue in contemporary Nigerian fiction. As evidenced by the works of Adichie and Atta, the acquisition of formal education, not only enables women to access the public realm, but it also equips them with the means to acknowledge and challenge gender discrimination and inequality which represents a fundamental step for women's emancipation. By dwelling into the fixed borders between the public and private sphere in Nigeria, Adichie and Atta are crossing the borders of traditional gender asymmetries thereby redefining the Nigerian feminine and masculine identity (Rezeanu 2015, 25). Olanna, Keinene and Ugwu in *Half of the Yellow Sun* and Enitan, Sheri and Ariola in *Everything Good Will Come*, mirror the ongoing transformations towards the democratization of gender relations. Therefore demonstrating the dynamism and complexity of gender identity, which, being a social construct, is constantly negotiated and dependent on social circumstances (10). In particular, by focusing on the kitchen as a site of empowerment and agency rather than a space of female oppression and subordination, the present paper analyses the domestic space as "an arena for doing

and undoing gender” (24). Ugwu’s displayed domestic masculinity and Enitan’s refusal to be allocated within the domestic sphere, exemplify these transformations. By means of their cooking or by refusing not to, the characters of both novels convert the geopolitical space of the kitchen into a site of agency and resistance thus desisting from complying to patriarchal values (Adapon 2008, 74).

In both novels, the kitchen, and, more specifically, in relation to food imagery, denotes an important symbolic meaning. If in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the presence or absence of food serves as anchor for depicting the difficulties and woes confronted by Biafran women as well as their active role during war-time. In *Everything Good Will Come*, the practice of food cooking or refusal to cook, is employed to highlight the ways in which women reproduce, resist and rebel against gender construction (Avakian and Harber 2006, 2).

Through the analysis of gendered geopolitical spaces and food practices along with its representation in contemporary Nigerian society, the current paper focuses on examining the process of construction as well as of disruption of gender roles in *Half of the Yellow Sun* and in *Everything Good Will Come*. By examining the specificities of women’s lives in all of its complexities, it illustrates the process of construction as well as of disruption of gender roles thereby challenging traditional hegemonic gender relations based on differences while transcending them.

## 2. Gendered Geopolitical Spaces of Power in the Nigerian Society

The definition of space has long been regarded in two ways: on a microcosmic and a macrocosmic level. If, on the one hand, space is defined as “the gaps between things which, as it were, keep them apart”; on the other hand, space is referred to as “the larger container into which all things are inserted” (West-Pavlov 2009, 15). This has been, broadly speaking, the Euclidean understanding of space that has shaped Western society’s perception of it since antiquity. However, this definition of space renders it neutral, homogeneous and insignificant since, according to such perspective, only things that occupy space are of significance to philosophy and the sciences.

With the twentieth century, however, the concept of space expanded as it was beginning to be perceived as less neutral and homogeneous than before. More specifically, Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity revolutionized the concept of space and time by demonstrating that “space appeared to have different consistencies, so that depending on the position of an experiencing or perceiving subject time might stretch or shrink accordingly” (West-Pavlov 2009, 16).

Whereas for the literary scholar, space was “simply the background upon which writing was carried out” (West-Pavlov 2009, 16). The relationship of space to writing (secondary, neutral and invisible) was viewed similar to that of writing to thought in which “writing was merely the recording code necessary to preserve and fix thought, which, though primary, was always in danger of being forgotten” (West-Pavlov 2009, 16). However, the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida questioned this hierarchy by asserting that the economy of writing is not subservient to thought or speech and that actually it is productive in its own right. By referring to the presence of spaces in writing, Derrida illustrated how something that is commonly considered irrelevant and extrinsic to text, upon closer examination, proves to be fundamental for its functioning. Without space indeed no coherent sentence would exist. For this reason, in order to denote the active and productive character of space, the deconstructionist philosopher coined the word “espacement” (spacing). In these terms, space rather than being depicted as a neutral and non-significant void, becomes a medium with its own consistency and agency (West-Pavlov 2009, 17).

The relevance and significance of space, becomes even more evident when we take into consideration the growing body of literature pertaining to spatial studies which range from sociology of space, anthropology, political geography<sup>1</sup> to cultural and gender studies (Rezenau 2015, 10). In particular, sociological and anthropological studies of spaces examine the dynamics of power and gender within the private and public sphere. The works of feminist anthropologists such as Shirley Ardener have contributed enormously in developing studies which analyse the “differing spaces men

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<sup>1</sup> Political geography investigates the concept of territory and territoriality by exploring “how power is exercised in and through spaces (and their boundaries) are defined, defended, and contested” (England 2003, 612).

and women are allocated culturally, and the particular role space has in maintaining and reinforcing gender relations” (Rendall, Penner and Borden 2003, 102). As a result, one of the most prevalent representation of gendered spaces is the paradigm of “separate spheres” which is a “an oppositional and hierarchical system consisting of a dominant public male realm of production (the city) and a subordinate private female one of reproduction (the home)” (Rendall, Penner and Borden 2003, 104).

Recent researches have also focused on examining the ways in which the relationship between gender and space is defined through power. Feminist geographers such as Liz Bondi, Doreen Massey, Linda McDowell and Gillian Rose argue that there is a connection between the spaces occupied by women and their social status. The spatial dimension of gendered and social relationship is the result of cultural representations. The use of certain symbols, images or words which have cultural associations with particular gender invoke comparison with biological bodies (Rendall, Penner and Borden 2003, 103). In these terms, it could be argued that space plays an important role in the “construction of the female subject and gendered subjectivity and identity” (Rendall, Penner and Borden 2003, 107).

In a patriarchal society like Nigeria, the relationship between gender and space significantly matters as it determines the individual access to social, economic and political power and the allocation (Soetan and Akanji 2018, 1). Despite the fact that women constitute about half of the population of Nigerian society and contribute to its development as mothers, producers, managers, community developers and organizers, still today they are considered second-class citizen, whose place is at home, in the ‘kitchen’ (Allanna 2013, 115). Within such system, men are being trained for leadership activities while women are confined to domestic duties. Yet, beside favouring and perpetuating male domination (Dogo 2014, 263) that legitimise male dominance over women (Allanna 2013, 117), the imposition of severe constraints on the roles and activities of females, strongly affects women later in life to the point that these lead them to “lose self confidence/worth and have low self-esteem in their career in adult life” (116). Hence it is evident how, unfortunately, Nigerian women are far from enjoying equal rights.

Besides socio-cultural and political factors limiting Nigerian women’s agency and self-advancement, there is also the burden of reproduction. Women are indeed expected to have many children and to fulfill the cultural role associated with the female domain, namely, child bearing, child rising and home making. The domestic burden along with other factors such as early marriages, low level of education attainment, poverty and biases against women’s employment in certain branches, continue to foster women’s discrimination and exclusion from political and professional arena (122). This consequently results in the maintenance of male’s supremacy and dominion in the public and political sphere. And even though several attempts have been made by the international community such as the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action, to profess gender equality in order to bridge the gap between women and men in the public arena, women continue to remain marginalized and poorly represented in political activities thus resulting in the perpetuation of female discrimination and subordination (116).

According to the scholar Babatunde, another crucial factor which hinders women’s emancipation and independence, is originated by the unawareness of their rights and laws which protect them. This because gender roles are so deeply rooted in the Nigerian society, that women accept traditional patriarchal practices. In addition, the lack of education definitively plays a significant role in obstructing women’s emancipation. Given the social pressures on girls which address them towards early marriage and childbearing, female education is considered as secondary to that of the male. In some families, investing in girls’ education is not regarded as priority since it is believed that girls, unlike the boys, will eventually marry (121). Hence since education represents a crucial vehicle for women’s emancipation, its denial inevitably leads women to being dependent on men while simultaneously constraining their opportunity to participate in the public arena (Babatunde 2013, 1).

In an attempt to challenge an oppressive and discriminatory system of social structures and practices, Nigerian women have come out now, more vigorously than ever, to fight patriarchal hegemony. Through their stories, these writers are demanding the full control over their bodies and ample opportunities to participate in the socio-cultural, economic and political domain of their societies. Yet such change is not possible without increasing women’s and girls’ educational attainment. The impact of education in women’s empowerment, is a recurrent issue which reverberates in several writings by third generation Nigerian women writers. By actively engaging social and cultural customs which exploit women and hinders their emancipation, novelists such as Adichie and Atta are not only unmasking the root of gender inequality, but are also presenting to their readers the weapons through which challenge it right from the early stages of their lives. For this reason, both writers choose to represent strong and young female characters and their path towards self-actualization and agency (Nadaswaran, 20).

Yet as Nadaswaran observes, it is indisputable that the role of third generation writers is particularly burdensome as “they question the myths swallowed and fed by their mothers under oppressive patriarchal strictures” (21). They inquire women’s allotted role within the domestic space thereby encouraging women to see beyond the roles of “wives”, “mothers” and “daughters” in order to build an individual identity for themselves. In these terms, in the following paragraphs, it will be outlined the ways in which Adichie and Atta, by challenging patriarchal notions of gendered spaces,

“[re]create alternative or virtual spaces as sites of possibility and resistance against social positions women have historically occupied in [Nigeria]” (Sierra 2012, 3).

### 3. “Undoing Gender”: Redefining and Renegotiating Gendered Spaces in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Everything Good Will Come*

#### 3.1 Subverting Patriarchy from Within and the Kitchen as Site of Resistance and Resilience

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a historical novel set in Nigeria that recounts the Nigeria-Biafra war spanning from the early to the late sixties. By weaving together the lives of three characters, namely, Ugwu, Olanna and Richard, Adichie narrates one of the most critical moments in the history of modern Nigeria. Through her writing, she tactfully portrays the important resilient roles of the Biafran heroines in their struggles to survive, win the war and rebuild a war-savaged society, Adichie, in these terms, present an insightful picture of the female characters’ path towards vocalization, re-presentation and emancipation of Biafran women. The anachronistic approach along with the technique of shifting viewpoints contributes to offering to the reader divergent social, cultural and diplomatic perspectives which makes the novel remarkably distinguishes itself from other narratives (Emenoyu, 160).

If in *Half of a Yellow Sun* the story is presented through multiple perspectives, in *Everything Good Will Come* the story is recounted through the first person narrator Enitan. Spanning from 1971 to 1995, the *Bildungsroman* centres on portraying the growth of two girls, Enitan and Sheri, from adolescence to adulthood (Akung 2012, 114). As discussed above, Atta’s choice to represent the protagonist’s path towards emancipation and self-determination is crucial as it highlights the ways in which the characters seek agency at an early age (Nadaswaran, 20). Framed by the life-long friendship between Enitan and Sheri, *Everything Good Will Come* depicts female characters who, by choosing not to conform to patriarchal dominance, challenge it by re-creating new spaces of independence for themselves (22).

When locating both literary works within the framework of womanist theory, it is evident how Adichie and Atta provide images of strong and resilient female characters who subvert traditional structure by challenging Nigerian social and cultural practices that undermine and downgrade women (20). By diametrically reflecting the mother-daughter relationship through the oppositional dichotomy between the old and the new, both novels explicitly delineate the changes across generations in an increasingly diverse Nigeria. If, on the one hand, Lady Ozobia (Olanna and Kainene’s mother) and Ariola (Enitan’s mother) are economically subjected to their husbands, on the other hand, Olanna, Kainene and Enitan are presented as being strong and independent women who do not necessarily need to rely on their respective partners (Emenoyu 2017, 163). It could be thus argued that the mother-daughter dyad functions as an indicator of the changing rhythm of life in the Nigerian society caused by the “socioeconomic transformations, the ongoing confrontation with new, opposing value systems, and the struggle for freedom and independence” (Abudi 2011, 7). Confined within the domestic sphere, Lady Ozobia and Ariola suffer the marginalization because they lack the means, namely the educational and economic empowerment of their daughters, to break free from patriarchal constraints. With regard to this, Atta ironically reveals Enitan’s father’s hypocritical behavior who teaches his daughter the principles of equality while negating to his wife her socio-economic independence by choosing not to put the house in which she lives by her name. Similarly, Lady Ozobia’s choice to remain married, despite the artificiality of their relationship, is dictated by the fact that her social and economic existence is tied to that of her husband (Mtenje 2016, 70). For this reason, even when she discovers about his infidelity, rather than reacting, she prefers avoiding confrontation by keeping silent thus, however, condoning in this way his behavior.

Yet it is worth mentioning how in spite of their circumscribed space within society, the female figures represented in *Everything Good Will Come* nevertheless attempt to find a way through which assert and express their individuality. In particular, Ariola, Enitan’s mother and Sheri, Enitan’s childhood friend, though belonging to different generations, initially suffer from similar forms of patriarchal oppression that do not allow them to be independent from their partners. Having Enitan’s mother failed by not giving birth to a male child, her husband sneaks out to have a male child outside their marriage (Akung 2012, 117). An act this, that in the postcolonial patriarchal Nigerian context, rather than being condemned as improper, is instead widely accepted. This because, when a woman fails to fulfill her duty, namely that of giving birth to a baby boy, the man is entitled not only to have affairs outside the marriage, but also to marry another woman if he wishes to. As a result, several women feel the pressure to conceive a male child, especially, given the fact that, culturally, women do not inherit family property since it is believed that they will marry out (Adams and Trosts 2005, 30). Through Sheri’s story, Atta clearly raises this issue. After her father’s death, Sheri is indeed deprived of the right of inheriting her father’s property due to the native laws which favor sons over daughters. Left with nothing, Sheri thus abandons any personal dreams she ever had and instead devotes to Ibrahim, a Military General, who is a strict Muslim that limits Sheri’s agency by putting her under his control and by not allowing her, for instance, to go out without covering her head. Devoted to her duties, Sheri is more preoccupied with keeping the house clean and cooking

for entire days without the assurance that Ibrahim will even show up. For this reason, when she reveals the details about her relationship, Enitan is outraged and encourages her friend not only to break ties with the man, but also to seek her path towards independence by opening a catering business. This represents a turning point for Sheri, as it is in this moment that she begins to envision the possibility to start afresh by opening her own business and becoming an independent and self-made woman rather than being an appendage to a man (Akung 2012, 116). Her metamorphosis is such that she passes from being a “kitchen martyr” (Atta 2016, 105) to being an independent businesswoman who no longer necessitates on depending on a man for survival. In this regards, Enitan observes:

“I envied her freedom to spend as she wanted; her business knowledge which came from bargaining. Sheri said she didn’t have a head for books, but she saw a clear margin before a deal started. [...] Within a year of starting her business, she was able to buy herself one of those second-hand cars people call “fairly used” and after two years, she was able to rent a place of her own (Atta 2016, 210, 211)

As mentioned above, Enitan definitely plays a crucial role in Sheri’s development. She is, in fact, the one who awakens in her the awareness of her rights and capabilities by making her conscious that she is not obliged to spend her entire life serving the Brigadier. In womanist terms, it could be argued that the bond shared by Enitan and Sheri is a sisterly and genuine one in which they both reach out in support of each other by looking out for one another (Hubbard, 43). Sisterhood and female solidarity represents one of the major themes explored by Nigerian women writers who emphasize the importance of coming together in order to build an authentic sisterly relationship that enables them to share their experiences whereby endure and withstand the everyday sufferings that life holds (Hudson-Weems 2009, 89).

Yet, as evidenced by Enitan and Ariola mother-daughter relationship, it is not always easy for women to establish a connection and create a strong bonding. Especially when these women belong to different generations who have developed a diverse knowledge and understanding of the world. However, it is significant to note how, in spite of their differences, at the beginning of the novel Ariola makes several attempts to seek a way through which connect and build a genuine bond with Enitan. She indeed repeatedly tries to reveal the truth to her daughter behind her father’s flaunted feminist principles: “[t]he man gave me nothing. Nothing, for all his education, he’s as typical as they come” (Atta 2016, 94). Yet having Enitan being constantly brainwashed by her father, she does not initially believe her mother and rather perceives her as an antagonist. However, as she grows up and goes through several experiences within her marital relationship, she realizes what her mother says and that she has to pitch tents with her and not her father anymore. Her mother indeed advises her to: “[n]ever make sacrifices for a man. By the time you say, ‘Look what I’ve done for you,’ it’s too late. They never remember” (Atta 2016, 173). Enitan’s mother, who has devoted her life to her husband, has now lost everything. What she thus demands, in order to acquire her liberty and no longer depend on Sunny, is that he puts the property in which she lives by her name. Yet Sunny continues to postpone the issue instead of signing the documents. Hence, trapped within patriarchal order, Ariola turns to the church as an escape mechanism while fighting from the circumscribed space of the kitchen the right to own her economic and social freedom. By refusing to cook for her husband, Enitan’s mother is actively reacting against her husband’s oppressive behavior who is denying her the right to own her own property. The kitchen, in this sense, rather than being presented as a site of oppression and subordination of women, is instead transformed into an active space of rebellion and subversion of patriarchal system (Abarca 2008, 132). In this regard, Abarca asserts that the culinary space is more than “just a functional, necessary room within a house’s architectural design” (18). In a male-dominated society in which women are not allowed to fulfill roles of leadership in public spheres, female empowerment and self-expression often originate in the kitchen (Méndez-Montoya 2012, 27). Hence rather than being perceived as the “locus of women’s emotional, physical, spiritual and economic vulnerability”, the culinary space is instead rendered as an empowering site of multiple changes and degrees of freedom, self-awareness, subjectivity and agency (Abarca 2006, 19) that enables Enitan’s mother as well as Sheri to assert their individuality.

Similarly, but in a different way, Adichie uses the kitchen space in *Half of a Yellow Sun* to explore and subvert gendered spatial boundaries. Through the character of Ugwu, who is one of the narrators and main protagonists, Adichie moves a critique to gender roles polarization. Being Odenigbo’s servant, Ugwu’s duties chiefly keep him in the kitchen. Right from the beginning of the novel, the character indeed manifests a spatial preference for the kitchen and the culinary activity. However, coming from a rural and patriarchal context, in which gendered roles are still deeply rooted in the cultural belief system, Ugwu who loves to cook, is denied the chance to participate in the cooking rites with his mother and sister. In this regard, he commends in the following way: “[my mother] had already told [me] [I] spend too much time around women cooking, and [I] might never grow a beard if [I] [keep] doing that” (Adichie 2017, 12). Yet in spite of the fact that the kitchen, meant as domestic space that is socially associated with the women’s realm, Ugwu nonetheless desists from cultivating his passion for cooking. In fact, similarly to Sheri in *Everything Good Will Come*,

it is actually his cooking skills that enable him to improve his social condition by moving from the small village of Opi to the University town of Nsukka to work for the University Professor, Odenigbo. Odenigbo, who firmly believes in the power of education as means through which “negotiate [the] new [postcolonial] world” (Adichie 2017, 101) and “resist exploitation” (Adichie 2017, 11), immediately enrolls Ugwu in the staff primary school. This represents a turning point in his life as it enables Ugwu to initiate the process of metamorphosis which determines the character’s shift from naïve and inexperienced boy into an educated and mature young man. As he acquires an increased command of the English language, Ugwu’s ability to engage with texts and newspapers allow him, from his position in the kitchen, to participate in Odenigbo’s community of intellectuals (Plaias, 62). As the narrative proceeds, the reader is brought to witness Ugwu’s gradual development which culminates in his claim for an authorial role during the experience of the war. By means of his writing, he is able to safeguard the memory of his traumatic experiences whereby, simultaneously, initiate the process of healing fundamental in order to recover from his sufferings (64).

Hence, as evidenced in *Half of the Yellow Sun* and *Everything Good Will Come*, Adichie and Atta have made the kitchen the liberating space of their characters. By representing the ways in which Sheri, Ariola and Ugwu transcend conventional gender division of space, both Nigerian authors deliberately ought to disrupt patriarchal gendered rigid notions of space based on the ideology of separate spheres. The kitchen, in these terms, rather than a confining and limiting space – considered chiefly a female domain in which men do not set foot in – is rather transformed into a liberating space in which both the females and male characters are able to assert their personhood.

Yet, it is noteworthy, examining how Atta does not fail to accurately depict the importance of the kitchen in maintaining spatial segregation and in conditioning patterns of gender roles that hinder women’s emancipation and independence. The relegation of women within the domestic sphere is a central issue that dominates the novel. In their quest for empowerment, agency and self-identification, the female characters question the cultural and social assumptions which restrict women to the domestic sphere and restrict men out of it (Miller and Borgida 2016, 5). Despite portraying the kitchen as a limiting space from which the woman must move out in order to fight for her rights and that of others (Akung 2012, 119); on the other hand, Atta also demonstrates that, even under adverse conditions, such as the ones exemplified by Ariola’s and Sheri’s case – who lack important means education and financial security, it is possible to overcome and challenge, whether successfully or unsuccessfully, patriarchal strictures. Rather than a place of submission, in *Everything Good Will Come* the kitchen is therefore rendered as “a place where rebellion can actually start” which can even lead to the collapse of the whole patriarchal system which aims “at putting women under the yoke of men” (Curtois 2015, 109).

With the similar aim of questioning the separate sphere ideology which structure society neatly along gender lines in order to maintain and reinforce traditional notions of appropriate roles for men and women (Miller and Borgida 2016, 7), Adichie deliberately chooses to represent Ugwu as a character involved in what is conventionally coded as “feminine tasks” (Rezeanu 2015, 20). The relevance placed on this aspect is significant as it reveals the Nigerian writer’s intent of subverting and reversing gender roles. As a matter of fact, in the Nigerian society, Ugwu’s interest in learning cooking skills and his eagerness in participating in culinary rituals, is considered not only unusual, but inappropriate as well since it does not conform to the ideal of masculine identity. This aspect is clearly brought to light when Mama, Odenigbo’s mother, who is so deeply imbued with patriarchal notions of gender roles, conceives Ugwu’s presence in the kitchen as atypical and thus comments that: “[a] boy does not belong to the kitchen” (Adichie 2017, 95). To which Ugwu not only is irritated by Mama’s behavior, but he is also perturbed as well because she has taken possession of his kitchen which he considers his domain: “[i]t irritated him: her assuming that everything belonged to Master, her taking command of his kitchen, her ignoring his perfect jollof rice and chicken” (Adichie 2017, 95).

A further observation that is worth mentioning, is that Mama’s attitude and conception of masculine and feminine identity simply mirror patriarchal ideology which emphasises the behavioral and social differences between the feminine and masculine. Gender roles identity is so deeply ingrained in her that she scolds Ugwu for not conforming to the duties which pertain to his sex. Mama cannot conceive the idea that a man operates within the kitchen arena, a place which is traditionally gendered as feminine. For this reason, she takes possession of it from him and clarifies to Ugwu his not belonging to the culinary domain by virtue of his sex.

Yet it is interesting to note that Mama’s admonition recalls, what Sefinatu Aliyu Dogo states regarding the importance of informal sanctions. She observes how the ratifications by peers and the formal punishment or threat of punishment by those of authority, play a key role in shaping thereby maintaining gender traditional roles (265). As a result, on the basis of these cultural practices and social expectation:

[t]he female child is expected to stay in the home, helping her mother with the household chores, learning how to keep a home, and helping to care for the younger siblings, while the male child accompanies his father to the farm or whatever profession his father is engaged in. He is taught to be a man and is rather sent on errands that requires going outside the house.

Given the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society, it therefore becomes particularly significant that Adichie, fully aware of the way in which the general notion of separate spheres for women and men is deeply ingrained in Nigeria, chooses to represent Ugwu within the spatial dimension of the kitchen.

Both Adichie and Atta indeed strategically employ the kitchen as a symbolic space to redefine women's and men's relationship with the private and public sphere. The kitchen is no longer perceived solely as an oppressive domain that reinforces gender inequality, but it rather bears a powerful symbolic meaning. As it is through the rediscovery of domesticity meant as a place of liberation, production and fulfillment, that these characters are "undoing gender". The disruption of the traditional system of oppositions which maintains and fosters patriarchal ascribed notions about masculine and feminine identities consequently leads to the emergence of alternative masculinity and femininity: whereby men are increasingly involved in domestic activities (Rezeanu 2015, 24), women are gradually participating in the public sphere.

By portraying characters who seek agency and self-expression outside the realm of gender structure, both Nigerian Authors are not only questioning and criticizing gender inequality, but are also voicing out the necessity for each person to have the liberty to build an individual identity for themselves even when this does not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either feminine or masculine.

### **3.2: Blurring Gender Boundaries: The Contribution of Women in the Public Realm and The Motif of Food and Hunger in *Half of the Yellow Sun***

As mentioned in the above paragraph, differently from their mothers, Kainene, Olanna and Enitan benefit from their social freedom together with the liberty of expression and active participation in the affairs of their society (Emenyonu 2017, 163). Equipped with the knowledge derived from their education, the three female characters are well conscious of their rights and capabilities and therefore refuse to accept the older generation of women's perspective according to which a woman should never be on the same level as a man, nor should she aspire to fulfilling roles different from that of the domestic one (Ajami 2014, 114) and, most importantly, she must never contest her husband's will. In this regard, Enitan observes that: "[i]n my country women are praised the more they surrender their rights to protest. In the end they may die with nothing but selfless to pass on their daughters; a startling legacy [...]." Nonetheless, Enitan, Olanna and Kainene, rather than accepting to be silenced and relegated within the domestic sphere, choose to go beyond societal stereotypical roles associated with women, by asserting their individuality and by participating in the public realm. Indeed, if, on the one hand, Enitan joins the Human Rights group by becoming a campaigner, not only for women, but for the nation as well (Akung 2012, 120). On the other hand, Olanna and Keinene rather to flee to London, choose to remain in Biafra by contributing actively during war time.

It is worth noting that Adichie and Atta strategically equip their female characters with Western education and financial security. Olanna, for example, is a holder of a Master's Degree in Sociology, while her twin sister, Kainene, holds a Master's Degree in Business Administration (Emenyonu 2017 163), Enitan instead has achieved a Law Degree during her years in the United Kingdom. The representation of female characters who are strong, independent and educated women is significant to highlight the ways in which education and financial security, constitute the foundations of female emancipation and empowerment. As it is only armed with such means that women will be capable of subverting and renegotiating hierarchical gendered spaces. Having gained more ground in terms of education, leadership and financially, Olanna, Kainene and Enitan appear as strongly empowered characters who actively participate as members of society, leaders and decision makers (163). In particular, Kainene's leadership qualities are highlighted right from the initial pages of the novel in which her father describes her by saying that: "Kainene is just not like a son, she is like two" (Adichie 2017, 31). She is portrayed as being a male daughter, a business administrator, head of her own home, manager of her own contracts with the government and oil companies, and controller of her relationship with her lover, Richard, an expatriate researcher (Emenyonu 2017, 162). Kainene's prominent and audacious traits become even more evident during wartime when she turns herself into an army contractor, a previously male's occupation, to build and manage refugee camps to save victims of the war. As Emenyonu observes: "[t]he novel describes her with imposing masculine tallness and vigour in embracing challenging tasks, speaking her mind and smoking like men. These images are juxtaposed to portray her as a woman-man or as a super-women, an image that defeats male dominance" (163). In these terms, it could be argued that by institutionalizing Kainene as a 'male daughter' and heir, the novel dismantles the patriarchal and cultural assumptions of male child preference and inheritance by male progenitor. Kainene's success in the business world and her financial independence disrupts patriarchal structures of gender inequalities. This aspect is particularly evident when, during wartime, the scarcity of food together with economic imbalance lead the male figures like Odenigbo, Richard and Ugwu to depend on her (163).

Similarly to Kainene, although in a different way, Olanna is portrayed as being a strong figure as well. Olanna's strong-willed personality emerges right from the beginning of the novel when her parents, treating her like a commodity, promise to Chief Okonji an affair with her in exchange for a business contract. However, Olanna refuses to be reduced

to sexual commodity the same way she dismisses her parents' proposal to marry from a rich family to secure their wealth. Instead, despite her parents' disapproval, she sticks with Odenigbo (Ajami Makokha 2014, 114). Similarly, Odenigbo continues his relationship with Olanna despite his mother's disapprobation. Since the woman in the postcolonial Nigerian society was expected to give birth once she started living with a man, whether legally or traditionally married, Mama is furious at Olanna for "failing to fulfill her duty". Odenigbo's childless cohabitation with Olanna brings disgrace to the mother among her fellow women as such behavior is considered anomalous to the guiding belief of their ethno-cultural heritage (Bobby and Harney 2016, 139). For this reason, convinced that Olanna's hold on her son could only be attributed to witchcraft, she consults a *dibia*. By acting within the circumscribed space of the kitchen and by taking possession of it from Ugwu, Mama uses charms to make Odenigbo have unprotected sex with Amala, a young girl that she brought along from her home-town village. However, since Amala fails to give birth to a baby boy, Mama does not want to keep the baby and instead suggests to have the baby taken to Amala's family. Olanna, on the contrary, decides that she and Odenigbo will keep the baby and raise her on their own. They will tell her the truth about her mother once she grew up (Makohka 2014, 114-115). With regard to this, it should be pointed out that Olanna's decision to keep Baby and raise her regardless of her sex, is significant because it mirrors a perspective that goes beyond the gendered centered patriarchal ideology which values male child over the female one.

Moreover, it is noteworthy to point out the ways in which the novel significantly stretches Olanna's mothering qualities to national service. Indeed, her commitment and struggle for freedom in Biafra is such that, rather to flee to London like other rich Igbo people, she chooses to remain and play an active role. Since most of the schools in Umuahia have become either refugee camps or army training camps, she decides to turn her yard into classes in which she teaches mathematics, English and civics (Zanou Capo-Chichi and Bodjrenou 2016, 160-163). Thus evidencing the importance of education even during wartime.

Besides education, another important aspect which is clearly highlighted in *Half of the Yellow Sun* is food imagery. Food, as a recurrent leitmotif, is employed to mirror social and political problems as well as to outline women's active contribution to the success of the Biafra Republic. During wartime, women were indeed the ones in charge of providing food for the entire family while the men went to war to liberate Biafra from the Nigerian soldiers. Through Olanna, Adichie accurately portrays the Biafran woman's struggles to feed and take care of their family. For example, when Chimaka, Olanna's adopted child, suffers from Kwashiorkor and lack of appetite, she is the one who goes to the relief center and scrambles her way to get some egg-yolk for her (Makohka 2014, 117). Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties related to food shortage, hunger, malnutrition and other diseases, Olanna and the Biafran women refuse to give up thus revealing themselves for being strong and resilient characters who play an essential and active role to secure the family well-being. Interestingly, the commitment and deep involvement of the female figures contrast with male writers' fiction where women are often represented in their subaltern roles. By portraying female characters from different backgrounds, who are actively engaged with their win-the-war effort, Adichie is therefore intentionally highlighting their capacity of resilience and empowerment (Zanou Capo-Chichi and Bodjrenou 2016, 159). As evidenced by the case of Mrs. Muokelu, a Primary School teacher, whose husband has returned invalid from the war, and that therefore is forced to take on her husband's responsibilities. Due to the circumstances, Mrs. Muokelu changes job and starts trading in the enemy lines because she needs extra financial resources to support her family (162): "I have twelve people to feed" [...] And that is not counting my husband's relatives who have just come from Abakaliki. My husband has returned from the war front with one leg. What can he do? I am going to start *afia attack* and see if I can buy salt. I can no longer teach" (Adichie 2017, 293). Adichie's portrayal of Biafran women echoes Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's perspective regarding women's capacity of resilience and resourcefulness (249). By narrating the significant contribution of Biafran women, she is not only capturing their experiences through a female perspective, but she is also subverting and inquiring male-centered narratives which often represent women as subalterns and marginal characters. Adichie's depiction of women's active roles during the Biafran war, therefore, represents a key element as it illustrates her attempt to transcend the consolidated gendered division of space while she is simultaneously reshaping patriarchal conceptualization of female (and male) identity (Nadaswaran, 26). By representing the lives of diverse female characters who belong to different social classes but are united in their win-the-war effort, she reveals women's invaluable contributions who are often left unacknowledged.

## Conclusions

This paper has examined the representation of female and male characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun* and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. More specifically, by focusing on the concept of space and its relation with gender in the contemporary Nigerian society, it has been outlined the ways in which both authors attempt to "create [and redefine] new spaces for young Nigerian women [and men] to inhabit" (Nadaswaran, 22).

In these terms, the paper opines that, on the one hand, Olanna, Keinene and Enitan, in their refusal to comply to stereotypical and subjugated positions, and, Ugwu, on the other hand, challenge patriarchal conceptualization of female

and male identity while simultaneously disrupting patriarchal notions of gendered spaces. Hence it could be argued that, through their writings, Adichie and Atta offer a peculiar glimpse of the complex changes that the Nigerian society is undergoing. By subverting the separate sphere ideology, both authors choose to represent empowered, strong and independent characters who redefine previously understood patriarchal notions of female and male subjectivity.

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