



universität
wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

„Reconceptualising Motherhood Beyond Essentialist
Gender Norms in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's
Half of a Yellow Sun“

verfasst von / submitted by

Barbara Jilek, BA BA

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2019 / Vienna 2019

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

A 066 844

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Sarah Heinz

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Univ.-Prof. Dr. Sarah Heinz who helped me to shape an abstract idea into a concrete research project. Without your recommended readings, advice, and enthusiasm for this topic, my thesis would not have arrived at its present state. I deeply value that you continued to supervise me although motherhood somewhat 'interfered' on a personal level, and that you provided me with invaluable feedback even when time was a scarce resource. Thank you, also, to my mother. Your emotional support and the fresh perspective you repeatedly enabled me to gain made it possible for me to cope with the stress of thesis-writing. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and writing buddies. Without you my days, weeks, and months at the library would not only have been far less productive, but far less enjoyable.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Social and Cultural Construction of Gender.....	2
2.1. Gender Studies, Feminism, and the Sex-Gender Distinction	3
2.2. The Naturalisation of Femininity and Motherhood in Powerful Discourses.....	6
2.3. Subversive Actions, Choice, and Gender Performativity	8
3. Motherhood from a Gender Studies Perspective	10
3.1. Motherhood as Subordination, Motherhood as Empowerment	11
3.2. Performing Motherhood and Care	14
3.3. Complex Motherhood: Maternal Ambivalence, Regret, and Agency	17
4. Contextualised Readings of Gender and Motherhood in Postcolonial and African Studies	23
4.1. Universal Patriarchy and the ‘Third World Woman’	24
4.2. Reappropriating Theory from the Global North.....	28
4.3. Motherhood in African Gender Studies and Literature	32
4.4. The Historical Setting of <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>	37
5. Choosing Motherhood in Adichie’s <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>	42
5.1. Education, Class, and the Road to Motherhood	43
5.2. Infertility and Social Exclusion	45
5.3. Self-Determined Motherhood as Empowerment.....	49
5.4. Being Nobody’s Mother: Childless Kainene and her Twin Sister	55
6. Mother Nurtures?: Mother-Child Relationships in <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>.....	57
6.1. Performing Motherhood(s)	57
6.2. Ambivalent Emotions in Mother-Child Relationships	63
6.3. De-Gendering Care and Motherhood	67
7. Destabilised Gender Roles and Violence Against Mothers in War	70
7.1. Gender-Based Violence Against Mothers	71
7.2. Mothers’ Agency in Wartime.....	73
8. Conclusion	78
9. Bibliography.....	81
10. Appendix	86
10.1. English Abstract	86
10.2. German Abstract	86

1. Introduction

The sheer vastness of current publications on the topic of motherhood in public as well as academic discourse highlights the significance of this much-discussed subject-matter and its manifold sub-topics in numerous contemporary societies. Two relatively recent examples of this present engagement with motherhood are Sheila Heti's 2018 book *Motherhood* and Orna Donath's 2017 sociological and anthropological study on Israeli mothers who regret having become mothers. Both, Heti's literary as well as Donath's academic approach to motherhood, take as their starting point, and thus show great awareness of, the intersection of gender norms with societal conceptualisations of motherhood, and regulations regarding mothering practices. In her novel, Heti addresses one of the central questions in many women's lives: whether to have or not to have children, and she subsequently points out how a female lack of desire to give birth is frequently regarded as controversial. Thus, Heti's novel draws attention to how questions of procreation are still subject to intense social monitoring and tightly connected to gender norms. Not only the question of becoming a mother, but the act of mothering as such is closely observed and regulated by powerful institutions. Orna Donath's research project highlights the influential role held by public, medical, and other institutional discourses in shaping women's decisions to be mothers. In her study, Donath makes it evident that culturally and historically determined rules govern whom society deems a 'good' or a 'bad' mother, and that, oftentimes, harsh criticism awaits those who are perceived to deviate from the norm.

In my thesis, I aim to investigate how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* explores the interrelation of motherhood and gender normative discourse against the backdrop of the enormous societal upheaval of civil war in 1960s Nigeria. While this novel, as well as other works by the same author, have received ample attention for their exploration of diverse gendered topics, motherhood as an issue that is linked to gender norms remains an understudied aspect of Adichie's writing, a research gap that the present thesis seeks to fill. Drawing on concepts and theories from the field of gender studies, I aim to identify how specific conceptualisations of motherhood and mothering are challenged in Adichie's novel, and how the relationship between gender norms and norms of motherhood becomes explicit in the process. Several sub-questions arise out of the attempt to answer this overarching question. In my close reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I seek to analyse

how women's choice of or against motherhood is framed in the novel in the light of socio-culturally dependent gender discourse, how Adichie's portrayal of the resulting mother-child relationships challenges gender normative ideas, and lastly, how civil war plays a role in the reconceptualisation of motherhood. My thesis is that Adichie's novel provides an insight into the highly gendered, discursive construction and monitoring of motherhood ideals in 1960s Nigerian society. Additionally, via its portrayal of a variety of discursively-shaped attitudes to motherhood, its complex and performatively-constituted mother-child relationships, and its depiction of mothers' agency, Adichie's novel contributes to a reconceptualisation of motherhood beyond naturalising and essentialising gender norms.

This thesis is subdivided into six central chapters; in three theory-based sections I aim to lay the conceptual and theoretical ground for my subsequent close-readings of Adichie's novel. Via a systematic review of the literature, I seek to determine the current state of research on the intersection between motherhood and gender. First, I discuss developments and concepts within the field of gender studies that are pertinent to my thesis, before narrowing down the focus to the debate surrounding motherhood within that same field in a second subchapter. In a final theory chapter, I then place the discussion on gender and motherhood in the light of a postcolonial research context. Subsequently, my close-readings of Adichie's novel begin with an exploration of the relationship between prevalent societal discourse on motherhood in the socio-historical context of the novel and women's choice of motherhood. In a second chapter, I will focus on the everyday reality of different mother-child relationships, and how the performative aspects of mothering allow a re-definition of motherhood beyond biology, thus instead drawing attention to "the contradictions and complexities of women's lives and roles" (Mohanty, "Revisited" 527). In my final literary analysis chapter, I move on to a discussion of the possibly transformative effects of civil war on conceptualisations of motherhood and gender.

2. The Social and Cultural Construction of Gender

For an analysis that explores the link between motherhood and gender in Adichie's novel, a closer inspection of the category of gender itself and of its relationship to specific societal and cultural discourses is a necessary intermediary step. In the

present chapter, I will discuss the most pertinent developments in academic approaches with regard to gender and, thus, establish the field of gender studies as the foundation for the subsequent analysis chapters of my thesis. I begin with a short overview of the differences between purely feminist approaches and the field of gender studies to establish the discursive constructedness of gender as a starting point for my analysis. In the following, I move on to an exploration of concepts such as performativity and agency which will prove pertinent to a discussion of gender norms and their possible subversion.

2.1. Gender Studies, Feminism, and the Sex-Gender Distinction

Gender studies as a field is grounded in feminist thought and yet, having developed its own agenda over the past decades, it is distinct from purely feminist approaches. While numerous issues that are of interest to gender studies might be rooted in feminism, Naomi Schor points out that to use the terms gender studies and feminism interchangeably would mean to overlook the singular achievements made within each field (264-265). Because of its agenda of promoting women's causes and of bringing about and accelerating gender equality, feminism is firmly grounded in women's activist work and social engagement. In contrast to feminist approaches, analyses that are based on a gender studies framework might ask how the concepts of male and female, or of feminine and masculine are discursively created. Scholars active in the field of gender studies have not only pointed to the discursive and normative construction of femininity but also to the social monitoring of masculinity and research in the field is contributing to the destabilisation of heteronormative concepts that view sex and gender as binary categories.

The fact that essentialising conceptualisations of femininity, which conceive women as a uniform group, were wide-spread in feminist thought, provided one of the main incentives for finding new approaches to gender in a separate field. As Judith Butler explains, "the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (*Gender Trouble* 2). In denying differences between women's bodies, their living conditions, or their goals in life, feminists fell into their own trap when they re-enforced binary understandings of gender and sex. Gender Studies then, although far from a unified field (Schor 275), can generally be understood as an "elaboration, questioning

and, ultimately reconfiguration of the insights of feminist criticism” (Schor 263). This questioning also applies to what lies at the heart of gender studies, described by Schor as “the most powerful and most vulnerable category of analysis elaborated by feminism”: gender itself (265). By looking closely into the mechanisms at work in the creation and upholding of gender norms, the academic field of gender studies goes beyond a denouncement of inequality between women and men but rather serves to unveil hegemonic interests behind the promotion of compulsory heterosexuality.

Although the distinction between sex and gender is nowadays mostly refuted by gender researchers for its naturalisation of an unambiguously sexed body, this differentiation nevertheless revolutionised ‘Western’ societal understanding of sexuality at the time it was first made. Even though the term ‘gender’ as such did not yet exist when her famous book *The Second Sex* was published, Simone de Beauvoir can be understood as an early proponent of the so-called sex-gender distinction. Famously arguing that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” (Beauvoir 273) she reformed scholarly as well as non-scholarly thinking on the matter of gender and sex by questioning the formerly presumed biological determination of a gendered identity. As Judith Butler explains, Beauvoir instead offered a view of “gender as the variable cultural interpretation of sex” (“Sex and Gender” 36). Distinguishing between female and woman, Beauvoir regards the first of these terms as “a fixed and self-identical set of natural corporeal facts,” but the latter as a cultural interpretation projected upon a sexed body (“Sex and Gender” 36). Beauvoir’s work, therefore, contributed to a destabilisation of biological determinist approaches to sexuality and gender and lay the ground for future engagement with the complex relationship between sex, gender and the body in various fields.

The sex-gender distinction that Simone de Beauvoir’s work drew heightened attention to, and which feminists would deploy repeatedly to support their cause of fighting patriarchal regimes, was famously questioned by Michel Foucault. His *History of Sexuality* is one of the founding works within the field of gender studies and it paved the way for scholars such as Judith Butler. First published in the 1970s, Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* challenged views purported by what he termed the “regime” of sexuality (40). Reasoning against a so-called “repressive hypothesis” which claims society needs to free itself from sexual repression (“History” 10), Foucault drew attention to the power of normative discourse instead. In showing that “discursive

interests” form society’s comprehension of sexuality, he pointed to the “strategic intention” behind a regulation of sex “through useful and public discourses,” including the propagation of the notion of a repressed sexuality (“History” 8). In her discussion of Foucault’s contribution to the field of gender studies, Schor argues that he “made possible a new look at and beyond the sex-gender system, including a questioning of the validity of that foundational system” by showing that it is “from within the prison house of sexuality that we have constructed our views of gender as an intractable binary system of opposites” (277). In other words, Foucault co-provided the founding work for future questionings of a binary sex-gender system that is, moreover, reliant on the false premise of a pre-existent sexuality.

Butler based her own research into gender and sexuality on the insights of her predecessors but interrogated more closely into the discursive construction of both, gender as well as sex, thus further undermining the supposedly binary distinction between the two concepts. Taking up Foucault’s notion of a discursive construction of sexuality again in the 1990s, Butler developed it further in her own seminal work. In her deconstruction of sex, gender and desire as mutually informing categories, she employed Foucault’s concept of a discursively-produced sexuality that cannot exist “in some sense ‘outside,’ ‘before,’ or ‘after’ power itself” (*Gender Trouble* 29). Schor describes Butler’s theory as “a radical questioning of the complicity of the sex-gender distinction,” (278) given that it highlights the dominance of heterosexist, heteronormative discourse in ‘Western’ society.

In Butler’s work, the “corporeal facts” (“Sex and Gender” 36) that Beauvoir had associated with sex and that Foucault had begun to question were revealed as being not nearly as fixed as frequently assumed. Instead, Butler showed how the supposed corporeality of sex is “seriously challenged by the continuum of chromosomal variations” (“Sex and Gender” 36). In arguing that “limits to gender, the range of possibilities for a lived interpretation of a sexually differentiated anatomy, seem less restricted by anatomy itself than by the weight of the cultural institutions which have conventionally interpreted anatomy,” (“Sex and Gender” 45) Butler undermines assumptions of a pre-existent sexuality. In other words, Butler claimed that given that the decision of who is declared female or male also falls into the realm of cultural interpretation, it is medical personnel who, informed by existing discourse on human sex, ultimately decide whether an infant belongs with either of the binary options widely

acknowledged by society. While Butler's understanding of sexuality as yet another socio-cultural construct may be an extreme view, it nevertheless provides an insight into the persistence of discursive interests in the upholding of norms regarding sex and gender.

2.2. The Naturalisation of Femininity and Motherhood in Powerful Discourses

Power plays a significant role in Foucault's analysis of the discursive determination of gendered identities and in his investigation into the institutionalised upholding of a heterosexual matrix. As Reiner Keller points out in his discussion of Foucault's approach to power, "discourses are structured by mechanisms of exclusion and empowerment" (74). Hence, the discursive creation of a binary heterosexual norm empowers those who conform while it relegates others to the margins of the social realm. The fact that "[p]ower is not a singular instance 'up there,' but a basic dimension of human action and human relations" complicates analyses of gender dynamics insofar as it makes it impossible to pinpoint a singular source of regulatory norms. On the other hand, as "[p]ower relations can be found at every level of social action and society," (R. Keller 75), focussed analyses may create a picture of the complicated network of discourses that determines the conceptualisation of gender and sexuality. According to Foucault, systems of power determine "the possible field of action of others," (Foucault, "Subject and Power" 221), and within these systems power is granted to some but taken from others. These systems play a vital role in the discursive production of gendered identities, and an analysis thereof may reveal how specific sexual behaviour and expressions of gender are rewarded while others are sanctioned by laws, or by the withdrawal of status in public as well as private institutions.

Although Foucault has drawn attention to the construction of a binary conceptualisation of sexuality by powerful institutionalised discourses, his lack of attention to the different effects of power in the creation of differently gendered bodies has received its fair share of criticism. For Foucault, power functions as "the central mechanism of producing subjects and objects," a process he also terms "subjectification" and that is shaped by power relations which exert a "productive, enabling and constraining force at the same time" (R. Keller 75). Nevertheless, Angela King argues that while his theory provides an apt starting point for interrogations into

the involvement of powerful institutions and discourses in the creation of subjects, Foucault disregards how these discourses construct and affect genders differently (30). According to King, especially when it comes to the gendered female body, the influence of powerful institutional discourses is strikingly obvious. She reads “the female body as a particular target of disciplinary power” and proposes that “gender, specifically femininity, is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control” (King 30). The fact that discursive restrictions shape genders differently is a neglected element in Foucault’s theory but that becomes obvious in the discussion of motherhood as a highly gendered social issue that is subjected to intense surveillance.

In the light of the present thesis, the power of discursive constructions of femininity reveals itself most clearly when it comes to the biologisation of the female body and the naturalisation of the concept of ‘woman’ in essentialist discourse. King aptly explains how “[w]omen’s association with body/nature is strengthened by biological essentialist and determinist paradigms which define woman according to her reproductive physiology. She is thus [...] literally a receptacle for the desires of the male and incubator of his offspring; [...] a slave to her reproductive organs/hormones” (31). Given that “the cultural insistence on a male/female binary that derogates the female body in relation to the male inevitably leads to more intense policing of women’s bodies and specific apparatuses of control,” King adds, a treatment of “the body ‘as one’ is not viable; [Foucault’s] concept of power cries out for gender specific analysis” (33). Kailing Xie’s research provides an illustrative example of the negative impact that the discursive naturalisation of the female body bears on the careers of married Chinese female academics (59). Strict gender norms that biologise women’s sexuality and, hence, determine their role as mothers in Chinese society, lead to the discrimination of female academics in the workplace by barring them from access to superior positions (Xie 73-74). Hence, an analysis that examines the link between motherhood and gender must relate to the powerful discourses that establish a link between motherhood and femininity and that furthermore shape and control the act of mothering as such.

2.3. Subversive Actions, Choice, and Gender Performativity

Butler's intense engagement with gender as a socio-cultural construct has resulted in a theory of gender performativity that subverts essentialist and heteronormative theories of sexuality. Partly indebted to her interest in a Foucauldian approach to discursive identity construction, Butler developed a notion of gender as a continuous, performative process that is not linked to a pre-existing sexuality but that creates an identity via repetitive performances (*Gender Trouble* 25). In contrast to Beauvoir's notion of a pre-discursively existing sexed body that takes on a gendered identity, Butler's concept of performativity questions the "myth of an unmediated access to nature, to the body" (Schor 264). By arguing that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed," Butler draws attention to the self-constructive nature of identity (*Gender Trouble* 25). As already mentioned, although feminists had previously based their arguments on conceptualisations of identity formation that relied on a clear sex-gender distinction, these binary concepts were shown to re-enforce essentialist, biologising views of femininity in the interest of a heteronormative mode of sexuality (Schor 278). Butler's notion of gender performativity, hence, subverts assumptions of a neat sex-gender binary and the categorisation of non-heteronormative gender identities as 'abnormal'.

Gender performativity is frequently employed as an analytical tool in a variety of academic fields, including literary studies, to question heteronormative modes of thinking. Viewing gendered issues in literary works from a theoretical angle that understands identity construction as a continuous, discursive process makes possible the subversion of a binary gender model. Performativity has previously proved to be a useful concept for literary analyses that focus on motherhood, parenting and related subtopics, as Alexandra Merley Hill's 2011 study of motherhood in contemporary German literature, or Rhonda Shaw's 2004 investigation into breastfeeding as a performative practice, exemplify. My own analysis of motherhood and mother-child relationships in *Half of a Yellow Sun* similarly focuses strongly on the performative aspect of mothering practices in the constitution of motherhood and, thus, seeks to highlight the subversive potential of Adichie's portrayal of motherhood.

The notion of performativity not only incorporates and substantiates a view of gender as discursively constituted, but it additionally raises individual agency as a noteworthy issue in relation to gender. A key term in feminist thinking, agency has been

defined in countless ways but, for the purpose of the present thesis, Siobhan Weare's description of agency as "the recognition of the ability of an individual to make a semi-autonomous decision to act in a particular way" ("Gendered Constructions" 338) will be used. Beauvoir's work lays the ground for Butler's discussions of the complicated role of agency in "becoming a gender" ("Sex and Gender" 37). As Butler points out, Beauvoir already exhibits an awareness of how the gendering process is "not a matter of acquiescing to a fixed ontological status [...] but, rather, an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting received cultural possibilities" ("Sex and Gender" 36). The individual is, hence, understood as both actor as well as acted upon. While the sex-gender distinction Beauvoir bases her work upon seems to support the view of a patriarchal system inscribing its values upon a passive body, Butler reinterprets Beauvoir's "becoming a gender" as "both choice and acculturation, [for] then the usually oppositional relation between these terms is undermined" ("Sex and Gender" 37). This "embodiment of possibilities within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms" ("Sex and Gender" 37) is a process that Butler's concept of gender performativity further illustrates. In the continuous, performative process of gender construction, agency is possible because individuals may choose from a set of options that are, however, limited and partly pre-determined by social regulations.

Where Butler discovers possibilities for individual agency and also ascribes subversive potential to the act of choice in connection to gender performance, others have foregrounded the limitations to agency in the light of social sanctioning. Paula Ebron points out how "[t]he notion of performativity [is also understood to challenge] the notion of individuals as free-will actors to show how these individuals are enmeshed in the logics of a given society" where "subjects do not choose their roles; rather, those roles are made by a social set of rules" (175). Nevertheless, I agree with Butler who holds that if the "transformative possibilities of personal agency" are not acknowledged, the import of an individual's partaking in the upholding of social norms is negated and subversion becomes unthinkable ("Sex and Gender" 41). While it is necessary to acknowledge limitations to individual agency, this same agency creates options to subvert the normative gender system, or as Butler explains, "to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination" (*Gender Trouble* 30). As Butler further states, "the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement" (*Gender Trouble* 30) becomes

possible despite the limitations to agency created by social and cultural pre-determination. Hence, individuals may act in a fashion that does not re-iterate and, thus, re-enforce rigid gender norms but that, rather, widens our understanding of gender and its role in society.

This chapter has introduced the field of gender studies as the theoretical basis for my own interrogation into a highly gendered topic in Adichie's novel. I have provided a review of key terminology and historical developments with regard to the conceptualisation of gender and sexuality in the field. By introducing concepts such as gender performativity and agency, and by drawing attention to the role of powerful, institutionalised discourses in the shaping of gender concepts, the present chapter lays the groundwork for my subsequent engagement with motherhood as a gendered issue.

3. Motherhood from a Gender Studies Perspective

From an understanding of motherhood as an instrument for female subjugation in patriarchy to contemporary views that place greater emphasis on the diverse, lived realities of mothers, motherhood has been of continued interest to gender studies for its tight interrelation with societal gender norms. Among the myriad issues that have engaged scholarly attention with regard to motherhood are the naturalisation of the role of the mother in essentialist discourse, the difference between biological motherhood and acts of caretaking that establish mothering as a social task, the ambivalence that may shape mother-child relationships and hence questions notions of the perfect mother, or the fact that mothering practices differ cross-culturally and over time. Scholarly attention to motherhood as a gendered issue directs attention to how historically- and culturally-shaped gender discourses influence the social treatment and understanding of motherhood. For example, analyses of differing social perceptions of good versus bad mothers that reveal these concepts as discursive constructions may subvert gender stereotypes which naturalise women's care and they may, moreover, highlight the cultural specificity of any concept of 'good mothering'. Explorations of the complex relationship between motherhood and gender have yielded results that not only contest restrictive conceptions of motherhood but that attempt to provide a wider understanding of the manifold "motherhoods" (Neyer and Bernardi 167) that shape and are shaped by society instead. The following chapter

deals with a number of concepts and developments with regard to the study of motherhood as related to gender studies that have previously been discussed in literary analysis and that will further prove useful in my close reading of Adichie's novel.

3.1. Motherhood as Subordination, Motherhood as Empowerment

Early academic interest in the gendered social treatment of motherhood mainly came from feminists who criticised biologising discourse that portrayed motherhood as woman's physical imperative. Views of motherhood as an affirmation of femininity and, hence, as a logical and necessary step in women's lives has also been described as the "motherhood mandate" (Russo 144, see also Mottarella et al. 223). This "[c]ulturally proscribed belief that to be complete and successful in the female role, a woman must have children and must spend her time with them" (Mottarella et al. 223) came under heavy critique by post-Second-World-War feminists who sought to highlight how patriarchal structures profit from constituting motherhood as an essential part of women's 'nature' (Neyer and Bernardi 165). Solely granted the social role of nurturer, carer, and creator of life, women were frequently barred from accessing other positions which remained reserved for men instead. In the 1960s, Simone de Beauvoir's arguments were among the most prominent to challenge prevalent expectations regarding motherhood and gender in the Global North. Her criticism of essentialist assumptions that link femininity to motherhood allowed for women to be re-imagined in positions that were not related to child-rearing, and thus to picture women away from their homes and hearths.

For Beauvoir, who severely criticised the naturalisation of concepts such as 'woman' or 'mother' in society, only the total rejection of motherhood could lead women to greater autonomy from patriarchal systems. According to the French philosopher and feminist, "supreme self-abasement" is always necessary to carry out the task of mothering, and the raising of children always stands in the way of any possible self-fulfilment (Beauvoir 501). Hence, in Beauvoir's eyes, if women became mothers, they automatically signalled their compliance "with systems which deny women the right to self-determined motherhood" (Neyer and Bernardi 166). In refusing the idea of any so-called "maternal instinct" (Beauvoir 490) and arguing that "there is nothing 'natural' about maternal love," (501) Beauvoir's notion of motherhood not only starkly contradicts patriarchal discourse on the same topic but also provides an alternative

view of women as possibly bad mothers (501). While the emancipatory process stirred by feminists such as Beauvoir enabled women to take different paths in life, those women who still wished to have children were marginalised for supposedly adhering to patriarchal norms.

Numerous feminists felt that Beauvoir's approach did not pay respect to the complex relationship between motherhood and femininity as it did not consider the possible rewards of motherhood. Hence, later feminist theory moved away from viewing motherhood as necessarily complicit in enforcing patriarchal power structures and no longer regarded women, or mothers, as automatically oppressed (Neyer and Bernardi 167). The possibility of a female desire to mother was re-acknowledged, thus also giving rise to a gender difference approach that highlighted women's or mothers' supposedly special capabilities in comparison to men. For example, Luce Irigaray's "approach of difference feminism perceives motherhood not as a quasi barrier to the definitive liberation of women, but as a special and unique female potential" (Tazi-Preve 224). In an attempt to forward the political causes of mothers, attention was drawn to their supposedly unique qualities and to how society might benefit from mothers' capabilities. Maternalism, a larger movement that drew on those essentialist and naturalising notions of motherhood that Beauvoir had denounced so resolutely, propagated mothers' reputedly superior experience, for example with regard to care-related matters, in order to improve their standing in society (Stephens 3). Thus, in feminist writing, motherhood has not only been regarded as a patriarchal tool but also, quite to the contrary, as a special feminine form of power.

Proponents of a gender difference feminist approach and maternalists had to face severe criticism for their essentialising and biologising line of thought given that their approaches disregarded and excluded women who did not perceive motherhood as fulfilling. Tazi-Preve points out how approaches such as the one that Irigaray explains in *Zur Geschlechterdifferenz* have received substantial critique (224) for substantiating biologising gender discourse via their assumption of an inherent difference between genders (228). In this context, Julie Stephens explains that feminists' "long struggle against essentialism [...] makes any discussion linking women and care, or mothering and nurture, particularly troubling" (10). Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* puts great emphasis on how "[m]aternal practice produces a different way of thinking, seeing, knowing, and acting in the world"

(Stephens 11). While Ruddick also views men as capable of maternal thinking (40-41 qtd. in Stephens 11), her claim of universal maternal practices nevertheless evokes an essentialist view of motherhood that has additionally been criticised time and again for “exemplifying a latent ethnocentrism” (J. Keller 834). Similarly, while Daphne de Marneffe makes a valid point when she argues that “the desire for caring and mothering is [...] a strength which women should try to re-legitimize in their life rather than deny it,” (Neyer and Bernardi 167) her recommendation must also be taken with a grain of salt. In the light of her over-generalisation of some women’s experience to a supposedly static, unified group of ‘mothers’, her approach may reinforce essentialist gender notions. The general portrayal of motherhood as beneficial to ‘women’ as a group, undifferentiated across age, social or cultural backgrounds, marginalises women who do not experience the wish to care for a child or who do not perceive their roles as mothers as fulfilling.

Although maternalist approaches have received a significant amount of criticism, they have also served to draw heightened attention to the possible positive ramifications of motherhood. Including the “emotional, intellectual and often spiritual rewards” of mothering (Neyer and Bernardi 167), that had formerly been written off by feminists as a patriarchal tool for the naturalisation of motherhood, now enabled researchers to provide a fuller picture of the complexities of real-life motherhood and its place in society. While maternalist writer Daphne de Marneffe’s book *Maternal Desire* has been criticised for promoting essentialist thought regarding femininity and motherhood, her arguments nevertheless contributed to feminist studies by highlighting how women may experience an intense wish to mother children and care for them (Kawash 989), a fact that had been denied by feminists such as Beauvoir. Samira Kawash explains that, for Marneffe, “mothering—in which [she] includes the worst parts, the messy work of bodily care, the exhausting work of emotional nurturing—is not just for the child but also for the mother (989-990). This understanding of motherhood as a possibly highly enriching practice for some women renders the total rejection of motherhood as a form of patriarchal oppression less credible. Instead, by understanding that the experience of mothering children differs greatly between women, that it must not be fulfilling but may be so, greater attention can be drawn to the various lived experiences of motherhood and femininity, a variety that subverts essentialist gender discourse.

3.2. Performing Motherhood and Care

The social perception and treatment of motherhood in relation to prevalent gender norms has received attention in literary works across the globe. Numerous concepts that have been employed by researchers from the gender studies field to analyse the vast number of topics linked to motherhood also lend themselves to an investigation into the literary treatment of motherhood. In the following, I focus on two concepts that recur in analyses of the connection between motherhood and gender, and that have proved pertinent for that purpose, be it in a literary or non-literary context. The key term performativity has already been discussed shortly in the previous chapter and is well-suited for analyses that focus on gendered expectations regarding mothering practices. It further serves to subvert biologising gender notions that romanticise “mothers’ work as love” (Neyer and Bernardi 165). Understanding motherhood as a practice that needs to be performed also makes necessary an investigation into the concept of care. Considering that care is still frequently understood as a gendered notion, and that society, furthermore, deems specific forms of care more ‘motherly’ than others, renders a discussion of care especially interesting with respect to the literary analysis of mother-child relationships in Adichie’s novel.

Judith Butler’s notion of performativity not only allows analyses of gender from a non-essentialist perspective, but it also makes possible a reading of motherhood as constituted by mothering practices in a performative sense. The concept of performativity has previously been expanded to literary analyses of motherhood, for example in Merley Hill’s reading of motherhood as a form of performative identity construction in various pieces of contemporary German literature. Assuming that, as Butler argues, “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results,” (*Gender Trouble* 25) then motherhood, too, can be seen not as a fixed identity but rather as a set of performed and performative practices. The fact that these practices are neither tied to a specific gender nor can they be carried out only by biological mothers undermines biological determinist views that tie femininity to motherhood and, thus, naturalise motherhood as the ultimate task of the female body. Drawing on performativity theory, I will show that Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* highlights the performative nature of motherhood by providing a detailed picture of how

diverse mother-child relationships, be they biological or non-biological, are constituted by specific practices.

Closely linked to an understanding of motherhood as constituted by a set of performative practices is the discussion surrounding care or care practices. Not only is caring behaviour frequently ascribed to women in a biological determinist fashion but it, consequently, also presents mothers as caring figures whose natural predisposition to look after others automatically renders them good mothers. Women who do not conform with societal conceptions of 'caring behaviour' are frequently deemed 'bad mothers' and are, furthermore, oftentimes described as 'unnatural'. For a deconstruction of motherhood as woman's biological imperative, a theory that identifies care as work can bring vital insights to the table. Care ethicists such as Virginia Held have proposed that care should be understood as a set of practices (37), and thus help to undermine the "conflation of biological and social motherhood" that shapes existentialist discourse (Neyer and Bernardi 165). Frost, Capdevila, and Johnson point out that "[d]oing motherhood involves engagement in choices in relation to a range of practical activities" (104). Identifying care as a set of practices, and motherhood as something that needs to be done, and not something that simply is, also highlights how mothering practices may be performed by any person regardless of their gender.

In distinguishing clearly between biological and social motherhood, a view of care as a set of practices emerges that can further help broaden the concept of motherhood to accommodate non-biological mothers. Ruddick's definition of motherhood as the choice "to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life," (17) similarly includes non-biological mothers into the picture. The broadening of the concept of motherhood to non-biological mothers that is thematised in Adichie's novel has been treated by Nigerian authors before, as Hilary Chala Kowino's article makes evident. His definition of "a *tentacled* motherhood – one that recognizes women who adopt or extend motherly care to children the same way it does those with biological children" (Kowino 26) will be useful for an analysis of Olanna's role as an adoptive mother and her relationship to her adopted child in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Kowino further argues that "[w]hen a society predicates a woman's place or placelessness on her biological roles, it creates and perpetuates a phallocentric definition of motherhood" (25). Thus, a redefinition of motherhood "beyond the binary logic of fertile/infertile" helps to

destabilise biologising notions of the concept (Kowino 25). If childcare practices are acknowledged as a constitutive factor of motherhood that, consequentially, not only biological mothers may carry out and that, moreover, is a form of work that puts demands on mothers, essentialising concepts of motherhood can be subverted.

It is noteworthy that femininity has been equated with caring behaviour to similar degrees in patriarchal as well as in feminist discourse. In claiming a feminine predisposition for caring and in, simultaneously, assigning little or no value to care, patriarchal societies have repeatedly positioned femininity as inferior to masculinity (McCracken and Tronto 20). Despite feminist criticism of essentialist conflation of care and femininity, some researchers from the field have tried to use the same biologist take on care to argue for women's unique capabilities that supposedly equip them with an advantage over men (Tronto 662). Carol Gilligan, co-founder of 'the ethics of care', bases her work (see, for example, her article "In a Different Voice") on the assumption of a gender difference and ascribes caring behaviour to women in a generalising fashion (Tronto 644-645). Joan Tronto challenges gender-based lines of argumentation such as the one Gilligan offers (Tronto 656) when she states that "the simple assertion of gender difference in a social context that identifies the male as normal contains an implication of the inferiority of the distinctly female" (646). Hence, to associate femininity, but not masculinity, with care always also risks the devaluation of femininity and a reinforcement of essentialist gender notions.

By closely analysing diverse care practices in mother-child relationships, attention can be drawn to the performative nature of motherhood and, thus, essentialist notions of femininity that naturalise motherhood can be undermined. Sarah LaChance Adams points to the difficulty of finding a narrow definition of maternal care, given that the setting up of care standards is highly problematic, as this leads to the marginalisation of care practices that are deemed 'other' (6). Donath mentions a number of different tasks that are usually subsumed under the name of motherly care in "contemporary Western societies," such as feeding, dressing or educating children, and further highlights how these practices are strongly shaped "by culture as well as by social class" (120). It is a social misconception that the task of mothering is constituted by identical care practices and that all mothers must perform these practices in order to be 'good' mothers. The pressure that mothers are subjected to when they are confronted with the norms of 'good' motherhood, and that value specific

care practices but devalue others, is evident. As LaChance Adams points out, “the complexity of mothers’ responses to their children” is frequently ignored in social and academic discourse about motherhood and “little consideration [is given] to its lived experience” (4). In her book, LaChance Adams proposes a close analysis of “the concrete experiences of mothers” in order to “provide a more nuanced characterization of the mother-child relationship” (4). An analysis of the various types of interaction between mother and child in *Half of a Yellow Sun* reveals how the novel questions gendered accounts of care and motherhood, and thus subverts essentialising gender norms.

A childcare practice that has received a notable amount of social commentary, and that also importantly features in Adichie’s novel, is breastfeeding. Shaw points to the intense social monitoring of breastfeeding that has developed out of essentialising discourse which aims to naturalise women’s bodies. Not only is breastfeeding nowadays generally constructed as an essential ingredient to ‘good motherhood’ (Shaw 103), but mothers are also instructed to adhere to a specific “good breastfeeding technique” by medical institutions (Shaw 104), a fact that draws attention to the spatially- and historically-specific discursive construction of breastfeeding practices (Shaw 105). This “relentless moral scrutiny” (Shaw 101) that mothers are subjected to discriminates those who do not or cannot perform according to highly normalised standards. Therefore, Shaw asks for a different conceptualisation of breastfeeding “as a gendered and embodied ethical practice rather than an aspect of one’s being” (99), and thus establishes the act of breastfeeding as performative but not as an indispensable practice constitutive of motherhood.

3.3. Complex Motherhood: Maternal Ambivalence, Regret, and Agency

Focussing closely on the varying experiences of mothers not only highlights differences between mother-child relationships, but it also shows that mothers may harbour contradictory emotions towards their children. LaChance Adams argues that increased attention needs to be paid to the “interrelated yet separable interests of the self and the other” (4) that mothers experience. In so doing, LaChance Adams points not only to the diverse realities of motherhood and of care but she also shows that women’s possibly contradictory emotions towards their children are frequently negated. In her study on mothers who regret, Orna Donath similarly criticises an image

of motherhood where mothers are portrayed as “‘naturally’ feeling great devotion to their children – even to the degree of erasing their own needs and feelings,” a notion that has been reinforced by care ethicists such as Carol Gilligan (116). LaChance Adams, furthermore, points out how “care ethicists’ emphasis on [the] interdependence” between mother and child does not fully grasp the “need for individual flourishing and conflicts of interest between” them (6). Instead, she proposes that mothers’ actions are influenced by a triad of requirements that can be described as “the needs to care, to be cared for, *and* to maintain independence” (LaChance Adams 6). Again, care emerges as a vital aspect in the discussion of mother-child relationships. Mothers sometimes struggle to find a balance between their children’s as well as their own needs, and an interpretation of mother-child relationships in a binary ‘good-versus-bad’ mode cannot pay respect to the mothers’ complex reactions to their children.

In some cases, maternal ambivalence even plays a role when mothers intentionally kill their children, although this fact is largely dismissed in public discourse. It is vital to point out that mothers may experience ambivalent emotions towards their children to an extent that can eventually lead them to commit filicide (LaChance Adams 6). In contemporary, ‘Western’ societal discourse on motherhood that frequently only distinguishes between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers, mothers’ crimes against their children are frequently portrayed as a result of neglect or carelessness. However, this is not always the case as Meyer and Oberman find in their study of several cases of filicide (89). Instead, they show that mothers may simultaneously care deeply for their children and also be deemed ‘good mothers’ by society for longer time periods, but still come to murder their children (Meyer and Oberman 89). A deed which eventually leads to a societal branding of these mothers’ as ‘bad’. However, mothers’ crimes may be motivated by a variety of factors, such as work overload (LaChance Adams 3). In the case of mothers who attempt suicide but kill their children first, it has been found that these acts are frequently committed by mothers who think they could protect their children from future harm in a world where they themselves no longer exist (LaChance Adams 3). While maternal ambivalence characterises mother-child relationships to varying degrees and while it does not have to result in filicide, these cases nevertheless draw heightened attention to the immense pressure that mothers may experience

when they have to negotiate their highly contradictory emotions in the light of social expectations.

The fact that mothers' crimes against their children are frequently not only condemned as 'unnatural' but also as 'unfeminine' reveals the extent of the social monitoring of gender norms and, consequently, of the naturalisation of motherhood in public discourse. In her study of filicidal mothers' identity construction in legal narratives, Weare offers pointed critique of the simplification of complex cases of filicide that happens in legal language and the resulting reinforcement of normative gender ideals that also affect conceptualisations of motherhood ("Bad, Mad or Sad" 202). Mothers who kill their children are frequently stamped as deviant from the norm without further inquest into their specific circumstances (Weare, "Bad, Mad or Sad" 202) and characterised according to "the macro narratives of the 'bad', 'mad' and 'sad' woman" (203). Moreover, these

narrative identities [...] deny the agency of filicidal women, albeit each in subtly different ways, by denying their ability to make any degree of choice in relation to their filicidal actions. Finally, these identities – and the subsequent agency denial which occurs – reinforce pejorative gender stereotypes which are damaging for all women, constructing them as pathological, weak, passive, and pitiful, as well as deviant in failing to adhere to the expectations associated with motherhood. (Weare, "Bad, Mad or Sad" 203)

This is not to say that mothers who kill their children are more agentive than others, but rather that "the ability of *all* women and mothers to choose to be violent" is denied, and, hence, that gender stereotypes are generally strengthened by the demonisation of filicidal women and the supposed 'deviance' of their acts from the norm (Weare, "Bad, Mad or Sad" 209). Although mothers' violence against their children cannot be read as a regular form of empowerment against social regulatory norms, it is noteworthy that discursive means are employed to clearly demarcate those who deviate from the accepted norm and to punish them by denying their agency as subjects.

Some mothers do not only experience ambivalent emotions towards their children but rather regret that they ever gave birth in the first place, a fact that further challenges patriarchal understandings of motherhood as woman's destiny and the social misrepresentation of motherhood as a necessarily fulfilling experience. Orna Donath's (2017) sociological and anthropological study on mothers who regret having become mothers highlights the influential role held by public, medical and other

institutional discourses in shaping women's decisions to be mothers. Donath aptly points out how regret is not an acceptable emotion in neo-liberal society where progress is viewed as the only way forward, (54) and further shows how regret simultaneously comes to function as a discursive control mechanism when women are confronted with their possible future regret of never having had children (57). Hence, the fact that mothers may regret their past decisions to have children subverts biologising accounts of femininity that negate women's possible fulfilment in a childless life.

Studies such as Donath's throw into sharp relief how culturally- and historically-determined rules govern whom society deems a 'good' or a 'bad' mother, with oftentimes harsh criticism awaiting those who are perceived to deviate from the norm. The inaccuracy of this binary mode of characterisation becomes clear when mothers who regret and who wish their children gone, nevertheless act in what their societies identify as caring behaviour (Donath 119). One mother interviewed by Donath explains that she is "by no means a neglectful mother" and that she has always provided her children with "the intensive caretaking they needed" but simultaneously argues that she wishes they were not part of her life (118). This mother as well as many others in Donath's study do not perceive caring for their children as a fulfilling task but they feel obliged to care nevertheless because social expectations of motherhood require them to take responsibility (117-119). The fact that mothers who regret frequently remain in family situations that they perceive as highly restrictive of their personal freedom because they feel "compelled to put [their children's] needs before their own" (138) further subverts binary notions of 'good' versus 'bad' motherhood. Thus, when mothers endure lives that they regard as unfulfilling, the amount of social pressure that informs mothers' decisions and that requires them to prioritise their children's needs is made evident.

Contemporary Western, neo-liberal attitudes to mothering place great emphasis on mothers' choices and require mothers to be primarily guided by their children's welfare in all their decision-making processes. Donath identifies a "contemporary model of demanding motherhood, according to which 'good mothers' keep their motherhood at the forefront of their consciousness at all times" (124). Jennifer A. Reich also describes this model of motherhood as "intensive mothering" (699). Again, the binary classification of 'good' versus 'bad' motherhood is shown to be an influential

factor in shaping mothers' actions. Reich analyses neoliberal mothers' choice to refuse their children's vaccination and explains that when mothers "place their children at the center of their neoliberal mothering practice, the potential consequences their choices carry for others remain invisible, even as they claim a gendered identity of themselves as good mothers and condemn others" (699). Hence, mothers who refuse child vaccination do so in order to achieve social standards of 'good motherhood,' given that the contemporary model of the 'good' mother compels them to make choices that stand "in dialogue with cultural norms that hold [mothers] uniquely accountable for their children's successes, failures, health, and disability" (Reich 699). Acting against official medical advice, mothers who refuse to vaccinate their children might perceive their own actions as a gain in agency, but they ultimately conform with neo-liberal social expectations of good mothering when they adhere to an imperative of choice and, thus, reify binary and reductive concepts of motherhood.

The fact that some, but not all, mothers choose not to have their children vaccinated further highlights how the neo-liberal model of 'good' motherhood is culture-specific, class-related, and stands in contrast with other models of 'good' motherhood. Lower-status and lower-income mothers frequently do not have the same resources, and hence, do not have the same options and freedom to choose that which higher-status mothers have at their disposal (Reich 700). While this means that poorer mothers "often find their choices proscribed," simply due to a lack of access to alternative options, the agency that higher-income mothers gain must be seen in the light of a neoliberal imperative of choice that not only marginalises lower-income mothers but that generally serves to consolidate gender norms (Reich 700). Although women's choice is frequently automatically portrayed as feminist, this line of thought leads to the denial of social regulations and frameworks as influential factors in the shaping of choice (Frost and Rodriguez 194). The following thoughts of Sheila Heti's protagonist in *Motherhood* underline how the choice to mother never happens in an empty space:

It is often said that whether or not to have children is the biggest decision a person can make. That may be true, but it also doesn't mean anything. A decision happens in the private mind of one. For things to happen in a life, other people must participate. You have to will it. Many things have to collaborate. Life itself has to will it. A decision in the mind is pretty small. It doesn't make babies. (Heti 29-30)

Thus, when women perceive their own actions as beneficiary to the welfare of their own children whilst failing to detect the larger social implications of their, sometimes, selfish actions, the extent of an imperative of choice that has made its way into conceptualisations of the neo-liberal 'good' mother becomes visible.

As the discussion surrounding mothers' vaccine refusal for their children shows, the relationship between agency and choice plays a central role in conceptualisations of motherhood and different mothering practices in society. Frost, Capdevila, and Johnson point out how, in the "current neo-liberal context of Western cultures, 'choice' is offered as a panacea for differential access to power" but argue that the relationship between mothers' choices and agency is, in fact, more complex (103). As the articles in Frost, Capdevila, and Johnson's special edition highlight, women's decisions to become mothers or not to become mothers, their daily choices regarding childcare practices, or their negotiations of motherhood with other social circumstances may all influence mothers' agency in various forms (104-105). As the authors explain, "negotiations [of choice] can serve to facilitate, constrain, or otherwise impinge on agency, to inform understandings of mothers, non-mothers and mothering, and thus constructions of gender" (103). To sum up, differing levels of agency are not always reducible to whether a woman has made a choice but also to whether this choice consolidates gender norms (Frost and Rodriguez 194) or whether a choice is subversive thereof. Nowadays, agency generally plays a key role in conceptualisations of motherhood. As Neyer and Bernardi point out, the "possibility for agency, for a great diversity of (self-defined) 'motherhoods' and for a positive identification with maternity" (167) has replaced former views of motherhood as an impingement on women's freedom.

In the process of defining motherhood, discussions have been raised regarding the difference between parenting, mothering and fathering. Some researchers and gender equality activists have proposed that all childcare work performed by mothers and fathers might be subsumed under the title of 'parenting,' a re-definition that omits gendered divisions. Sarah N. Gatson, however, brings up a valid question when she asks whether this "de-gendering" does not result in "simultaneously erasing the bodies doing the work" (33). Similarly, Stephens argues that "[t]o empty out the category of mother and make it disembodied feels almost as unsatisfactory as essentialist ideas of motherhood. It risks reproducing market notions of care as a transferable

commodity” (12-13). While the performativity of motherhood shows that the term mother “need no longer apply to adult women who have given birth to a child” and that “[i]n effect, [...] anyone could perform the maternal, including men,” (Merley Hill 17) lumping these practices together under the label of ‘parenting’ for the sake of gender equality risks a blurring of the gendered reality of caretaking in many contemporary societies.

The fact that social attitudes towards motherhood and fatherhood differ quite strongly (Donath 128) further casts doubt on whether a subsumption of mothering and fathering under the label of parenting is meaningful in current societal contexts, but especially in the context of Adichie’s novel. That social understandings and, hence, expectations of motherhood and fatherhood are not identical is, for example, reflected in the fact that “[f]athers, generally speaking, have more permission and opportunities to be the owners of their own time, whereas mothers have less” (Donath 128). The discrepancy in society’s reactions to mothers’ versus to fathers’ actions is highly illustrative of the gendered reality of parenthood. Hence, motherhood and fatherhood are practices that deserve separate discussion due to their gendered reality in various societies. Nevertheless, a re-definition of mothering and fathering as parenting might bear potential for the future as it allows a view of child-care practices that is no longer gendered and that therefore destabilises the “institution of motherhood, against which society judges and condemns women (those with children and those without children) and which excludes others (such as fathers or non-biological parents)” (Merley Hill 90-91). As I will point out in the analysis section of my thesis, Adichie’s novel draws attention to this gendered reality of motherhood in Igbo society, but she simultaneously challenges the status of motherhood as a near-sacred and exclusive institution when she includes non-biological motherhood into the picture as well as Ugwu’s ‘maternal’ performance that re-defines mothering beyond gender.

4. Contextualised Readings of Gender and Motherhood in Postcolonial and African Studies

The spatial as well as the historical setting of Adichie’s novel in 1960s postcolonial Nigeria requires a contextualised, culture-specific reading of motherhood and gender. Efforts of emancipation not only from oppressive governmental structures but also from

ideologies which had been imported by colonial regimes formed a vital part of the strive for freedom in numerous formerly colonised countries. In the course of this emancipatory project, criticism of the universalistic claims made by 'Western'¹ feminists began to emerge, accompanied by a demand for heightened attention to culturally- and locally-specific readings of gender-related issues (see Mohanty 1984). The de-colonisation of colonised identities, hence, not only brought change in the global political sphere but it also resulted in the re-evaluation of concepts and theories derived from European cultural and religious backgrounds. This revision of gender concepts originating in the Global North and their appropriation for different socio-cultural contexts in Africa has served to create the independent field of African gender studies. Additionally, the insight that "research on Africa serves as a corrective by grounding gender systems, identities, practices, and ideologies in time and place" (Boris 200) has had a significant impact on gender studies worldwide. Non-universalist, culture-specific readings of gendered topics, such as motherhood, that value regional, cultural or religious idiosyncrasies are gaining ground across the globe. Motherhood as a gendered social issue has also received attention in the literary works of African writers who are thus adding to create a detailed picture of complex African lives.

4.1. Universal Patriarchy and the 'Third World Woman'

Broad statements made in 'Western' academia regarding the supposed oppression of all women in so-called third world countries have provided researchers in other parts of the world with the impetus to revise totalising gender concepts originating in the Global North. In her seminal article "Under Western Eyes," Chandra Talpade Mohanty offers a substantial critique of Eurocentric Western feminism and its creation of and derogatory attempts at saving a supposedly "singular monolithic subject" (333) that the Global North has termed the 'third world woman'. The creation of this homogeneous, 'non-Western' female subject in 'Western' commentary is based on the assumption of a uniform set of individuals who are collectively identified as 'women' and who are

¹ Distinguishing between 'Western' and 'non-Western' in a binary fashion may lead to an exaggeration of the difference between cultures and to the re-instantiation of a hierarchical relationship between countries and people. Hence, I have attempted to replace 'Western' with the term 'global north' where possible. However, as previous theory has frequently been formulated using the term 'Western', it has not been discarded completely but set in inverted commas to express my awareness of its possible inappropriateness in a description of difference on a global scale.

furthermore equally subjected to a universalised patriarchy across cultures (Mohanty, "Western Eyes" 336-337). This simplifying discourse about women who live their lives in various third world countries can be understood as a form of colonisation that negates the "material and historical heterogeneities" of these women's lives (Mohanty, "Western Eyes" 334). For a non-discriminatory analysis it is, therefore, vital to understand that women who live in third world countries do not share identical values, wishes and living conditions and that any analysis of women's status in specific societies, and hence, of gender relations, can only be made contextually.

Not only are women who live in third-world countries frequently denied their individuality in 'Western' feminist discourse, but they are continuously deprived of their subject-status as well, given that they frequently only remain in the sphere of the discussable object. As Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi points out, "[i]f women have been excluded from the realm of 'the subject' in Eurocentric discourses, then Third World women have been 'objects' of discourses (Eurocentric, colonial and post-colonial) even more so than Western women" (31). Hence, paternalistic 'Western' approaches have frequently served to further colonise and objectify those who were supposedly in need of aid.

This ongoing object-status of 'third world women' is not only an issue in feminist discourse and has led women in the Global South to claim subject-positions via making identity claims. As Nfah-Abbenyi points out the objectification of women from the Global South in this essentialising manner is a wide-spread problem that can, however, be subverted when women claim distinct identities (31). In order to challenge their objectification, those described as "African and 'Third World' women [...] need to claim a specific identity [...] because claiming an identity gives to all marginalized groups of women not only the chance to critique gender hierarchies within their own communities from the margins but also the dominant power structures" (Nfah-Abbenyi 31). Women living in diverse African cultures are facing the difficult task of re-defining their images in the eyes of the world by breaking loose from 'Western' colonial as well as post-colonial discourse that automatically ascribes them a peripheral, objectified position within their own social networks. They can do so by offering situational critique from within their cultural, political or religious environments instead. At the same time, women from the Global South who seek to free themselves from their object-status via identity claims risk the reinforcement of essentialising identity positions. Raksha Pande

points out that the participation in an identity politics of “strategic essentialism,” a term coined but later also rejected by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to describe a strategy that involves the adoption of a collective identity for specific political purposes (1), frequently corresponds to a replacement of “essentialized understandings of gender” with “essentialized understandings of cultural difference” (5). I argue that, in her novel, Adichie challenges essentialist views of gender and identity when she renders it impossible to subsume her characters under just one identity label, or “masterword,” (Spivak 4), such as ‘Nigerian,’ ‘Igbo,’ ‘mother,’ or ‘woman,’ and creates a picture of multifaceted identity negotiation within specific contexts instead.

Assuming the uniform subjugation of ‘third world women’ by an oppressive, patriarchal system has rendered the tackling of gender inequality issues more difficult. The undifferentiated ‘Western’ feminist assumption of a “stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in [third world] countries” (Mohanty, “Western Eyes” 335) serves to reinforce the derogative image of a ‘third world woman’ (Mohanty, “Western Eyes” 337). The frequently displayed ignorance regarding the heterogeneity of women’s lives worldwide, and the specific conditions that disadvantage them in their socio-cultural surroundings, prevent an international political joining of forces that might contribute to the advancement of those women who truly face exclusionary social practices (Mohanty, “Western Eyes” 336). Only an analysis that considers the distinct reasons for specific women’s relative ‘powerlessness’ in context can be of value for an attempt at improving individual circumstances (Mohanty, “Western Eyes” 338). By paying respect to the global diversity of women’s lives, valid statements about the lived reality of gendered issues in distinct societies can be made.

As a response to the criticism of Eurocentric gender concepts and the ‘Western’ assumption of a universal form of patriarchy, transnational feminism emerged as a separate movement in the feminist field. In “Under Western Eyes,” Mohanty offers a pointed critique of “apolitical understandings of universal sisterhood” and calls for transnational feminist approaches instead, as Leela Fernandes explains (13). These transnational analyses were novel in their acknowledgement of how “complex layers of local, national, and state practices [...] interact with and are shaped by transnational processes,” (Fernandes 14) calling attention to the ongoing influence of colonial history (Fernandes 13). Paying respect to cultural differences and global dynamics,

transnational approaches aim to provide an “intersectional analysis of local and global inequalities” (Fernandes 14). However, because transnationalism is so strongly focused on readings of cultural and social contexts that are frequently regarded as ‘other’ in the Global North, it also participates in the upholding of a binary opposition between national and non-national, between here and there (Fernandes 15). While transnational feminists have been criticised for highlighting differences instead of similarities between the Global North and the ‘third world,’ their approach nevertheless provides an important insight into how global hierarchies interrelate differently with gendered realities in different societies.

Although contextualised, culture-specific criticism of gender-related discrimination may render valuable insights, there are power issues that connect women worldwide and the strive for equal rights is frequently dependent on global collaboration. Even though, as Barbara Einhorn outlines, transnational feminist approaches highlight the “diversity and heterogeneity of women’s experience,” they also complicate the “joint [...] quest for gender equality and social justice” (31). Ampofo, Beoku-Betts and Johnson Osirim, on the contrary, argue that transnational feminism has itself led to an increased connection and collaboration between feminist scholars worldwide (334). A need for the global joining of forces in the fight for women’s rights also prominently features in Mohanty’s 2003 article “Under Western Eyes Revisited”. In this follow-up to her widely-acknowledged 1980s challenge of ‘Western’ feminism, Mohanty re-evaluates a number of her previous arguments and calls for a change from transnational approaches to a version of feminism that allows for the formation of “strategic coalitions across class, race, and national boundaries” (334) whilst especially acknowledging individual and cultural differences. In the capitalist reality of the post-modern era, Mohanty argues, not only a transnational but a truly collaborative approach is necessary (509). For this purpose, she proposes the use of a “comparative feminist studies model” that builds solidarity among feminists worldwide while it simultaneously acknowledges cultural and individual differences between women and does not presume a stable category of ‘woman’ (Mohanty, “Revisited” 521). While the striking of a balance between contextualised, culture-specific readings of gender and the formation of global coalitions remains a difficult task, I value this balancing as a necessary step to achieve gender equality across the globe. In the following chapter, I will further expand on how the exchange of theory and analytical concepts between

the Global North and the Global South may contribute to finding a balance between localised, contextualised readings and the strive for global gender equality.

4.2. Reappropriating Theory from the Global North

Reminiscent of transnational feminist approaches in its prioritisation of the local over the global, the field of African gender studies aims to provide contextualised research focussing on various African regions in a post-colonial environment. A process that is frequently accompanied by the reappropriation of theoretical concepts originating in the Global North. In their introduction to *Africa After Gender?*, Miescher, Manuh, and Cole write that “gender has come to mean something in Africa, even if there is little agreement about *what* it actually means” (2). Although gender “has been widely adopted – and adapted – in Africa” as a term of discussion in academic as well as public discourse, African researchers disagree on the significance of gender as an analytical concept for African cultures (Miescher, Manuh, and Cole 2). Eileen Boris, for example, summarises the results of this re-evaluation of the gender concept within the broader field of African gender studies as

an unsettling of the relationship between the biological and social that reinforces trends within feminist thought; a questioning of the privileging of gender over other social attributes, especially age, lineage, kinship, and wealth, thus complicating understandings of “intersectionality”; and a revealing of gender as an expression of power through historical struggles over colonization and liberation. (192)

Hence, while gender has become a “category of analysis” (Boris 192) in African research, it is necessary to acknowledge that this same category may carry a different meaning than it does in other socio-cultural environments, such as in the Global North. Nevertheless, I agree with Atanga et al. who, in their discussion of the challenges for gender-linguistic analyses in Sub-Saharan regions, argue that theoretical concepts that are not indigenous to Africa need not necessarily be discarded due to being grounded in different cultural values given that it would make little sense to “reinvent the field for a particular continent or region” (5). Instead, theory that has been imported from the Global North may be adapted to better apply to various African regional, ethnical or even diasporic contexts (Atanga et al. 12-15). Thus, contextualised readings that offer insights into regional or cultural specificities do not necessarily preclude the use of theories and concepts that are not specific to a particular regional

context, if these frameworks are not adopted blindly and without consideration of local circumstances as well as global inequalities.

Not all African research on gender is content with adapting 'Western' gender concepts for African contexts but rather seeks to completely discard imported theory. Oyeronke Oyewumi's analysis of the pre-colonial Yoruba gender system is a frequently cited and much-discussed outright rejection of Eurocentric takes on gender. Oyewumi sharply criticises the overgeneralisation of European gender concepts and their application to analyses of other cultures when she argues that the Nigerian Yoruba people did not distinguish between genders before European colonisers brought with them the idea of women's inferiority (124). However, Oyewumi's analysis has been subjected to serious critique for mistaking the lack of pre-colonial linguistic distinctions between genders for a general absence of gender asymmetry in Yoruba everyday life (Bakare-Yusuf 129) as well as for its overgeneralisations to the African continent as a whole (Ampofo, Beoku-Betts, and Johnson Osirim 330). In addition, Oyewumi has been criticised for awarding colonialism an unprecedented impact on the Yoruba gender system that supposedly led to a complete change in this Nigerian people's social hierarchies (Bakare-Yusuf 138). Lynn M. Thomas agrees that "to cast gendered reproduction as simply a colonial invention is to grant Euro-American colonizers enormous agency and to deny the efficacy of African reproductive ideas and practices" (49). While Oyewumi's linguistic analysis offered a new, non-Eurocentric viewpoint of gender in Africa, her line of argumentation is based on a purely linguistic perspective of the Yoruba gender system that dismisses the possibility of a gender difference that is not mirrored by linguistic markers.

The debate that followed Oyewumi's publication and the substantial critique that her writing has received have also had positive effects on African gender studies as a field of research. The discussion of Oyewumi's work has helped to raise attention to local and cultural specificities and has made researchers more aware of the dangers of generalising across cultures (Ampofo, Beoku-Betts, and Johnson Osirim 331). Thus, while it must be taken into account that gender concepts originating in the Global North do not necessarily translate to other cultures, as Oyewumi as well as her critics point out, this acknowledgment need not result in African gender studies' complete rejection of 'Western'-generated theories. Instead, specific theories and concepts that are non-

native to Africa may be used in the light of cultural specificities and local, historical realities.

In fact, 'Western' and African gender studies should not be understood as two strictly separated fields of study but rather as two parties in a discussion whose communication may render profitable results for all involved and help achieve gender equality on a global scale. Bakare-Yusuf argues against approaches that seek to view either Africa or Europe in isolation. She explains that

[f]or millenia, Africa has been part of Europe, as Europe has been part of Africa, and out of this relation a whole series of borrowed traditions from both sides has been and continues to be brewed and fermented. To deny this intercultural exchange and reject all theoretical imports from Europe is to violate the order of knowledge and simultaneously disregard the (continued) contribution of various Africans to European cultural and intellectual history, and vice versa. (Bakare-Yusuf 140)

As Bakare-Yusuf makes clear, the relationship between Africa and Europe is strongly shaped by a mutual exertion of influence (140). While the process of decolonisation was accompanied by anti-European sentiments, the complete rejection of valid theory as yet another unwanted European import is not necessarily the most productive way of engaging with 'foreign' concepts. Rather, I argue that a careful evaluation of different theories that takes into account how specific concepts may need adaptation is necessary in a postcolonial context.

Two examples of a fruitful exchange between gender studies in the Global North and African gender studies are Paula Ebron's analysis of performance and performativity in West African contexts and Nana Wilson-Tague's discussion of performative gender in the works of selected African women writers. Ebron explains that she aims to enter "two sources of gender analysis [...] in a productive conversation," and suggests that "West African studies of gender and Northern feminist studies have a great deal to exchange in a dialogue about performance and performativity" (171). While both concepts originate in gender discourse from the Global North, they have been appropriated by some African gender studies scholars. Ebron explains:

Gender performance in some societies in West Africa instructs about social categories, including class, age, and rank, as well as the possibilities of development projects and global economic inequalities. This attention to multiple differences offers a useful dialogue with the agenda of feminists of color in the West and international feminists who pushed for an expansion of the men/women

binary to include categories of race and class as mediating factors in the formation of gender identities. (187)

Wilson-Tagoe similarly highlights the importance of considering gender as performative in Africa and argues that “[i]t is also within the performative that we uncover repressed aspects of everyday culture and in the process illuminate the psychodynamics of cultural identification and their implications for how we internalize gender ideologies” (225). The interrelation of gender with other social categories plays a crucial role in my own analysis of Adichie’s novel, where social class or rank and age repeatedly intersect with gender. An analysis of motherhood and mother-child relationships in *Half of a Yellow Sun* must, consequently, pay attention to how the internalisation of gender norms is connected to other social factors.

The appropriation of gender concepts originating in the Global North for different African regional contexts not only plays a vital role in theory, but it is moreover reflected in contemporary literary engagement with gender-related issues. As Sadia Zulfiqar Chaudhry points out, for a number of African women writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the wholesale re-writing of gender notions originating in ‘Western’ societies is not necessarily an issue (12). Instead, writers like Adichie provide culture-specific literary accounts of women’s emancipatory struggles within particular contexts (Zulfiqar Chaudhry 12), thereby appropriating concepts originating in the Global North for their own use.

More generally, the literary treatment of topics such as gender inequality allows for the representation of prevalent discourses that shape the conceptualisation of gender in a given society and, sometimes, also makes possible their subversion. As Viola Amato argues, literary approaches to gender-related issues may “submit the category [under analysis] to processes of resignification, and potential subversion of hegemonic versions” (161). Stefan Neuhaus recognises a general focus on social problems as well as the function of offering proposals for solutions to these problems in contemporary, postmodern literature (255). Simultaneously, he points to the artificiality of the literary medium (Neuhaus 255) that, as Daniela Pfennig explains, offers the reader an opportunity “zum risikofreien Experimentieren” (“for risk-free experimentation,” my translation) (44). I argue that this is exactly what Adichie’s novel does. For one thing, the author portrays the social restrictions that affect how motherhood and gender are lived in Igbo society. Additionally, *Half of a Yellow Sun*

contributes to the re-evaluation of gender norms and gendered norms of motherhood when it subverts an essentialised and naturalised image of motherhood as well as the narrow conceptualisations of gender that provide the basis for restrictive evaluations of the role of the mother in Nigeria.

4.3. Motherhood in African Gender Studies and Literature

In line with the worldwide rise of non-universalising approaches to gender studies in academia, culture-specific analyses of motherhood have gained attention in the field. For a long time, motherhood was treated from an essentialising, Eurocentric perspective in the academic as well as in the public sphere of the Global North. The understanding of motherhood as a state of being that is accompanied by universally identical wishes, feelings or constraints has been heavily criticised by researchers around the globe. In “Under Western Eyes”, Mohanty calls for localised analyses of motherhood, and explains how the fact “[t]hat women mother in a variety of societies is not as significant as the value attached to mothering in these societies. The distinction between the act of mothering and the status attached to it is a very important one – one that needs to be made and analysed contextually” (“Western Eyes” 340). Mohanty touches upon a vital issue when it comes to motherhood by highlighting the difference between the acts of childbirth or childcare performed by mothers and the social significance attributed to both. In keeping with Mohanty’s call for context- or socio-specific analyses, I will take into account the value attached to motherhood in Nigerian society, or more precisely, the respect that mothers are paid and the problems that arise out of the disparity in influence and esteem between mothers and non-mothers within the Igbo community depicted in Adichie’s novel.

In opposition to Eurocentric approaches which have generally portrayed motherhood in Africa as an oppressive tool of patriarchal control in a Beauvoirian sense, many African researchers have pointed out the unique status granted to African mothers within their societies. Muwati, Gambahaya, and Gwekwerere state that “[t]he acknowledgement of the mother as supreme is a continent-wide phenomenon. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, for example, *Nneka* is an expression that underlines both the supremacy and the sacredness of mothering/motherhood” (4). The fact that the Igbo’s “most important deity is the Earth Goddess, Ani” further accentuates the valued place of mothers in this Nigerian ethnic group (Muwati, Gambahaya, and Gwekwerere

4). Carole Boyce Davies explains that “[t]o mother a child (a son preferably), entitles a woman to more respect from her husband’s kinsmen for she can now be addressed as ‘Mother of ---’” (243). Some African researchers have pointed to these matrifocal aspects of Nigerian society to refute automatic assumptions of female subjugation that were made in the Global North. Additionally, the status that women may achieve via motherhood in Nigeria allows them “to challenge some of the demands their cultures place on them,” (Nfah-Abbenyi 24) such as gaining influence in a male-dominated society or negotiating a frequently lacking access to education. These conditions as well as the respect granted to mothers in Igbo society which are also portrayed by Adichie, need to be taken into account when analysing her female characters’ varied stances to motherhood and their relationships to their children.

Advocates of the separate field of Africana womanism or African feminism, a school of thought that distances itself from ‘Western’ feminism, generally hold a view of motherhood as African women’s biological destiny and as the only way they may gain respect within their communities. Based on analyses of historical African social structures, African feminists and Africana womanists promote a co-operative and complementary view of man and woman in contemporary African contexts. Cheikh Anta Diop attributes matriarchal aspects to various pre-colonial African societies, claiming that women and men once existed in “a harmonious dualism, an association accepted by both sexes, the better to build a sedentary society where each and everyone [can] fully develop by following the activity best suited to his physiological nature” (108). Africana womanists or African feminists have adopted this biologising framework of femininity and masculinity for their own purposes. In their line of thought, an “African family system where the husband and wife are co-rulers, with each playing a complementary role in shaping the family and lineage consensus,” (T’Shaka 228) is clearly distinct from ‘Western’ kinship networks. This picture of ideal co-operation in African marriages painted by African feminists and Africana womanists might aid to destabilise Western patronising concepts of universal patriarchy. Nevertheless, I argue that this idea becomes restrictive if reliant on an essentialist assumption of fixed gender roles within a dualistic framework and that, moreover, essentialises the experience of families living in diverse African cultural contexts and nations.

While the respect granted to mothers in Nigeria may indeed furnish women with greater power on a communal or even on a social level at large, it simultaneously

exerts a considerable amount of pressure to conform on Nigerian women. In Igbo society, the role of the mother is viewed as the final realisation of femininity and without giving birth to children, a woman always remains somewhat outside the sphere of 'womanhood' (Carwile 23). An understanding of motherhood as the final attainment of femininity not only raises mothers to a status of elevated respect but it furthermore results in a significant gap in social standing between women who mother and women who do not mother. The ambiguity of discourses that women are facing in Nigerian society is tied to the mythologisation of motherhood and has also been heavily criticised from within African gender studies. While Nah Dove argues that there are distinct culturally-determined treatments of mothers in Western and in African cultures, stating that "[t]he debasement of women in one culture and the respect for women in the other are distinctions that should not be ignored when analyzing the contemporary difficulties for African people, especially African women living in Western-oriented societies," (521) it remains questionable whether women are truly granted more respect in Nigerian culture than they are in the 'West'. Considering that only mothers, but not women in general, attain positions of higher regard in Nigerian society, the supposed general disparity in respect for women in African versus 'Western' societies becomes doubtful.

When motherhood turns into a yardstick that femininity is measured against, those women who cannot or do not wish to conform with societal expectations of procreation are frequently ostracised. In their study of cultural constructions of infertility in Nigeria, Dimka and Dein highlight how problematic it is when "the inability to bear a child is seen to reflect moral status" (103). This moral worth is tightly connected to the mystification of motherhood and negative, traditional mystical beliefs about women who do not mother. In her anthropological study, Christey Carwile comments that "women viewed in this way easily become the prime targets for witchcraft accusations. These accusations are themselves gendered practices that, in this case, are directly associated with Igbo notions of femininity" (80). Friday Eboiyehi additionally points out that these witchcraft accusations function as a "form of control and dominance over women [...] who are seen as "powerful and dangerous" (255). Thus, it becomes obvious that deeply entrenched moral beliefs and "cultural images of what constitutes a woman" shape Igbo society's treatment of childless women as well as the resulting negative self-image that childless women acquire (Dimka and Dein 114). As Kowino

explains, “[w]hen a society predicates a woman’s place or *placelessness* on her biological roles, it creates and perpetuates a phallocentric definition of motherhood” (25). Hence, the definition of motherhood should be broadened to include non-biological motherhood as well, thus defying “the binary logic of fertile/infertile”. The social exclusion of women who do not have biological children is a highly normative practice that must be considered when women’s choices to mother or not to mother are analysed.

Given that the continuation of the family lineage in Nigeria is very much dependent on blood relations (Dimka and Dein 104), alternatives to biological procreation such as adoption are rarely viewed as an accepted option by women who cannot mother. In their study on attitudes to adoption in Lagos, Omosun and Kofoworola find that while parentless children might be adopted by relatives to ensure their safe upbringing (2), infertile couples are very frequently unwilling to adopt as they desire a blood-relationship between themselves and the child (6). The infrequency of adoption in a Nigerian context renders the non-biological relationship between Olanna and her adoptive child in Adichie’s novel a noteworthy challenge to biologising conceptualisations of motherhood and the resulting social exclusion that women and couples have to face who are unable to bear children.

Despite the difference in influence between mothers and non-mothers in Nigerian society, and while this divergence certainly influences women’s choice to mother, motherhood must not simply be written off as a patriarchal institution. When Nigerian scholar Remi Akujobi argues that “patriarchies can easily deploy notions of motherhood to foster traditions no matter how obsolete these may be, and in especially these traditions motherhood also becomes a means of female control,” (4) her view of motherhood as a patriarchal regulatory instrument is reminiscent of de Beauvoir’s 1960s attitude. While the power of normative discourse on motherhood should not be underestimated, an attitude towards motherhood that negates its possible positive aspects and the manifold motivations that individuals might have for becoming a mother hardly reflects the reality of Nigerian women’s lives accurately. Extreme stances towards motherhood, be they positive or negative, frequently ignore the complex realities of women’s and mothers’ diverse, lived realities.

Contemporary African literary approaches to motherhood are frequently trying to capture this complex reality. Olayiwola and Olowonmi speak of a “paradigm shift” in

African writing about motherhood (144) and find that the “plurality of views” offered calls into question “mythic norms of wifehood and motherhood” (145). In her discussion of motherhood as a topic in African literature, Obioma Nnaemeka points out that African women writers in particular manage to

question some of the existing feminist studies of African literature that insist on straitjacketing the complex web of issues raised in literary works into *oppositional* binaries, such as traditional/modern, male/female, agent/victim, when the works themselves and the reality from which they evolve disrupt such binaries. (2)

Nnaemeka explains that the co-existence of seemingly opposing values within characters demonstrates how “agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive” (3). When it comes to African women’s literary engagement with motherhood, this unsettling of binaries also means that motherhood is freed from its linkage to victimhood, a connection frequently assumed in earlier feminist writing. Instead, motherhood is portrayed as a complex practice that is frequently accompanied by ambivalent experiences (Nnaemeka 5). When African writers highlight the negative aspects of motherhood in patriarchal contexts while also pointing to the possible emotional gains of mothering, they can “give a human face to motherhood,” as Nnaemeka argues (5). Thus, by featuring the multifaceted reality of motherhood in their works, African writers may challenge discourse that characterises motherhood in a strict either/or fashion where mothers can only be victims or goddesses.

In their explorations of the multitudinous forms that mothering may take, African writers are also drawing attention to non-biological motherhood. As Nnaemeka neatly summarises in her introduction to Huma Ibrahim’s article on “Ontological Victimhood,” a woman’s choice of adoption as an alternative route to motherhood may allow her to “[define and participate] in motherhood as mothering on her own term” (5). This stance towards adoption as a self-determined form of motherhood also provides a useful approach to Olanna’s relationship with Baby in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The mothering practices that Olanna engages in despite her lack of a biological relationship to Baby performatively constitute her motherhood and, thus, can be read as subversive of narrow, biologising understandings of motherhood. In his analysis of Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*, Kowino demands a redefinition of motherhood and suggests “a *tentacled* motherhood – one that recognizes women who adopt or extend motherly care to children the same way it does those with biological children” (26).

Including non-biological mothering into the definition of motherhood recognises their caring practices as constitutive of their roles as mothers.

Not only have non-biological mothers been featured in African literature as self-determined and self-empowered mothers but the acknowledgement of women's possibly ambiguous feelings towards their children, regardless whether they are biologically related to them or not, also plays a role in African writing and, thus, draws attention to the diversity of mother-child relationships. In their close reading of an ambivalent mother figure in Mariama Ba's *So long a letter*, Olayiwola and Olowonmi, "identify some of the ambiguities attached to [mother-child] relationships; [in] an attempt to issue a caveat that illustrates absence of 'perfect motherhood'" (150). As already discussed in the preceding chapter, the deconstruction of the image of an ideal, 'good' mother helps to subvert narrow, patriarchal definitions of motherhood. When literary works highlight how mothering is shaped by a complex net of emotions which may be contradictory and yet exist simultaneously, they can help to take the pressure off women to conform to unrealistic norms of 'ideal' motherhood. I argue that the emerging "plurality of views" on motherhood, that Olayiwola and Olowonmi (145) generally identify in contemporary African literature, is a vital aspect of Adichie's novel. It also serves to challenge essentialising conceptualisations of motherhood and of gender in Nigeria.

4.4. The Historical Setting of *Half of a Yellow Sun*

As briefly touched upon in the introductory section of this chapter, the spatial and historical setting of Adichie's novel bears great significance in the interpretation of motherhood not only as a gendered but as a culturally and historically determined concept. Divided into four parts that span the early and late sixties in alternating order, *Half of a Yellow Sun* features social change as a major theme. Not only does Adichie's novel stage the civil war between Nigeria and Biafra that rattles the country after it has finally gained independence from the British colonial regime. Moreover, it is set in a time frame marked by major changes regarding women's emancipation and a worldwide reconfiguration of gender norms. The novel's interrogation into motherhood as a gendered issue is interwoven with the events of an enormous civil conflict as well as with larger global developments. Hence, a short overview of both the disruptive events of the Nigerian civil war, as well as major developments such as birth control,

that affected the conceptualisation of the female body on a global scale, will facilitate the subsequent literary analysis.

The outbreak of the Nigerian civil war, also termed the Nigeria-Biafra war, in 1967 marked the beginning of a tumultuous, violent period that cost millions of lives in the course of only three years. After the end of British colonial rule in Nigeria, the country was still heavily influenced by the remainders of its colonial past, given that the population's division by ethnicity that had been imposed upon the country by the British was still intact (Heerten and Moses 172). Three major ethnic groups were predominant in different areas of the country; the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Igbo in the east, or southeast, and the Yoruba in the western regions (Heerten and Moses 172). This ethnic and territorial separation additionally led to a religious rift that separated Muslims in northern Nigeria from the largely Christian population in the south, a situation that was aggravated by the different regions' competition for economic prosperity (Heerten and Moses 172-173). Tensions grew between the north and the south. An Igbo coup led to the implementation of a military government headed by an Igbo tribesman, but was followed by a counterattack organised by northern, non-Igbo military personnel. Thus, the country slid into a dangerous political imbalance (Heerten and Moses 173). As south-eastern Nigeria, populated by an Igbo majority, did not succumb to the renewed northern rule and as growing numbers of Igbo living in the north were murdered, mass flights of Igbo to the southern territory began, where a growing wish for independence from the north became palpable (Heerten and Moses 173). This strive for independence was especially strong among what Falola terms the "Igbo intelligentsia," (120) a demographic group that is represented by Odenigbo and his circle of academics in Adichie's novel. As the Igbo-reigned, but not exclusively Igbo-populated, southeast finally called for secession in May 1967 and named its newly founded independent state Biafra, the situation escalated and war between the Nigerian and the Biafran regions was declared only about a month later (173). What followed was a civil war that led to an estimated death toll of between 1 to 3 million people (Falola and Heaton 158).

Many of those who died in the Nigeria-Biafra war were victims of a famine that shook Biafra after food supplies had been cut off by the Nigerian regime, a topic that is also thematised in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Pictures of starving children that had arrived in 'the West' via newspapers and television led to the involvement of an unprecedented

wave of transnational humanitarian intervention that was, however, partly inspired by other countries' political affiliations with either the Nigerian state or with Biafra (176-178). The fact that humanitarian aid from the Global North only came when Biafra already stood on the brink of a famine (Heerten and Moses 176) shows that global interest in the bloody events of this civil war was triggered far too late and partly held back due to economic reasons. The Biafran famine forms a vital part of the novel's final chapters and will figure in my analysis of mothers' actions during wartime.

The role of Europe, and especially the former British coloniser, in the events of the Nigeria-Biafra war is repeatedly thematised in Adichie's novel. Not only does *Half of a Yellow Sun* draw attention to the lack of political intervention from the outside but it also highlights how the events of war were crassly simplified and partly misrepresented in 'Western' media. While the images of dying children broadcast in the media confronted people worldwide with the disastrous effects of the civil war and also triggered humanitarian aid (Heerten and Moses 176), the territorial divisions superimposed upon the country by the former colonial regime (Heerten and Moses 172) as well as national and international oil interests (Falola 126) were hardly recognised as major catalysts for the Nigerian civil war. While the Biafran famine heightened global attention to the terrible effects of the war, its manifold causes were only discussed in detail much later, when postcolonial scholars and writers began to examine the repercussions of colonialism in countries such as Nigeria.

Numerous Nigerian writers have engaged with the events of the Nigeria-Biafra war in its aftermath, many of them in an attempt to come to terms with their country's, as well as their own families', troubled past. Chinua Achebe is not only the widely acclaimed Nigerian author of *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that tells the story of Okonkwo and his life and upbringing in an Igbo tribe, as well as the clash of Nigeria with European colonisers. He has also authored several works about the Nigerian civil war, such as *Girls at War and Other Stories* as well as *There Was a Country: a Personal History of Biafra*. Other famous works that cover the events of the Nigerian civil war and its effects on the Nigerian population are Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* or Chris Abani's *Song for Night*. These novels have rendered the horrid events and political entanglements of the civil war accessible to a reading public by closely interweaving them with their protagonists' life and by, thus, portraying the devastating effects of war on individuals. The same holds true for *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where

Adichie not only thematises the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war, as well as the events of those wartime years that followed, but where she draws attention to how war leaves no one unmarked; not only whole countries but also individual families are re-shaped irrevocably.

As a result of the overturn of larger political patterns, changes also happen on other social levels during war. Adichie's novel not only shows how the Nigeria-Biafra war intruded into the everyday lives of families but it simultaneously explores how gender norms are reconfigured in wartime, a change that also affects mothers' actions and their roles in society. Pauline Uwakweh mentions the possibility of "gender code or role reversals, especially in times of distress" (88) and Meredith Turshen points out how, in wartime, "[w]hen men are away fighting, or have been killed in action, women may grieve or suffer loss, but they also step into functions from which they were previously barred" (20). Additionally, Turshen points out that as women also engage in violent acts during war, "it is no longer possible to maintain the innocence of all women" which, in turn, leads to the disruption of a "binary stereotype of active males/passive females" (Turshen 1). While female characters in Adichie's novel hardly act violently, they nevertheless challenge this neat "active males/passive females" (Turshen 1) binary when they become active in fields that were formerly not accessible to them. As I will show in my final analysis chapter, mothers, but also women more generally, may gain agency in *Half of a Yellow Sun* via an expansion of their social roles that results in the subversion of a gender binary that links passivity and femininity. In contrast to the portrayal of binary and fixed gender roles, from a previous generation of exclusively male writers in Nigeria, that included Achebe, gender in Adichie's writing is no longer fixed and this blurring of lines also strongly affects the conceptualisation of motherhood.

As my analysis explores motherhood and mother-child relationships in relation to gender norms in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, global historical events that concern the social understanding of the female body must also be considered in addition to the prevalent events of the Nigeria-Biafra war that form the historical setting of Adichie's novel. A major event on a global scale was the introduction of the anti-baby pill as a form of family planning in the 1960s. The use of contraceptives enabled women to choose whether, and when, they wanted to be mothers and, thus, revolutionised how women thought about their bodies and their prospects in life. In the following chapters, I will

show how Adichie's novel captures women's changed attitudes towards their bodies and how she uses it to make an appeal for the reconfiguration of gender norms.

J.C. Caldwell and Helen Ware's 1977 article on contraceptive use in the Nigerian city of Ibadan shows that a rise in the popularity of family planning measures was not limited to developed nations, such as in Europe or the United States. As the authors point out, the use of modern contraceptives in Nigeria offered women who already had children, the opportunity to allow space between pregnancies, or to limit further pregnancies, and additionally it allowed women who had not had any children yet to postpone the birth of a first child (507). As a comparison of the Nigerian population count shows, while in 1960 roughly 45.2 million people lived in Nigeria, the country's population grew to roughly 200.96 million in 2019 (UN World Population Prospects). Mairo Mandara points out that the Nigerian population will probably reach 300 million by 2034 and identifies "[l]ow level use of family planning [as] a major factor influencing the fertility pattern and population growth rate in Nigeria". Hence, while contraception opened up new paths for women, the relatively low use thereof in contemporary Nigeria recalls the importance of procreation in Nigerian culture as well as the lack of access to specific contraceptives by poorer parts of the population.

Summing up, the turbulent era that Adichie chose as a historical setting for her novel provides an ideal canvas for the simultaneous exploration of a change in gender conceptions in Nigerian society, a change that is mirrored in new understandings of motherhood and mother-child relationships. Both, the turmoil of the civil war as well as the steps conducive to female emancipation taken in the 1960s contribute to this reconceptualisation of mothering. However, an analysis of the events in Adichie's historical novel should not limit itself to how a past era is re-created and re-imagined. In his article "Gender (Re)Configuration in Nigerian Literature Through Time and Space," Christopher Babatunde Ogunyemi builds his arguments on Hayden White's understanding of history-writing, where "the past is largely re-imagined through the lens of the present time and space" (Ogunyemi 126). In Adichie's writing, as Ogunyemi points out, "the historical is imagined through the lens of a present that is sharply critical of the masculinisation of colonial history" (129). Assuming that Adichie's re-imagining of the past is strongly shaped by the present, it becomes clear that the social treatment of motherhood and the understanding of mothering as a gendered practice are topics of unabated significance. The wider definitions of motherhood and non-essentialist

conceptualisations of gender that Adichie's novel allows can, thus, also be understood as a contribution to the reconfiguration of still-standing, essentialist norms of motherhood and gender.

The previous chapters build the theoretical and conceptual foundation for my following close reading of Adichie's novel. In a review of the literature most pertinent to a discussion of the intersection between motherhood and gender in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I have attempted to determine the current state of research on motherhood as a gendered topic and to carve out relevant theories and concepts. I have drawn attention to the changing, socio-historically dependent, conceptualisations of motherhood and the discursive interests that are invested in upholding essentialised views of gender and motherhood. Moreover, I hope to have shown that a focus on the performative aspects of motherhood and mothers' agency contributes to a wider conceptualisation of mothering. My final theoretical chapter has been dedicated to the contextualisation of my theoretical and conceptual framework in the light of the spatial as well as the historical setting of Adichie's novel. I have argued that theory and concepts from the Global North may be applied to the analysis of gendered issues in a Nigerian socio-cultural context as long as Nigerian, or African, evaluations of and approaches to these frameworks are taken into account. The elevated standing of motherhood and the influential role of mothers in Igbo society has been explored, but it has also been related to the exclusionary practices faced by infertile women, a problem that draws attention to the naturalisation of motherhood and of femininity in Nigerian gender discourse. In my subsequent analysis chapters, I seek to show how Adichie's novel provides a highly contextualised reading of motherhood in Nigerian society, that contributes to the de-essentialising of concepts such as 'woman' and 'mother' and to a re-definition of motherhood which instead takes into account the complexities of women's lives.

5. Choosing Motherhood in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

When Adichie explores how her characters come to have, want, or not to want children in the tumultuous era of 1960s Nigeria, she draws attention to the historically- and culturally-dependent discourses that shape women's choices to mother. Moreover, the novel makes graspable the fact that these discourses sometimes also determine a woman's lack of choice. By tracing her characters' paths to motherhood or to a life

without children, Adichie draws a detailed picture of the prevalent social discourses surrounding motherhood that her protagonists need to negotiate in gendered Igbo society. In the process, gendered expectations are depicted as being tightly connected to several other social factors, such as education, class, or age, and thus differing realities of motherhood are portrayed as contingent on social contexts. By picturing the social stigmatisation of women who are unable to bear children, the novel also explores the oftentimes ambivalent and contradictory attitudes held towards women and mothers in Nigerian society. Eventually, Adichie's novel not only shows how women's choices to mother or not to mother are informed by prevalent social discourses on gender and motherhood, but *Half of a Yellow Sun* simultaneously allows for the subversion of normative ideals of femininity and motherhood.

5.1. Education, Class, and the Road to Motherhood

The novel's female protagonist Olanna is an educated Igbo woman whose relative independence allows her to make decisions regarding motherhood that are denied to other characters in the novel. Her parents' fortune and the foreign university education she received have provided Olanna with a palette of options. Just having finished her master's degree in London, and shortly before war comes to rattle Nigeria and its population, Olanna returns to her native Lagos. In a country that has only just gained official independence from British colonial rule, the colonial regime's influence on Nigerian politics, its social system and on individual families' lives still reverberates. On Olanna's path to motherhood, as well as following her adoption of another woman's child, she has to negotiate normative social discourses that link femininity and motherhood. Olanna's decision to mother is tightly connected with, or rather portrayed as a direct consequence of, numerous circumstantial factors, such as another woman's lack of choice. The difference in class and upbringing between Olanna and several other women is central to an interpretation of their differing attitudes to motherhood. Other women's missing alternative opportunities generally highlight Olanna's status as a (self-)empowered woman who, in line with a number of female characters in other novels by Adichie, "enforce[s] social transformation within the world of the text" (Ogunyemi 129). Although Olanna's choice of motherhood is not a subversive act in itself, the fact that she decides to "participate in motherhood as mothering on her own

term” (Nnaemeka 5) to a child she is not biologically related to undermines prevalent gender notions of the historical story world.

When it comes to the significance they ascribe to biological children, both Olanna and her twin sister Kainene’s mindsets initially differ greatly from that of their mother, a fact that can partly be ascribed to the generational gap between them. In the earlier stages of the novel, both daughters express a general lack of interest in having children. A stance that is, however, incomprehensible to Mrs Ozobia who, in accordance with prevalent Nigerian gender notions, understands a woman’s giving birth as the ultimate realisation of her femininity. Dimka and Dein highlight how “[m]otherhood is [...] the preferred and cherished self-identity of African women which is laden with respect and honour” (105) and that this perception is due to deeply entrenched moral beliefs and “cultural images of what constitutes a woman” in Nigerian society (114). Olanna’s mother has grown up in a social system that cannot imagine femininity without motherhood, for her “*motherhood defines womanhood*,” a naturalising understanding of the role of women that Boyce Davies ascribes to numerous African societies (243). This omnipresent cultural discourse that prescribes motherhood as woman’s main purpose is also reflected in Mrs Ozobia stigmatisation of her daughter Olanna as “*abnormal*,” when Olanna tells her that she does not feel any longing for a child, a sentiment that her twin sister shares (104). Through the diverging attitudes to motherhood exhibited by the twins and their mother, Adichie illustrates how gender norms intersect with other social markers, such as age, but also with categories such as wealth and class, as I will discuss shortly.

When the novel suggests that neither Olanna nor Kainene have been pregnant despite engaging in sexual relationships, it is made evident that they both make use of contraceptives, a fact that further illustrates the relevance of a generational gap to gender conceptualisations. Considering the historical setting of the novel, contraception is an option that Mrs Ozobia and other older women in the novel were not given; a fact that further highlights how the older generation was exposed to different discourses regarding the importance of motherhood in a woman’s life than Olanna and Kainene’s generation. The difference between the twins and their mother and the stigmatisation Olanna and Kainene experience within their own family, despite having been granted an education and the option to achieve other goals in life besides motherhood, draws attention to the pervasiveness of restrictive gender norms.

While Mrs Ozobia does not agree with her daughters' alternative paths in life, as both do not feature biological motherhood, she is ultimately able to accept them given that she views neither her own nor her children's welfare as dependent on heirs whom she is related to by blood. In contrast to other characters in the novel, Mrs Ozobia has the resources that allow her not to measure her wealth in the continuation of her bloodline. The Ozobia family is an affluent middle-class family who gained status via their co-operation in business with the former British colonial regime. In contrast to Olanna and Kainene, their parents also identify to a large extent with the British, as becomes most obvious when their father criticises local, Nigerian educational facilities (Adichie 32) or when Mr and Mrs Ozobia eventually leave Biafra for London in times of war. The wealth that Olanna and Kainene's parents have accrued via their affiliations to the British have rendered them less dependent on traditional Igbo kinship systems. While Mrs Ozobia might still wish for a grandchild, she does not perceive it as imperative because she can imagine alternative options for her children and does not have to fear her family's social exclusion or stigmatisation as a result of Olanna and Kainene's childlessness.

Comparing Mrs Ozobia to Odenigbo's mother, it becomes apparent that while both women view motherhood as a vital ingredient to their femininity, wealth and class play an important role in their differing conceptualisation of gender. Although both women belong to the same generation, and while they were born in the same country, they occupy entirely different worlds. The two mothers' lifestyles diverge significantly; whereas the wealthy socialite Mrs Ozobia resides in a large house in urban Lagos, Odenigbo's mother lives in the rural village of Abba where she is surrounded by a tight communal network. Childlessness has far greater repercussions in the small community of Odenigbo's mother. The class difference between the two women as well as the differing social discourses they are subjected to as a result are shown to strongly inform their attitudes to motherhood and to gender.

5.2. Infertility and Social Exclusion

Because Olanna has received an education and lives an independent life that is not regarded as 'normal' in a traditional, rural Igbo context, Odenigbo's mother perceives her son's partner as morally deviant and therefore rejects her. Driven by her village neighbours' nagging comments, the older woman attempts to prevent her son from

marrying Olanna, whom she describes to others as “an abnormal woman” (Adichie 97) “This is why I came,” she later explains to Ugwu, Olanna and Odenigbo’s houseboy, adding that “[t]hey said she is controlling my son” (Adichie 97). For the older woman, Olanna’s upbringing, which differs strongly from the child-rearing that Odenigbo’s mother practices herself, is only one of several factors that render the young woman supposedly morally deviant. The fact that Odenigbo’s mother is mainly referred to as Mama by other characters is suggestive of her total identification with the role of the mother and already hints at the rift between the two women. Upon seeing Olanna for the first time, Odenigbo’s mother greets her with the words, “I hear you did not suck your mother’s breasts” (Adichie 96). Differing social constructions of ‘good motherhood’ are shown to inform Olanna’s and Odenigbo’s mothers’ child-rearing practices. Odenigbo’s mother also reiterates other strict gender norms, for example when she tells Ugwu that “[t]oo much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that. It gives a woman a big head and she will start to insult her husband” (Adichie 98). Olanna’s university education further reinforces Mama’s negative impression of her son’s partner and makes her an unacceptable addition to the family. For traditionalist Mama, a woman must be obedient to her husband’s wishes; she is not to question her husband’s superior status. This strict adherence to patriarchal gender norms throws into sharp relief the difference between Mama and Olanna. Olanna’s upbringing and the higher-level education she received provide the breeding ground for Odenigbo’s mother’s rejection, a rejection that highlights the older woman’s adherence to a more restrictive, patriarchal set of gender norms.

As becomes evident in the course of the story, Odenigbo’s mother not only disapproves of Olanna’s ‘modern’ way of life per se, but she is additionally scared of the infertility she ascribes to Olanna as a result of the younger woman’s supposedly morally deficient lifestyle. Traditional Nigerian cultural constructions of female infertility ascribe barrenness to evil supernatural forces, for example to women’s secret involvement in witchcraft, or to “[m]alicious curses from persons in the physical world” (Dimka and Dein 108-109). Moreover, women’s moral failure is frequently assumed to be a prime cause of their inability to bear children, which is in turn perceived as a punishment for these women’s bad deeds (Dimka and Dein 114). Infertile women face severe social exclusion in the rural area where Odenigbo’s mother lives, a practice that is fed by socially- and culturally-constructed beliefs about barren women and that

serves to maintain biologising notions of motherhood as well as of femininity. The fact that Odenigbo's mother believes Olanna to possess supernatural evil powers becomes evident when she asks the young woman to, "[p]lease go back and tell those who sent you that you did not find my son. Tell your fellow witches that you did not see him" (96-97). Only when Mama speaks to Ugwu, the link between her belief in Olanna's witchcraft and the younger woman's supposedly corrupted moral status becomes apparent. "These girls that go to university follow men around until their bodies are useless," Mama explains to Ugwu and adds that "[n]obody knows if she can have children. Do you know? Does anyone know?" (Adichie 98). Equating Olanna's education and her 'modern' lifestyle with promiscuity, the older woman infers that her son's girlfriend could very well be infertile due to her supposed moral failures as a woman, a condition that would render her an unacceptable daughter-in-law.

Odenigbo's mother's fierce rejection of Olanna draws heightened attention to the central position of motherhood in the older woman's life. Not only does her community read the ability to bear children as a marker of femininity, but because women acquire status and respect via their roles as mothers, motherhood simultaneously becomes imperative to women who want to participate in their community and gain respect and influence. The extent to which motherhood is revered in this society is also reflected in common girl names such as Nneka, which translates as "mother is supreme" (Carwile 147). Names are not chosen at random in Igbo culture given that they carry great symbolic meaning and are believed to stand in connection with an individual's fate (Okagbue et al. 73). Odenigbo's mother is addressed as Mama by almost everyone out of respect to her elevated social position. But this address is simultaneously connected to a certain level of intimacy. Hence, when Odenigbo's mother tells Olanna "Don't mama me, [...] I said, Do not mama me," (Adichie 97), she denies her any right to a closer personal relationship. Although even Ugwu, Olanna's houseboy, is allowed to address Odenigbo's mother as Mama, Olanna's supposed moral failures render her utterly unworthy in the eyes of the older woman.

The continuity of the family lineage is of special importance in the socio-cultural context of the Igbo community that Odenigbo's mother belongs to, a factor that contributes to the strict fertile versus infertile binary frequently upheld by its members. As Dimka and Dein explain, children are perceived as a "socio-economic investment" insofar as their achievements reflect positively on their parents (107). Moreover,

children are supposed to provide for their parents once they themselves are no longer able to sustain the family (Dimka and Dein 107). While this latter aspect might be of lower importance in Olanna's family, considering her parents' monetary, and hence, their social independence, Odenigbo's mother lives in a small community that is highly dependent on mutual support. When she complains to Ugwu that "son has not married while his mates are counting how many children they have," Odenigbo's mother clearly states her primary concern. For Mama, the continuation of her bloodline takes absolute precedence and with Olanna being a supposedly "loose woman" (Adichie 98) who cannot produce an heir, Odenigbo's mother is driven to interfere in her son's choice of partner as a result of the social and cultural norms that have shaped her world view and that co-determine her needs and expectations.

Not only does Odenigbo's mother live in a close-knit normative network that excludes non-conforming, infertile women from social life, but she also participates in the reinforcement of patriarchal standards at the cost of other female community members. Kowino emphasises how "[t]he marginal space that 'barren women' occupy [...] is sustained and perpetuated by women" (26) and indeed the level of communal control held over women by their fellow women is high among the Igbo people portrayed in Adichie's novel. Kowino adds that it "is therefore inadequate merely to paint women as victims; one has to analyse and account for women's role in marginalizing their childless counterparts" (27). Odenigbo's mother, then, can be read as both 'victim' and 'aggressor' at the same time and cannot be categorised in a binary either/or fashion. She has come to internalise the arguments of a patriarchal system that have formed her own approach to motherhood, and she re-enacts these ingrained values in her subjugation of other women. Though her participation in the oppressive exclusion of infertile women and in the construction of the resulting negative self-image acquired by these childless Nigerian women (Dimka and Dein 114), Odenigbo's mother contributes to the upkeep of a highly restrictive image of femininity and denies herself as well as her fellow women any alternative paths in life. While she seeks to empower herself, Odenigbo's mother simultaneously deprives other women of their power. Thus, Adichie's novel highlights that there is an inherent ambivalence in the treatment of motherhood in Nigerian society. While motherhood grants higher status to women in the Igbo social system, it is simultaneously employed as a tool of control over women. The practice of excluding childless women raises attention to the highly normative and

narrow concepts of gender roles perpetuated within numerous Nigerian communities and questions the validity of the social mystification of motherhood.

5.3. Self-Determined Motherhood as Empowerment

Olanna, who initially writes off the need for a child as an uneducated notion tied to rigid gender norms, is surprised when she, herself, experiences an unexpected desire to carry Odenigbo's child. Her want for "the solid weight of a child, his child, in her body" is described as a "longing in the lower part of her belly [that] was sudden and searing and new" (Adichie 104). As Olanna's double emphasis on the word "child" and her expression of her wish for a child as a "longing" clearly show, hers is not a fleeting thought but a relentless need to become pregnant (104). After "Odenigbo's mother's visit [...] ripped a hole in her safe mesh of feathers," Olanna views a child as a chance to fill the void she has come to feel (104). Having had to endure Mama's derogatory comments and, as a result, having come to doubt her own self-worth and validity as a woman, Olanna suddenly feels "one step away from where she should be," as well as "light" and "unmoored" (104). Her strong wish for Odenigbo's child as the "solid weight," as the anchor that will moor and steady her (104) is thus portrayed as a direct effect of Olanna's clash with the traditionalist and normative gender discourse represented by her future mother-in-law. Importantly, the sequence of events illustrates that Olanna's desire to have a child is not a biological imperative that simply kicks in at a random moment of her life but that the powerful and highly normative discourse that links femininity and motherhood in Igbo society plays a vital role in shaping Olanna's needs.

Regarding herself as an educated and 'modern'² woman, a role that Olanna also personifies in comparison to characters such as Mama in the novel, she is surprised by a want that she describes and perceives almost as a bodily imperative. Olanna mentions that she "had never really discussed children [with Odenigbo]. She once told him that she did not have that fabled female longing to give birth, and her mother had called her *abnormal* until Kainene said she didn't have it either. He laughed and said that to bring a child into this unjust world was an act of blasé bourgeoisie anyway" (Adichie 104). Retracing Olanna's line of thought, the reader gets to experience her

² I would like to point out that I do not consider tradition and modernity as opposing and contradictory values, where the former stands for an outdated, negatively-connoted way of life that needs to be overhauled by an improved, progressive 'modernity'.

struggle with the purported “female longing” (104) to procreate, a need that she had formerly viewed as a myth grounded in a rigid and outdated view of gender roles. The fact that Olanna describes her wish for a child as a “searing” yearning not only draws heightened attention on her physicality but makes graspable the painful extent of her longing (104). However, Olanna struggles to reconcile her rejection of the naturalisation of motherhood, a standpoint she writes off as traditionalist and narrow-minded, with the wish for a child she experiences despite her identification with ‘modern’ values. She has to reconsider her previous views on motherhood and femininity, and must acknowledge that, although she disagrees with biologising conceptualisations of femininity, her yearning for Odenigbo’s child nevertheless takes the form of a physical longing that she is unable to ignore.

Olanna’s internalisation of Mama’s devaluing commentary is made further explicit when the younger woman becomes preoccupied with the possibility of her own infertility. This is most obvious when Olanna thinks that she “did not conceive a child, she knew. The sudden thought that something might be wrong with her body wrapped itself around her, dampened her” (107). It is not clear why Olanna would suddenly assume that she might be infertile, and it is moreover striking that she automatically finds fault with her own body but cannot imagine Odenigbo’s infertility. In Nigeria, infertility is mostly ascribed to women (Uadia and Emokpae 46), and male infertility is generally less of a topic of public discourse (Dimka and Dein 112). While male infertility may also lead to men’s stigmatisation within their communities, the value of motherhood as a marker of femininity in Nigeria generally places higher pressure on women to be fertile than on men (Dimka and Dein 114). When Olanna learns that Odenigbo has impregnated the village girl Amala, her own body’s inability to conceive comes to trouble her even more. Upon hearing of Amala’s pregnancy, Olanna “stood in front of the mirror and savagely squeezed her belly with both hands. The pain reminded her of how useless she was; reminded her that a child nestled now in a stranger’s body instead of hers” (232). The image of the nest that is conjured up in Olanna’s mind highlights how she links motherhood to the task of providing a safe net for a child; a conception that, as I will explore further in the following chapter, also significantly shapes her mothering performance in later stages of the novel. Olanna views her possible infertility as an all-encompassing verdict on her ‘usefulness,’ a thought that is reminiscent of the opinion Mama expresses regarding the uselessness

of the younger woman's womb. Unable to bear Odenigbo's child, although this has come to be her deepest wish, Olanna questions her own self-worth and thus draws attention to the social stigmatisation of infertile and childless women in Nigeria.

Adichie's repeated emphasis on Olanna's struggle with her inability to conceive highlights how the female protagonist's eventual choice to adopt her partner's child is not a decision that happens in an empty space. After Amala has given birth, Olanna is again confronted with her own body's 'failure'. Upon first seeing Amala in hospital, Olanna has to "pull her eyes away from the slight swell of [Amala's] belly" because the sight of it makes it "newly unbearable, the thought that Odenigbo's baby had been in that body" (248), and not in her own. Additionally, the baby's biological relationship with Odenigbo is not irrelevant to Olanna's decision. As the reader learns, when Olanna thinks how

[s]he startled herself by how clearly she had articulated the desire to keep the baby and how right it felt. It was as if it was what she had always wanted to do. [...] She could raise a child, his child. She had not felt sorry for the child. Instead, holding that tiny, warm body, she had felt a conscious serendipity, a sense that this may not have been planned but had become, the minute it happened, what was meant to be. (251)

Olanna's decision to adopt Odenigbo's and Amala's child is fed by her pressing wish to be somebody's mother, to care for a child and, moreover, to care for her partner's child, as the repeated expression of "a child, his child" shows (251). Olanna's wish to be a mother eventually outweighs her want for her own biological child when she decides to adopt Amala's unwanted baby.

The amount of social influence on Olanna's decision-making process is thus continuously moved into the spotlight. As Orna Donath explains:

[T]he idea that every woman becomes a mother as a result of her own inner will is partly formed by modernity, capitalism, and neoliberal politics, which increasingly recognize our ownership over our bodies, decisions, and fate. As today more women have a wider access to education and paid work, and a wider ability to decide whether to have romantic relationships and with whom, women are more frequently considered to be individuals who personally compose our own life stories—as if we act independently, freely selecting from numerous options as wise consumers. (4)

The element of choice in Olanna's adoption of Baby is to be viewed as interrelated with naturalising discourse that links femininity and motherhood in Igbo society. As I already mentioned, the sequence of events in Adichie's novel suggests that Olanna's sudden urge to mother is also partly a product of social pressure given

that Olanna's wish for a child arises just after she has had to face Odenigbo's mother's harsh criticism. Moreover, the fact that Olanna seems indeed unable to conceive a biological child is shown to play a vital role in forming her decision.

Nevertheless, Olanna's choice to adopt the child that Odenigbo has fathered turns her into a mother on her own terms and can be read as an act of emancipation that bears disruptive potential, given that it signifies a step away from essentialised motherhood and instead allows a reconceptualisation of motherhood beyond biology. For Olanna, the adoption of Baby becomes a subversive act as she defies the "equation of motherhood to reproduction [which] is a product of patriarchal power; [which] naturalizes the act of child bearing, thereby denaturalizing and marginalizing women who cannot have children" (Kowino 26). The adoption of Baby, hence, serves a dual purpose in the novel; Olanna gets to slip into the role of the mother she so dearly wished to hold while simultaneously renouncing rigid conventions that equate femininity with biological motherhood.

Bearing in mind, Olanna's socio-cultural and socio-historical context, her choice becomes even more noteworthy. In their study of Nigerian citizens' attitudes to adoption, Omosun and Kofoworola point out that more educated women are frequently also more willing to adopt (7). However, adoption is still only rarely considered as a real alternative to biological children (6), a fact that draws further attention to the subversive potential of Olanna's adoption. The unusualness of Olanna's decision to adopt is further highlighted when it meets with her mother's resistance. Mrs Ozobia is convinced that Olanna "will have [her] own child soon" and that it "is not right for [her] to raise the child [Odenigbo] had with a village girl he impregnated" (Adichie 251). Olanna's mother exhibits not only her preference of biological over non-biological motherhood, but her comment is also telling about her class-consciousness and fear that a 'stranger' might inherit her wealth. Olanna, however, defies her mother's wishes and thus rejects the older woman's strictly biological conceptualisation of motherhood and class-consciousness.

Considering all this, Olanna's agency can be said to constitute itself partly in the fact that she adopts Odenigbo's baby, disregarding the fact that her choice may entail social sanctions. As Olanna acts against the prevalent notion of biological motherhood as ideal motherhood, she subverts common essentialist takes on the role of the mother. The female protagonist's non-conforming behaviour allows her to determine

her own self-worth and to gain agency via choosing motherhood. The fact that Olanna's agency and self-worth are based on her role as a mother highlight a central ambivalence explored in Adichie's novel. Although Olanna's agency subverts traditional perspectives of femininity, her choice of motherhood simultaneously means that she chooses a highly traditional role for herself. Thus, *Half of a Yellow Sun* allows for a reconceptualisation and positive evaluation of motherhood beyond essentialising discourse.

Olanna's character stands in stark contrast to Amala, Baby's biological mother, who has little say or control over her own body. This lack of control is moved into even sharper focus when compared to Olanna's actions. The fact that Amala barely speaks at all in the novel is symbolic for her silencing by other community members and her entailing deprivation of choice. Amala's lack of options is most significantly topicalised in the aftermath of Baby's birth. During her visit to Amala in hospital, Olanna reflects upon the other woman's state, thinking that "Amala [...] never once looked at Odenigbo. What she must feel for him was an awed fear. Whether or not Mama had told her to go to his room, she had not said no to Odenigbo because she had not even considered that she could say no" (Adichie 250). When Olanna goes on to wonder, "[h]ow much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice?" (250), the degree of Amala's silencing is moved into the spotlight. Amala is clearly disturbed after having given birth; she neither wants to eat, nor does she want to touch or feed her baby. Her emotional state reveals that her decisions have been made by others and that she is unable to cope with the result of the encounter with Odenigbo enforced by his mother, who is Amala's elder and a person who wields total power over the young girl within their community.

The unusualness of Olanna's stance towards mothering is further contrasted with her cousin Arize's attitude to topics such as motherhood and marriage. Olanna's visit to her mother's poorer relatives, which still takes place in the early, pre-war stages of the novel, generally serves to shine a light on the difference in living conditions between the young, university-educated, urban dweller and her mother's poorer relatives. The two cousins' diverging lifestyles are moved into sharp focus when Olanna explains that Arize shares the confined space of a two-room house with her parents. Additionally, Olanna brings "bread, shoes, bottles of cream" (39) for her less well-off relatives and later the reader witnesses her admit in thought how "the smoke

irritated her eyes and throat” or how the “sight of the cockroach eggs nauseated her” (Adichie 42). Hence, the reader comes to learn that Olanna’s younger cousin Arize lives in a completely different environment and that the two women’s lives are, consequently, also shaped by different needs and expectations. Olanna, however, repeatedly points out the deep emotional ties that connect her to her cousin’s family and, thus, minimises the distance between them on another level. While Olanna might have spent the majority of her life in more prosperous surroundings, she nevertheless respects and deeply values her Uncle Mbaezi’s family.

The two cousins’ different levels of education and their social networks are portrayed as influential factors regarding their attitudes to motherhood. Upon hearing that Olanna will move in with Odenigbo but not marry him just yet, Arize tells Olanna that “[i]t is only women that know too much Book like you who can say that, Sister. If people like me who don’t know Book wait too long, we will expire” (41). Arize’s reaction is noteworthy in two ways. On the one hand, the younger cousin reveals that she, too, views Olanna’s education as a chance for an alternative to getting married and becoming a mother. When she says that only Olanna “can” say she won’t marry right away, Arize makes it very clear that she views her own lack of education as a limitation of sorts. When Arize speaks of her body as something that may “expire” (41), the topic of female ‘usefulness’ is thematised again. The dooming loss of fertility with age is a prospect that the younger cousin perceives as more threatening, given that she understands motherhood as her main route to status and respect. In comparison to Olanna, Arize’s agency is limited by different factors. Considering that she has no higher education that would allow her to gain a living in the city and cannot stay with her parents forever, only by complying with patriarchal standards that include marriage and motherhood the younger woman may gain independence and, to a certain extent, also achieve status.

At the same time, Arize cannot be categorised as a mere victim, instead her character contributes to the challenge of a binary categorisation of women as either victim or agent. She does not express jealousy of Olanna’s education but mock contempt when she argues that Olanna knows “too much Book” (41). Arize then goes on to express her own wish to marry as soon as possible. “I want a husband today and tomorrow, oh! My mates have all left me and gone to husbands’ houses,” she states (41). Here, the younger cousin reveals her longing for a social network that will support

her, given that her friends have already left for other villages and she will not be able to live with her parents forever. When Olanna tells her to “focus on [her] sewing” as she is still young, Arize counters, “[i]s it sewing that will give me a child? Even if I had managed to pass to go to school, I would still want a child now” (41). Arize’s foremost wish, as it turns out, is to be a mother, not a wife. While Adichie’s contrasting of the two families’ lifestyles does not result in her complete devaluation of more ‘traditional’ stances to marriage or procreation, it draws attention to how the matrifocal discourse in a tight Igbo community strongly shapes Arize’s expectations in life and, thus, also determines her choices.

5.4. Being Nobody’s Mother: Childless Kainene and her Twin Sister

With Olanna’s twin sister Kainene, Adichie includes yet another figure whose actions run contrary to biologising gender notions that equate femininity with motherhood. As an autonomous Igbo woman whose self-worth as well as public image are not linked to her procreative abilities, Kainene instead finds esteem in her role as a businesswoman. The management of her father’s companies in Nigeria is Kainene’s main occupation, as becomes most clear when Richard, the third of the novel’s narrators and her boyfriend, describes his first impressions of Kainene’s daily routine in Port Harcourt. First and foremost, Richard is “bewildered by Kainene’s busy life” and finds it “strangely disturbing to think [...] how her routines [are] already in place” (Adichie 77-78). Here, Richard as well as the reader first learn about the degree of Kainene’s independence and Richard’s thoughts reveal that he has to get use to the fact that his girlfriend is not dependent on him, that “hers [is] a life that [runs] fully and would run fully even if he was not in it” (77). For Kainene, “work [comes] first” because “she [is] determined to make her father’s factories grow,” (78) and probably also because she needs to prove herself in a largely male-dominated sphere. Kainene lives by her own standards and thus redefines femininity without motherhood.

As holds true for Olanna as well, the degree of Kainene’s independence is partly retraceable to the progressive thinking displayed by the Ozobia family in the context of 1960s Nigeria. The fact that Kainene’s father recognised her talent for business early on and then enabled her to take a leading role in managing “everything in the east, the factories and [the company’s] new oil interests” shows that he does not determine his daughter’s value based on her reproductive abilities (31). When Chief Okonji, a dinner

guest of Chief Ozobia, mentions that “[w]hoever said you lost out by having twin daughters is a liar,” Kainene’s father proudly answers that she “is not just like a son, she is like two” (31). Both men exhibit their awareness of the prevalent social discourse on femininity that views women as inferior to men and they partly refute it. Kainene is not a son but she is valued just as a male heir would be; her parents do not measure her worth by her ability to procreate, and neither does Kainene.

The image of the twin sisters in Adichie’s story is especially noteworthy in the light of the traditional Igbo practice of killing twins at birth, and it adds to the subversive quality of the novel. Due to the belief that a wife’s infidelity, and her involvement with evil spirits, causes her to carry two children at the same time, twin killings were seen as a possible way to circumvent punishment by the gods (Imbua 142) and, additionally, to minimise instances of female adultery (Marroquín and Haight 266). It is therefore arguable that this practice served to monitor women’s actions and to thus ensure that they adhered to the tasks and roles allocated to them. By choosing twins, and female twins as well, to perform the subversion of gender norms and gendered norms of motherhood, Adichie grants a powerful, agentive position to this formerly stigmatised social group and, in the process, reinforces her challenge of gender normative discourse.

By featuring childless Kainene alongside Olanna, Adichie simultaneously shows how motherhood is not necessary for women to gain self-worth, while also highlighting the possible empowering and enriching aspects of mothering. Her adoption of Baby allows Olanna to subvert essentialising notions of motherhood and to experience her role as Baby’s mother as emotionally fulfilling at the same time. Olanna’s choice of non-biological motherhood in *Half of a Yellow Sun* thus renders possible a reconceptualisation and positive evaluation of motherhood beyond essentialising gender concepts. The simultaneous depiction of Olanna and Kainene’s divergent lifestyles further subverts essentialist gender ideas as both women define and perform femininity in their own ways, one of them by choosing motherhood on her own terms, and the other without becoming a mother in the first place. Both women gain agency; Kainene does so via living without children, and Olanna via mothering another woman’s biological child, despite social expectations that would dictate both sisters to act otherwise.

6. Mother Nurtures?: Mother-Child Relationships in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

The previous chapter mainly explored how a complex interplay of social discourses that naturalise motherhood colludes with a wish for personal agency in Adichie's novel and informs women's choices to mother or not to mother. In the present chapter, I address how Adichie's exploration of the complicated make-up of mother-child relationships and their manifold possible forms deconstruct the link between femininity and compulsory 'good' motherhood and, in the process, draws attention to how these diverse realities of mothering are shaped by particular social contexts. Moreover, the present chapter takes a close look at how the ambivalence that characterises Olanna and Kainene's relationship with their mother highlights that 'perfect' motherhood is but a myth which serves as a tool for surveilling, and thus for regulating, mothering practices. The depiction of a multitude of possible "motherhoods," (Neyer and Bernardi 167) further substantiates Adichie's reconceptualisation of motherhood beyond essentialising gender norms. The triangular mother-child relationship between Ugwu, Baby and Olanna sheds light on how Ugwu's participation in the raising of Olanna's child adds to the re-definition of motherhood, beyond the normative ideal of biological motherhood. Ugwu's role questions gender norms that naturalise women's caregiving, but do not link masculinity with caring behaviour to the same degree. Additionally, I argue that Ugwu's continuous care for Baby and his emotional involvement may be characterised as performative mothering practice as well, a description that further challenges the gendered status of motherhood in Igbo society.

6.1. Performing Motherhood(s)

The love, the child, and all those motherly feelings that the mothers speak about in such an enticing way, as though a child is something to have, not something to do. The doing is what seems hard. The having seems marvellous. But one doesn't have a child, one does it. (Heti 21-22)

These thoughts mulled over by Heti's protagonist in *Motherhood*, that also illustrate how the complexity of motherhood goes beyond having or not having children, also provide an ideal starting point for a reading of mothering practices and mother-child relationships in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In Adichie's novel the 'doing' of a child that Heti's protagonist mentions is in sharp focus; all mother-child relationships in the novel are, in some way, described in terms of different practices that are, moreover, depicted as

highly dependent on social contexts. In her portrayal of mothers' differing approaches to childcare, Adichie offers up an interpretation of motherhood that goes beyond 'good' or 'bad' motherhood but that, via its focus on the diverse realities of mothering, subverts a normative binary that naturalises motherly care and women's roles as mothers. At the same time, while the novel explores this contrast between mothers and between women, it generally shows that non-biological mothers' actions construct motherhood in the same performative sense that biological mothers' performances do, and in the process, questions the elevated status of biological motherhood in social discourse. Although child-care practices differ strongly between generations and between cultures, these practices continuously establish motherhood in a given society.

The repetitiveness of everyday tasks as constitutive of motherhood is most clearly portrayed in Olanna's relationship to her adoptive child Baby. In this context, acts such as feeding or bathing take prominence and are topicalised recurrently. Baby first appears as a character in the novel in the midst of being bathed by Olanna. Although the reader is, at this point of the story, not yet aware of the relationship between Olanna and Baby, the first thought that comes to mind is that Olanna must be the child's mother. The fact that this connection between the two characters is almost automatically assumed highlights how specific practices are very much conceived of as tasks usually carried out by mothers, or more generally speaking, by parents. In the novel, however, bathing is most closely connected to motherhood, as is also recognisable in the fact that Ugwu thinks about Odenigbo's mother as "this woman who had bathed Master as a baby" (Adichie 85). Baby's bathing remains a vital part of the entire remaining story and takes on an almost ritual-like character when Olanna insists on its re-iteration in times of distress and times of ease alike. Via her repetitive enactment of caring tasks such as bathing, Olanna not only expresses her love and care for Baby but she performatively constructs her own role of the mother by adhering to a discursively-determined script of 'good motherhood'. The dedication with which Olanna commits herself to her role as a mother, despite a missing biological link between herself and the child, shows that the continuous performance of tasks that she perceives as constitutive of the role of the mother only renders her a mother in the first place. Olanna has chosen to be Baby's mother but this self-defined and self-determined form of motherhood must be performatively re-iterated every day, in a variety of acts that establish her as Baby's caregiver and as her dependant.

As a vital element of Olanna's mothering practice, the naming of Baby plays a constitutive role, especially given the significance attached to names in Igbo culture. As Okagbue et al. (73) point out, the choosing of a name is an act that Igbo parents will not take lightly, given that first names are viewed as powerful predictors of a person's future. Olanna and Odenigbo discuss possible girl names immediately after Odenigbo's mother has brought Baby to their house. "Mama named her Obiageli," Odenigbo explains (Adichie 253), but Olanna refuses to accept the name, thinking that "[h]is mother had no right to name a child she had rejected" (254). Instead, Olanna claims the right to name the baby. "We'll call her Baby for now until we find the perfect name. Kainene suggested Chiamaka. I've always loved that name: God is beautiful" (254). The fact that the girl will not be called Chiamaka for years to come further reveals the importance of motherhood in Olanna's life. Finally having a child to call her own, Olanna continuously confirms the child-status of her adoptive daughter by naming her Baby. When Baby is already a couple of years old, Kainene mentions to Olanna that "it's about time the girl began to called Chiamaka. This Baby business is tiresome," (344) but Olanna ignores her sister's comment. Olanna has discovered agency via her role as mother and via the continuous emphasis on the child's infant-status that is inherent in the name of 'Baby', she re-constitutes herself as Baby's mother on a day-to-day basis, thus confirming the central role of mothering in her life.

When it comes to naming as an act that is constitutive of Olanna and Baby's mother-child relationship, it is noteworthy that Olanna asks Baby to call her Mummy Olanna while Mummy remains reserved for Baby's birth mother. Olanna thus expresses her respect for Amala's biological relationship to Baby. When Kainene asks her what she will tell Baby about her birth mother, Olanna returns, "[t]he truth: that Amala is her mother. And I'll have her call me Mummy Olanna or something, so that if Amala ever comes back, she can be Mummy" (252). At the same time, Olanna does not understand herself as less of a mother to Baby than Amala is. After all, Baby is to name her Mummy Olanna and not simply Olanna. While having a child and being a mother means the world to Olanna, she also factors in Amala's rights in a way that nobody else does in the course of the entire story. "She was so helpless. I felt as if I knew her," Olanna explains to Kainene (252). The decision to become Baby's mother while also acknowledging the fact that she might have to share the role of the mother

with another woman illustrates how Olanna's self-empowerment is not performed at the cost of others.

Another aspect of Olanna's everyday relationship to her child and a further central caring task she performs throughout the novel is her feeding of Baby. While hunger is among the most basic needs a small child may express, the repetitive enactment of Baby's feeding also reveals the performative nature of Olanna's mothering, similar to her practice of bathing the child. Frost, Capdevila, and Johnson identify feeding as a key practice constitutive of motherhood when they argue that "[d]oing motherhood involves engagement in [...] a range of practical activities, a key one being feeding, with biological discourses positioning mothers as largely responsible for providing sustenance" (104). Throughout the novel, Baby's needs are first and foremost on Olanna's mind, a fact that not only highlights the strong bond that has formed between the two despite a lack of a biological relationship but that simultaneously shows how Olanna's expression of care in terms of specific practices is socially-conditioned. Olanna views herself as mainly responsible for Baby's care, and she not only seeks to fulfil the child's needs, but she also asserts her own role in their relationship via claiming the responsibility that society places on mothers. A key scene that highlights the imminence of Baby's needs in Olanna's mind happens when Olanna begins to regain control after she has suffered severe shock following her discovery of the dead bodies of her uncle's family. Ugwu brings food to Olanna's bedside and she almost immediately asks him, "[h]as Baby eaten?" (Adichie 161). Although Olanna herself is barely able to eat and only just begins to see past her traumatising experience, her concern for Baby comes to the forefront and in expressing this concern in terms of a mothering practice, Olanna confirms her status as Baby's mother.

The topic of feeding Baby also takes on a greater significance when considering that breastfeeding, a practice that is frequently prescribed to women as the most 'natural' way of nursing a baby, is not an option for Olanna. Instead, she has a wet nurse come in to breastfeed Baby, and thus she, again, complies with widely recommended standards of good mothering practice. Olanna's decision not to formula feed Baby reveals how the young mother aspires to act in accordance with socially- and historically- dependent norms of 'good motherhood' that portray breastfeeding as the most 'normal' way to feed a small child, an attitude that Odenigbo's mother clearly

personifies in Adichie's novel. While breastfeeding is indeed recommended by Nigerian medical personnel as the healthiest choice for babies (Agho et al. 1), the devaluation of other practices, such as formula feeding, in relation to breastfeeding frequently results in the devaluation of mothers who cannot breastfeed for various reasons. Thus, the immense social pressure on mothers to always act in the best interest of their children and ensure their health and success in life is made further evident.

The intense social monitoring of motherhood that becomes obvious in these portrayals of breastfeeding as something close to an imperative is topicalised in Adichie's novel not only in connection with Olanna's nursing of Baby but also via repeated references to her own mother's inability or refusal to breastfeed her twin daughters. For the first time, this piece of information is revealed to the reader when Odenigbo's mother tells Olanna, "I hear you did not suck your mother's breasts," (Adichie 96) a rumour that she interprets as a sign of Olanna's abnormality. Later, she wonders aloud about Olanna's mother in front of Ugwu, "[w]hat woman brings another person to breastfeed her own children when she herself is alive and well? Is that normal [...]?" (98). For the older woman, a figure who represents a traditional, rural Igbo system of thought and kinship, the fact that a mother would not breastfeed her children is utterly unintelligible. Despite the very private nature of Olanna and Kainene's mother's breastfeeding practices, even Odenigbo's mother has heard about the other woman's deviation from the norm, and by criticising her actions as harshly, Odenigbo's mother exposes her complicity in the upkeep of motherhood as a naturalised institution.

The fact that Mrs Ozobia's daughters, too, are clearly occupied with their mothers' uncommon decision underlines the amount of social monitoring that specific mothering practices receive, and it points to the effects that a mother's deviation from socio-culturally determined norms may have, not only on their social standing but also on their relationships with their children. When Olanna visits her uncle's house in Kano, Olanna "wishe[s], for a brief guilty moment, that Aunt Ifeka were her mother. Aunt Ifeka was as good as her mother, anyway, since it was Aunt Ifeka's breasts that she and Kainene had sucked when their mother's dried up soon after they were born" (39). The fact that Olanna thinks of her aunt as someone who is "as good as her mother," because she was the one to breastfeed her reveals the degree to which breastfeeding

functions as a practice constitutive of motherhood in her society. It is, however, crucial to note that as a performative practice, breastfeeding has only gained its elevated status in social discourse, and that other feeding practices, such as formula-feeding, can be just as performatively constitutive of motherhood. When Olanna ponders on how “Kainene used to say their mother’s breasts did not dry up at all, that their mother had given them to a nursing aunt only to save her own breasts from drooping,” (39) a certain amount of disregard for their mother becomes palpable. While the truth of Kainene’s statement is never confirmed, it is revealing of both twin sisters’ unease regarding their relationship with their mother. To some degree, the sisters perceive Mrs Ozobia as a selfish woman; Kainene is well able to imagine that her mother prioritised her appearance over the experience of breastfeeding and Olanna has not been able to forget Kainene’s words either. Kainene’s remark is illustrative of the sisters’ general assessment of their mothers’ character and, thus, of their complicated relationship as well. Although they do not know why their mother chose to give them to a wet nurse, Olanna and Kainene presuppose that their mother acted selfishly in prioritising her own welfare over that of her children.

The fact that the children perceive their mother’s act as selfish further highlights how mothers who deviate from societal norms of ideal motherhood are frequently punished with a denial of their agency and accusations of egotism. Although Olanna and Kainene might not generally view women who do not breastfeed their children as self-centered, their relationship with their own mother is marked by a complicated emotional connection and also by a lack of closeness that the sisters interpret as disinterest on their mother’s side. Kainene and Olanna cannot easily forgive the indifference that they ascribe their mother’s actions to. While the children’s attitude towards their mother is relatable, it is also very telling about the extent to which mothers are expected to practice self-abandonment in favour of their children’s emotional and physical wellbeing. Eventually, it is thus not only Odenibo’s mother’s reaction but also the sisters’ attitude which is highly telling about the amount of social disregard that women may harbour by acting against social conventions and against socially-constructed gender norms.

6.2. Ambivalent Emotions in Mother-Child Relationships

The complicated relationship that Olanna and Kainene have with their mother can be read as a questioning of the supposedly biologically-induced, gender-related, and 'natural' devotion that women feel for their children and that children reciprocate. While I do not want to argue that Olanna, Kainene and their mother do not love each other, it is debatable that their relationship is marked by a degree of ambivalence that highlights the imperfection of non-idealised mother-child relationships. Adichie's novel takes up the mother-daughter relationship between Mrs Ozobia and Olanna at several key moments throughout the story and, as Olayiwola and Olowonmi mention with regard to ambivalent emotions in mother-daughter relationships more generally, the novel thus draws attention to the "absence of 'perfect motherhood'"(150). Instead, Olanna and her mother differ greatly with regard to their general dispositions and expectations in life, as well as their levels of education. All these factors contribute to the complication of their relationship.

The dinner which takes place at the house of Olanna's parents at a very early stage of the novel already allows a first glimpse into the workings of this mother-daughter dynamic. Olanna is the focaliser of this sequence of events, and already the first passage that describes the dinner from her view indicates that Olanna and her mother live by different rules:

She had not wanted to have dinner with her parents, especially since they had invited Chief Okonji. But her mother came into her room to ask her to please join them; it was not every day that they hosted the finance minister, and this dinner was even more important because of the building contract her father wanted. '*Biko*, wear something nice. Kainene will be dressing up, too,' her mother had added, as if mentioning her twin sister somehow legitimized everything. (Adichie 30)

Two things become apparent in these few sentences already. Olanna is not very close to her parents and leads a separate, relatively independent life. Secondly, Olanna's appearance seems to be important for the outcome of her father's negotiations with the male guest, a first hint at her parents' willingness to use her to win the minister's favour. When Olanna later wonders "how her parents had promised Chief Okonji an affair with her in exchange for the contract," (32) this suspicion is strengthened and, moreover, it becomes clear that Olanna's mother is not the single driving force behind the attempt at setting her daughter up. Kainene, too, and only half-jokingly, calls Olanna their parents' "sex bait," a teasing observation that Olanna outwardly rejects

but that she also recognises as partially true. However, the fact that the task of talking Olanna into coming to dinner had clearly fallen to her mother and that her mother is the one who attempts to force Olanna into meeting with the minister rebounds on their mother-daughter dynamic.

The conversation that takes place between Olanna and her mother following the dinner party deepens the impression of a complicated mother-daughter relationship marked by conflicting emotions and different expectations in life. Olanna's mother comes to her daughter's room to show her the rich lace she has been given by their guest, hoping to impress Olanna with the minister's obvious material wealth. Olanna, however, is clearly not impressed, as becomes noticeable when she points out that "[h]aving conversations with her mother tired her" (34). The differing expectations of mother and daughter are thrown into even sharper relief when her mother goes on to compare Odenigbo's lifestyle with that of Chief Okonji. When her mother asks her whether she will be comfortable at her boyfriend's house, "Olanna almost smiled because her mother had Odenigbo's *basic* university house in mind, with its sturdy rooms and plain furniture and uncarpeted floors" (35). It is obvious that, for Mrs Ozobia, comfort equals modern conveniences, imported goods and a nicely decorated house. For her, the need for comfort surpasses other necessities in life and she wants her daughter to enjoy the same amenities. Olanna, however, lives by different standards; all she wants is to "work in the university, and [...] to live with [Odenigbo]" (35). Diametrically opposed to her mother's expectations and understanding of a comfortable life, Olanna speaks of "the discomfort that came with being a part of the gloss that was her parents' life" (34). Clearly, mother and daughter have different understandings of comfort and wealth, a discordance that renders their interaction highly frustrating to both.

As a result of their differing standards and their continuous play of forces, Olanna feels like a disappointment to her mother, and Mrs Ozobia similarly feels rejected by her daughter. Olanna registers that her mother's voice sounds "small and wounded" when she says good night, and while she mentions that she "[is] used to her mother's disapproval," given that "it had coloured most of her major decisions," she also concedes that "[s]till, each time, the disapproval made her want to apologize, to make up for it in some way" (35). The fact that Olanna's mother experiences a loss of words and then goes on to talk about the maid as Olanna refuses her offer of hand-sewn

clothes further shows that Mrs Ozobia is aware of her daughter's disapproval, that she senses the tense situation between them, but feels unable to resolve their issues. Mother and daughter are caught deep in a conflict based on attitudes to life that are hard to reconcile and that are grounded in the generational but also in the educational gap between them.

Eventually, the rift between mother and daughter also comes into effect on a spatial level when Olanna's parents leave Biafra without their daughters. Although Mrs Ozobia asks Olanna and Kainene to flee with them to England, both sisters stay behind. The fact that Olanna's parents offer only one ticket to each sister, and hence neither consider Odenigbo, nor Baby as Olanna's family, underlines not only their disapproval of her choice of partner but also emphasises their denial of Olanna's non-biological motherhood. Olanna, however, does not perceive her mother's offer as an affront; she already knows that her mother cannot understand her way of life. Instead, "Olanna felt pity at the plea in her mother's eyes. Her mother knew she would not run away to England with them [...]. But it was so like her to try, to make this doomed, grasping, well-meaning effort" (Adichie 189). While both women are aware that Olanna will stay in Biafra, the fact that Mrs Ozobia feels obliged to make this half-hearted offer to her daughter can be read as the older woman's attempt to comply with standards of 'good' motherhood that require mothers to prioritise their children.

Nevertheless, Olanna cannot oblige and the distance between them that is already so evident on an emotional level is eventually translated to a spatial distance as well, as becomes most evident when Olanna wants "to reach out and touch her mother's perfect skin" but does not dare to (189). "How can I leave my children and run to safety," Mrs Ozobia then wonders but Olanna knows that her mother "could and she would" leave without her. Here, Olanna's mother clearly addresses a neo-liberal concept of motherhood that obliges mothers to prioritise their children, and that, consequentially, expect mothers not to leave their children (Donath 138). At the same time, Mrs Ozobia is aware that she cannot adhere to these strict norms of motherhood, as is made evident when, although Olanna's mother "wiped her eyes with her palm, [...] there were no tears" (Adichie 189). Olanna is no longer disappointed by her mother's actions, but rather "pleased [...] she would not have to deal with her until this war was over" (189). To some extent, both women have learned that their contrasting opinions prevent them from forming a closer bond that would allow them to

communicate openly. Thus, the complicated relationship between Olanna and her mother questions “the assumption that there is an inherent emotional connection between mothers and daughters” (Merley Hill 79), and, additionally, illustrates how mothers’ inability to conform with unrealistic, essentialist norms of motherhood may come to bear on mother-child relationships.

While Olanna and Kainene might not experience neglect at home, Olanna finds more emotional support at her uncle Mbaezi’s house. During her visits to her uncle’s family, Olanna’s closeness with her relatives is illustrated repeatedly and comparisons to the relationship she has with her parents and sister are invited. At one point of the story, Olanna wonders how her father, mother, sister, and herself came to be “strangers who shared the same last name” (Adichie 219). The emotional closeness that she shares with her extended family but not with her immediate relatives highlights how the nuclear family does not necessarily provide the most important emotional support. When Olanna “wonder[s] if she would admire [her uncle] as she [does] if he were not so different from her mother,” it becomes all the more obvious that Olanna has previously compared her mother to her uncle and found Mrs Ozobia lacking in various regards. It is at his house where Olanna “[feels] a sense that things were in order, the way they were meant to be, and that even if they tumbled down once in a while, in the end they would come back together again” (39). The importance of this ‘second’ family of Olanna’s questions the primacy of the institution of motherhood as it directs attention to the fact that support and care may also be found in other places.

Not only does Olanna feel at home with her uncle’s family but she also finds an alternative mother figure in her uncle’s wife. For Olanna, Aunt Ifeka functions as a counterexample to her biological mother; not only did her aunt breastfeed Olanna but she also provided emotional care for her in a way that her own mother never could. When Aunt Ifeka welcomes Olanna with open arms, cooks for her – “Aunt Ifeka always killed one [of the chickens] when she visited, even if it was the last she owned” (39) – and gives advice when Olanna struggles with Odenigbo’s betrayal, she performs tasks that Mrs Ozobia does not perform throughout the novel and that Olanna also only seeks at her aunt’s. It is Aunt Ifeka who urges Olanna to return to Odenigbo’s house and reminds her of her independence. “Do you not have your own flat and your own job?” Aunt Ifeka asks Olanna before she tells her that she “must never behave as if [her] life belongs to a man” (226). To imagine this piece of advice coming from Olanna’s

mother is unthinkable for two reasons. Firstly because its content could hardly be more contrary to Mrs Ozobia's opinions and expectations regarding her daughter's life, and secondly because Olanna would not discuss her relationship with Odenigbo with her disapproving mother. Taking into account that Olanna's emotional needs are looked after by Auntie Ifeka, the woman can be argued to partake in mothering Olanna, a practice that further undermines narrow definitions motherhood.

6.3. De-Gendering Care and Motherhood

The exploration of mother-child relationships and the consequent challenging of naturalising definitions of motherhood in *Half of a Yellow Sun* further extends to the relationship between Ugwu, Olanna and Baby. Gendered, naturalised concepts of care that establish women as more 'natural' caregivers whose biological disposition renders them best suited for the task of raising children are questioned in Adichie's novel in the portrayal of Ugwu's care for Baby. Not only can the fact that Ugwu plays a decisive role in raising Baby be argued to establish him as a co-mother, but it also underlines that all childcare may be performed equally well by persons of any gender, a fact that calls into question the elevated state of the institution of motherhood itself.

In the course of the story, Ugwu, one of the novel's three protagonists, turns from Odenigbo's houseboy to Olanna's entrusted co-provider of Baby's care. While Ugwu's tasks are manifold and comprise household chores in addition to childcare tasks, Ugwu's participation in Baby's everyday care is central to the novel's course of events, as becomes clear in the repeated foregrounding of his feeding and bathing practices for the child. Thus, Olanna and Ugwu's shared care practices bear great relevance pertaining to my analysis of mother-child relationships in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Already in the very first scene that features Olanna, Ugwu and Baby together, the degree of sharing that takes place between Ugwu and Olanna with regard to Baby's care becomes apparent. Just having returned from a visit to his hometown, Ugwu finds Olanna bathing Baby and immediately suggests that he might prepare Baby's food in the meantime, a task that normally falls to him given that Ugwu is generally responsible for cooking for the family. But Ugwu's participation in Baby's daily care goes beyond merely cooking for the child. When Olanna suggests that Baby might wear "that blue dress Arize made for her," but Ugwu tells her that "[t]he pink one is better" (Adichie 123) because the other one does not fit Baby, the fact that Ugwu knows best which

clothes fit Baby can be read as a clear indicator of his continuous, day-to-day involvement in the child's upbringing. While Olanna might be responsible for Baby on a different level than Ugwu, his everyday care shows that mothering tasks may be shared between several people who are not biologically related to a child, a fact that further questions the supremacy of the role of the biological mother frequently claimed in essentialist discourse.

Although it could be argued that caring for Baby is only one of several aspects of Ugwu's daily work, the fact that Ugwu is also emotionally involved in the child's upbringing further highlights how care practices may be performed equally well by any individual regardless of their gender. Ugwu is neither biologically related to Baby, nor is he a woman, and yet he is portrayed not only as a servant whose job it is to care for Olanna's child, but who performs his child-rearing tasks with affection. Ugwu plays with Baby, he sings to Baby, and his need to "shield" Baby (143) from various sorts of danger is repeatedly topicalised. Again, it is a scene that features Baby's bathing which serves well to illustrate Ugwu's emotional connection to the child. "Ugwu helped Baby up and took her inside. 'Bath time,' he said, although it was a little early. 'I can do it myself,' Baby said, and so he stood by and watched her bathe herself for the first time. She splashed some water on him, laughing, and he realized that she would not always need him," Adichie writes (424). Ugwu's realisation resembles that of a parent who watches his or her child become independent. Thus, Ugwu's emotional involvement highlights that care is not portrayed as a "transferable commodity" (Stephens 12-13) in the novel. The fact that Ugwu's childcare not only takes a central place in the novel but that he obviously performs his caring tasks with great devotion and that Baby returns Ugwu's affection defies naturalising discourses that emphasise a biological mother-child connection as the ideal foundation of a child's healthy upbringing and that claim women's superior suitability for childrearing.

Given that Ugwu and Olanna share Baby's everyday caring tasks to a large extent, it is possible to describe Ugwu's participation in Baby's upbringing as co-mothering. Neither Olanna, nor Ugwu are biologically related to Baby and yet both establish their relationship to the child via their care practices. Reading Olanna's motherhood as performatively constituted, Ugwu's tasks may similarly be described as 'mothering'. Of course, to call all childcare 'mothering' bears the risk of re-inviting biologising accounts of care that naturalise the role of woman as well as the role of

mother. However, Ugwu's performative caring tasks question discourses that establish a connection between caring behaviour and femininity. Thus, via his participation in a highly gendered practice in 1960s Nigerian society, Ugwu disrupts gender norms. To describe Ugwu's care for Baby as mothering illustrates well what Merley Hill states in her discussion of performative motherhood in German literature, namely that "anyone could perform the maternal, including men" (90). While some would argue that Ugwu's practice could, at most, be described as co-parenting, I argue that the gendered reality of the novel's setting must be considered so as not to erase the "bodies doing work" (Gatson 33). With regard to this gendered reality, it is noteworthy that, for example, Odenigbo as Baby's only biological relative in the household, seems least involved in her day-to-day care. Hence, although I do not wish to promote a link between motherhood and caring behaviour, the fact that fathering and mothering are not easily subsumable under the name of parenting in the social and historical setting of Adichie's story must be acknowledged. By attesting Ugwu a shared motherhood status, the novel's re-definition of motherhood beyond biology can be argued to go further beyond gender as well.

As this chapter has shown, Adichie's portrayal of motherhood in *Half of a Yellow Sun* questions idealising as well as naturalising understandings of the role of the mother and takes into account specific cultural and historical contexts in the process. A focus on the care practices that constitute motherhood and shape mother-child relationships in Adichie's novel questions biologising definitions of motherhood and allows for a reconceptualisation of motherhood as performatively constituted via mothering tasks instead. The re-definition of motherhood in *Half of a Yellow Sun* includes non-biological mothers such as Olanna into the picture, and thus questions the primacy of the biological mother. Moreover, as the novel zooms in on specific childcare practices such as breastfeeding, the amount of societal regulation of mothering practices is revealed and the pressure on mothers to perform 'good' motherhood as well as the negative consequences of their deviation from this socio-cultural norm becomes obvious. As the portrayal of the ambivalent emotions in Olanna and Kainene's relationship with their mother shows, normative ideals of 'good' motherhood do not necessarily translate to the complex, lived realities of mother-child relationships although an intense bond between mother and child is frequently purported as a biologically-induced and thus 'natural' effect of motherhood. The fact

that the novel furthermore draws repeated attention to Ugwu's performance of caring tasks for Baby, and thus establishes him as a co-mother next to Olanna, additionally subverts naturalising definitions of care, of femininity, as well as of motherhood.

7. Destabilised Gender Roles and Violence Against Mothers in War

In its depiction of the violent acts committed during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, and especially those committed against the Biafran side of the population, *Half of a Yellow Sun* not only draws attention to the frequently traumatising effects of war, but the novel also highlights the heightened vulnerability of mothers. In addition to the fatalities caused by armies fighting each other, Adichie graphically narrates how mothers and children are murdered, abused, and starved to death during war, thus directing special attention to gender-based forms of violence committed against women and mothers. In the context of the present thesis, the psychological violence that mothers suffer who must constantly fear their children's deaths, and who are held solely responsible for their children's welfare, is interpreted as a gender-based form of violence that deserves special attention and that highlights the pressure that gendered mothering norms and their social monitoring exert on mothers.

Civil war, in Adichie's novel, not only raises attention to the gendered reality of motherhood and femininity in 1960s Nigerian society, but it simultaneously reveals how gender norms can begin to unravel as social contexts are altered beyond recognition. As Wilson-Tagoe points out, "[i]n situations where political upheavals throw old orders into chaos and bring new ones into being, the terms and organization of gender and culture may be revised" (226). Given that motherhood is a topic closely tied to societal conceptualisations of gender, this chapter further seeks to carve out how the role of the mother is altered by the events of war in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. While, as Adichie's novel shows, mothers and children are among the most vulnerable parts of the population during war, it would be a false conclusion to reduce the roles of mothers to mere victims. The fact that mothers take on a variety of tasks highlights not only how "[t]he binary stereotype of active males/passive females [...] breaks down" (Turshen 1) during war but further emphasises that mothers are not merely victims of violence but "active agents negotiating violent contexts" (Damousi 119), a fact that contributes to the reconceptualisation of motherhood beyond restrictive gender norms in Adichie's novel.

7.1. Gender-Based Violence Against Mothers

The pressure and existential fear that mothers may experience when their children are in danger during wartime can be interpreted as a form of non-physical, gender-based violence against mothers that is illustrated at several points throughout Adichie's novel. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights defines gender-based violence as "any harmful act directed against individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of their gender" (1). Violence against women, more specifically, has also been defined in ways that are inclusive of non-psychological types of violence. Gill, Heathcote, and Williamson conceptualise gender-based violence as "any physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, financial or social harm caused to a woman by individuals (known or unknown to the woman), groups, institutions or states, based primarily or in part on the fact that she is a woman" (1). I argue that Adichie's novel not only focuses on physical violent acts against women committed during civil war, such as rape, but that it additionally zooms in on the unique form of psychological violence that mothers endure who are held and feel uniquely responsible for their children's welfare.

There are manifold types of, mainly psychological, violence that affect Olanna to varying degrees during civil war, and I argue that the pressure she experiences in fearing and fighting for her child's safety adds to these varied forms of psychological violence that the young mother has to suffer. Olanna experiences a number of war's atrocities; she finds the dead bodies of her aunt, uncle and pregnant cousin, she has to fight hunger and trauma, she witnesses mothers' and children's deaths by starvation in her sisters' refugee camp, as well as how children become prey to abuse. A scene that takes place after Baby has stopped eating due to illness serves well to illustrate Olanna's desperation as a consequence of her child's endangerment by war events. At the local relief centre, when Olanna learns that the only thing Baby will eat is no longer available, she begins to beg with one of the employees. "'My little child is sick – 'Olanna said. The woman cut her short. 'Join that queue for milk.' 'No, no, she has not been eating anything, but she ate egg yolk.' Olanna held the woman's arm. 'Biko, please; I *need* the egg yolk'" (Adichie 269). And indeed, it is Olanna's need as well; her own welfare has become inseparable from that of her child. The fight for Baby's

survival is simultaneously a fight against Olanna's existential fear, a fear that negatively affects Olanna's actions, thoughts and dreams.

Olanna's growing despair as Baby's cough worsens clearly illustrates the enormous pressure she is subjected to in her role as the child's mother and provider, and it draws further attention to the intensity of her emotional connection to her child. Any possible harm to Baby that war may bring is tantamount to psychological harm to her mother; Olanna's own welfare depends on the safety of her child, as the following passage highlights:

[Olanna] had a recurring dream: She forgot about Baby and ran to the bunker and after the bombs had fallen, she tripped on the burnt body of a child with its features so blackened that she could not be certain it was Baby. The dream haunted her. She made Baby practise running to the bunker. She asked Ugwu to practise picking Baby up and running. She taught Baby how to take cover if there was no time for the bunker – to lie flat on her belly, hands wrapped around her head. Still, she worried that she had not done enough and that the dream portended some negligence of hers that would harm Baby. (262-263)

Olanna's fear of neglecting Baby is doubled in force by the impending physical danger of war. As Olanna's anxiety shows, their missing biological link is no impediment to the development of a deep emotional connection, a connection that is so intense that it threatens Olanna's own mental stability. Thus, not only is the gender-based, psychological violence that mothers such as Olanna experience during war emphasised, but her emotional involvement also serves as a challenge to the supremacy of biological motherhood.

In Adichie's portrayal of the Nigeria-Biafra war, Olanna is not the only mother portrayed in a struggle for her child's survival. In a shared housing complex in the town of Umuahia, Olanna is surrounded by numerous other mothers on a daily basis. With their husbands either at war, injured, or hiding from conscripting soldiers, these women oftentimes become the sole providers of their families. As Olanna's neighbours, Mama Oji, and Mama Adanna and their children become constants in her narrative. Throughout the final chapters of the novel, these mothers are portrayed in a continuous effort of keeping their children alive and fed. Mama Oji recounts to Olanna that her "children have asthma. Three have died since the war started. Three are left" (326). The cruelty of her loss has rendered Mama Oji a stern and unforgiving woman who cannot accept what she perceives as other another woman's, and moreover as another mother's, weakness. Mama Adanna, who is desperate because her daughter might

starve, comes to beg Olanna for food, but Mama Oji berates her. The stern woman tells Olanna to stop giving Mama Adanna food because “[t]his is what she does with every new tenant. She should go and farm cassava and feed her family and stop disturbing people!” (327). The pressure to keep their children alive that all mothers in Olanna’s vicinity are subjected to and that calls to attention how “cultural norms [...] hold [mothers] uniquely accountable” for their children’s welfare (Reich 699), also leads some mothers to further pressurise others. The sole responsibility which many mothers have to bear for their children’s survival and the psychological distress that may arise as a consequence highlights how war potentially violates mothers in Adichie’s novel in a profound, unique and yet invisible way. The existence of this gendered form of violence draws increased attention to the gender inequality inherent in the social pressure that mothers experience as they are held solely responsible for their children’s survival.

7.2. Mothers’ Agency in Wartime

While women and mothers are portrayed as especially prone to suffer violence in a variety of forms, *Half of a Yellow Sun* simultaneously contests narrations of victimised and helpless women in general, and of mothers in particular. Adichie is not content with depicting mothers as vulnerable, passive onlookers who turn into victims of their circumstances, but rather underlines mothers’ active roles and agency during the Nigeria-Biafra war. Whilst women more generally need to invent new ways to survive as men are conscripted, and as women thus take on roles that were formerly not available to them (Turshen 20), the fact that numerous mothers become indispensable to their families’ survival is especially noteworthy in the context of the present thesis. Agentive behaviour on the side of mothers has previously been discussed in relation to violent circumstances such as war. Joy Damousi analyses mothers’ action-taking to “prevent further violence in war, especially in relation to their children” as agentive practices that subvert the notion of the victimised mother (120). I argue that this negotiation of violence (Damousi 119) exerted by mothers also features as a central aspect of Adichie’s exploration of motherhood in relation to gendered norms.

Olanna’s adaptation to her changed circumstances and to the challenges that war places on her in her role as a mother shows how she defies the role of a war victim and gains agency instead. Throughout the years of war that Olanna’s family suffers,

she attempts to keep the violence that rattles the country outside her door, and thus also out of her child's life. Unable to stop the chaos of war from reaching ever closer and from endangering her loved ones, Olanna nevertheless finds other ways to act against the impending threats of death and madness. As she holds on to specific quotidian mothering practices, such as bathing Baby or teaching her, Olanna not only upholds her "intensive mothering" (Reich 699) practice, but actively attempts to ban war and its violence from her family's lives. Through taking recourse to what Damousi identifies as the "limited choices available to [mothers]" in the light of an armed conflict (122), Olanna proves that she is not a helpless bystander, that she is unwilling to "exist limply, waiting to die" and let others "dictate the terms of her life," (Adichie 280) but that she is able to negotiate the violent chaos that impinges on her life instead.

As has been carved out in the previous chapter, care practices such as bathing and feeding are central and recurring elements of the storyline that, however, take on an almost ritualised character in Olanna's struggle with wartime events. On the one hand, the fact that the bathing and feeding of Baby are daily practices that remain uninterrupted by war highlights how the "ordinary continually reasserts itself" in times of war in Adichie's novel (Coundouriotis 227). These moments that zoom in on Baby's bathing as an element of "ordinary" (Coundouriotis 227) life are especially noteworthy when they clash with events that are extraordinary. When the events of war force Olanna's family to leave their old home behind, and Olanna compiles a mental list of necessary tasks to be fulfilled before they may go, she ponders on how she "had already packed the albums [and] had bathed Baby" (Adichie 195). At another point, Olanna "[is] giving Baby an evening bath when the siren alarm [sounds] again," (Adichie 275). Clearly, the everyday necessities of childcare are shown to remain upright despite war. At the same time, as the repetitiveness topicalisation of Baby's bathing suggests, Olanna's preoccupation with childcare tasks allows her to ensure her own as well as her child's mental stability. Metaphorically speaking, this ritualised practice enables Olanna to clean war's dirt off her child. Caring for her child allows Olanna to remain active, and although her focus on Baby's care in a ritualised manner may be understood as part of a mechanism of repression, her substantiation of the "ordinary" (Coundouriotis 227) also serves Olanna to exert a limited amount of control in an otherwise chaotic period.

The true extent to which Olanna has created an artificial bubble of stability around her little family is revealed when she reacts badly as Baby catches lice despite Olanna's focus on the child's cleanliness, a reaction that further underlines how Olanna's understanding of herself as a good mother is highly dependent on the bathing routine she has developed. As she screams at Ugwu, "[l]ice? What are you saying? How can Baby have lice? I keep her clean," and then makes Baby cry as she searches her hair rather roughly (Adichie 277), Olanna clearly struggles for control. Because the dirt of war that she attempted to keep away from her child settles on her nevertheless, Olanna is in danger of losing the ground beneath her feet. The fact that Baby catches lice despite Olanna's bathing routine highlights how Olanna's agency is limited by external, uncontrollable factors. This circumstance, however, conflicts with her equation of 'good' motherhood with intensive mothering. Given that war has already rid Olanna from the possibility of self-determination and choice in various ways, it is all the more meaningful to her to retain a small portion of control, or to, at least, keep up an illusion thereof. Olanna's struggle for control, and hence for stability, is also illustrated in her thoughts about Baby's illness:

When, towards the end of the rainy season, Baby began to cough in drawn-out whistles, Olanna felt relief. Something had happened to Baby. If the heavens were fair, war-time misfortunes would be mutually exclusive; since Baby was sick, she could not be harmed in an air raid. A cough was something Olanna could exercise control over, an air raid was not. (Adichie 262-263)

However, as Baby's cough worsens, Olanna has to learn that her own resources and powers as a mother are limited. Although Olanna's caring routine has allowed her to upkeep a level of mental stability, she simultaneously must acknowledge that there are events she cannot avert or influence, even if she fulfils most of the parameters of 'good' motherhood that she aspires to. The pressure to ensure Baby's wellbeing that Olanna experiences as Baby's mother in the light of social regulations of 'good' mothering practices is further intensified as the chaos of war renders Olanna less able to conform to the motherhood ideal she has committed herself to.

Gendered norms of motherhood are further subverted in the novel as mothers take on roles that were formerly reserved for men, mostly in order to ensure their families' survival, thus subverting social norms. Mrs Muokelu explains to Olanna, who is her fellow teacher at a school in the town of Umuahia, "I have twelve people to feed [...] I am going to start *afia* attack" (Adichie 293). Driving past the Biafran border to

import supplies that the cut-off region no longer has access to, Mrs Muokelu actively contributes to the survival of her family as well as to that of her community. Taking this dangerous journey upon herself, Mrs Muokelu challenges the notion of the passive, victimised mother who has been silenced by the events of war and who is paralysed by impending danger. As she passes the border, Mrs Muokelu actively negotiates her surroundings, and in her adaptability to the challenging situations that war places her in, she also turns into a role-model to Olanna. She is the one who teaches Olanna how to make soap, and she also helps her when Baby loses her appetite. Through these lessons, the older woman contributes to the survival of Olanna's family and enables Olanna to become more independent and self-sufficient.

The fact that Mrs Muokelu's incentive and her willingness to defend herself and those she cares for signify a transgression of restrictive gender norms is reflected in other characters' description and stance towards the self-determined mother's physical appearance. Although Olanna describes Mrs Muokelu as a friend, she also ponders on how the "thick, black hair on her arms and legs, the fuzz on her upper lip, the curled strands on her chin, and the squat, muscular limbs often made [her] wonder if perhaps Mrs Muokelu would have been better off being born a man" (264). Odenigbo, similarly, asks Olanna "[h]ow much hair does Mrs Muokelu have on her chest?" (273). Because Mrs Muokelu's 'unfeminine' looks mirror her non-conforming actions, the mocking comments that her appearance elicit are a clear indicator of other characters' uneasiness with her transgressive gender performance. But when Olanna wonders whether her friend might have been "better off being born a man," (264) this thought can not only be read as a comment on Mrs Muokelu's hairiness and, hence, her lack of a heteronormative feminine appearance, but it also speaks of Olanna's awareness of the strict gender norms that her society places upon its members. Indeed, in the societal context of the novel, Mrs Muokelu's looks and actions might resemble more closely those of a man, but as it is, she subverts the gendered roles of a woman as well as of a mother, and additionally functions as a role model to other women, not despite, but because of her non-conformity.

Although Olanna ridicules her friend's looks, and thus also participates in the upholding of gender norms, she clearly admires those characteristics that render the other woman less conforming. As she "watche[s] the swift movements of the masculine arm," Olanna wonders how "[t]hey really had nothing in common, herself and this

barely educated primary-school teacher” but how, nevertheless, the other woman “had always seemed familiar [...] because [she] exuded fearlessness, a fearlessness that reminded Olanna of Kainene” (265). While Olanna seeks to distance herself from Mrs Muokelu’s ‘un-feminine’ looks as well as her behaviour, she also notices a closeness between them. The fact that Olanna likens Mrs Muokelu to her sister Kainene is noteworthy given that both characters are not regarded as typically ‘feminine’ for the same reasons: they are self-determined and seemingly fearless, and the looks of both women are either described as “androgynous,” “boyish,” (60) or “masculine” (265). Although Olanna does not seem to perceive herself as either fearless or very confident, she exhibits those exact characteristics herself at various points, and especially in her role as Baby’s mother. Thus, although their appearances might differ, Olanna and Mrs Muokelu are both agentive, self-determined mothers who are willing to act in the interest of their families even if this means they need to face up to danger.

Mama Oji, Olanna’s neighbour, is yet another mother who is portrayed as a fierce fighter whose active and unyielding character moreover stands in contrast with her husband’s reluctance to engage in fight:

In the evenings, when Mama Oji fought with her husband, her voice tore across the yard. ‘You castrated sheep! You call yourself a man, and yet you deserted the army! Let me just hear you tell anybody again that you were wounded in battle! Just open that dirty mouth one more time, and I will go and call the soldiers and show them where you have been hiding!’ (328)

Far from a victim, Mama Oji, although she has lost three of her children, cannot understand her husband’s fear. Against social conventions, this mother displays a violent temper; as she belittles her husband by doubting his masculinity and, thus, verbally violates him, she simultaneously perpetuates gender norms that prescribe men to perform a specific, proactive form of masculinity. Whilst at the same time, she subverts norms of femininity that negate women’s role as aggressors and gains agency via her self-assertive behaviour. Mama Oji, thus, functions as a prime example of how “agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive,” (Nnaemeka 3) a fact that rejects simplifying accounts of femininity and motherhood but draws heightened attention to the complex lives of mothers instead.

To sum up, as this final chapter has shown, the setting of Adichie’s novel amidst the turbulences of the Nigerian civil war highlights the vulnerability and psychological violation of mothers who feel responsible, and who are held responsible, for their

children's welfare. Olanna's devotion for Baby and her constant foregrounding of her child's needs amidst the chaos of war moreover questions the necessity of a biological link between mother and child for the development of an intense emotional relationship and sense of obligation. Additionally, the invisible and highly gender-based violence committed against mothers draws attention to the social monitoring of mothering practices. Summing up, the stability of normative gender roles is subverted as war re-organises social contexts and throws mothers' agency in violent circumstances into sharp relief.

8. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analysed how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* explores the relationship between motherhood and gender normative discourse in the turbulent era of the Nigerian 1960s. Drawing on a theoretical and conceptual gender studies framework and taking into account postcolonial adaptations and challenges to theories established in the Global North, I have shown that Adichie's novel makes explicit the social monitoring of gender norms that essentialise motherhood and mother-child relationships. In addition, the novel subverts essentialising discourse when it provides alternatives to restrictive models of motherhood and gender in Nigerian society. In three close-reading chapters, with each focussing on particular sub-topics related to my research question, the complex picture of motherhood painted in Adichie's novel and the interrelated subversion of essentialising gender norms becomes graspable.

When it comes to the topic of choosing, or not choosing, motherhood, I have demonstrated how *Half of a Yellow Sun* explores the influential role of biologising discourse that links motherhood and femininity in Igbo society. The intense social monitoring that women are subjected to is made most evident in Adichie's topicalisation of infertility and the impending social exclusion that the inability to bear children frequently signifies in Nigeria. In this context, Olanna's choice of non-biological motherhood is framed as an empowering act that grants agency and allows her to subvert essentialist norms of femininity. At the same time, the fact that Olanna subverts gender norms precisely via her adoption of the role of the mother, which is after all a highly traditional position for women in Nigeria, allows for a reconceptualisation and positive evaluation of motherhood beyond essentialising gender discourse. Moreover,

Olanna's twin sister is portrayed as a woman whose success and fulfilment are not dependent on motherhood, a fact that adds to the denaturalisation of motherhood and to the subversion of restrictive gender norms in the novel.

The reconceptualisation of motherhood and gender beyond essentialising definitions is also made possible by Adichie's strong focus on the performative aspect of mothering practices. Especially the fact that Olanna continuously re-constitutes her mother-child relationship with Baby via a repetition of a specific set of mothering tasks destabilises the primacy of biological motherhood and draws attention to motherhood as a socially-conditioned practice instead. By exploring the possibly ambiguous feelings that may shape the relationship between mothers and children, Adichie further adds to a deconstruction of essentialising definitions of motherhood. In addition, it is arguable that Ugwu's care practices for Baby may also be described in terms of mothering and that his participation in this gendered practice not only de-stabilises normative conceptualisations of care and of masculinity but adds to the novel's reconceptualisation of motherhood beyond gender.

The historical setting of Adichie's story in the midst of the Nigerian civil war adds another layer to the reading of motherhood as a gendered practice. On the one hand, I have shown that specific, psychological forms of gender-based violence are shown to frequently affect mothers differently than they affect other population groups, and thus highlighted mothers' heightened vulnerability in times of war. This vulnerability is partly due to gendered norms of motherhood which put mothers under extreme, and frequently under sole, pressure to sustain their children. Not only is the gender-based, psychological violence that mothers may experience during war emphasised, but it also throws into sharp relief Olanna's emotional involvement with Baby, thus challenging the supremacy of biological motherhood in essentialising discourse. On the other hand, the fact that mothers are also portrayed as agentive negotiators of violent circumstances destabilises gendered accounts of the victimised mother during war, thereby adding to the novel's re-configuration of motherhood.

Taken together, these results suggest that motherhood experiences a conceptual modification in *Half of a Yellow Sun* that goes beyond essentialising, biologising gender norms. The multi-faceted depiction of motherhood in Adichie's novel not only allows for an alternative view of motherhood but it also subverts restrictive norms of femininity and masculinity in the process. Therefore, I argue that

the novel can be read as a contribution to change in the discursive constructions of gender and motherhood. Although Adichie provides a highly contextualised reading of motherhood and gender, I argue that her reconceptualisation of motherhood and subversion of gender norms go beyond a 1960s Nigerian context. The intense social monitoring of motherhood and of childcare practices is a topic of great relevance in diverse contemporary societies. The fact that issues related to motherhood, such as breastfeeding, or women's wish to reconcile motherhood with a career, incessantly feature in public media and academic discussions shows that the literary engagement with these topics also points to an awareness of the contemporary interest in motherhood as a highly supervised, gendered practice. Thus, I propose that Adichie's novel also serves to inspire a re-thinking of still-standing essentialist notions of motherhood and of gender.

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, there are topics in connection to motherhood as a gendered issue in Adichie's novel, but also with regard to the treatment of motherhood in other works by the same author, that I have not been able to touch upon. Different works by Adichie similarly lend themselves to analyses on the intersection between motherhood and gender norms; the mother-role certainly inhabits a central space in her widely-acclaimed novel *Purple Hibiscus*, and, in her latest publication *Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, Adichie centres on contemporary, feminist mothering practice. I am convinced that future research into Adichie's work could bring further vital insights regarding the intersection of gender norms and motherhood to the table.

9. Bibliography

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. 1959. New York: Penguin, 2017.
- Adichie, Chimamanda N. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. 2006. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.
- Agho, Kingsley E., Michael J. Dibley, Justice I. Odiase, and Sunday M. Ogbonmwan. "Determinants of exclusive breastfeeding in Nigeria." *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 11 (2011): 1-8. Web. 24 Nov. 2019. <<http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2393/11/2>>.
- Akujobi, Remi. "Motherhood in African Literature and Culture." *Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.1 (2011): 2-7. Web. 1 October 2018. <<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss1/2/>>.
- Amato, Viola. *Intersex Narratives: Shifts in the Representation of Intersex Lives in North American Literature and Popular Culture*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016.
- Ampofo, Akosua A., Josephine Beoku-Betts, and Mary Johnson Osirim. "Researching African Women and Gender Studies: New Social Science Perspectives." *African and Asian Studies* 7 (2008): 327-341.
- Atanga, Lilian, Sibonile E. Ellece, Lia Litosseliti, and Jane Sunderland. "Gender and Language in Sub-Saharan African Contexts: Issues and Challenges." *Gender and Language* 6.1 (2012): 1-20.
- Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. Rev. of *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, by Oyeronke Oyewumi. *African Identities* 1.1 (2003): 121-142.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1960.
- Boris, Eileen. "Gender After Africa!" *Africa After Gender?* Ed. Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007. 191-204.
- Boyce Davies, Carole. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, London: Routledge, 1990.
- . "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*." *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986): 35-49.
- Caldwell, John C., and Helen Ware. "The Evolution of Family Planning in an African City: Ibadan Nigeria." *Population Studies* 31.3 (1977): 487-507.
- Carwile, Christey. "Sweet Mothers: Feminine Forms of Power in Nigeria." Diss. Southern Illinois Univ., 2007.
- Coundouriotis, Eleni. *The People's Right to the Novel: War Fiction in the Postcolony*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014.
- Damousi, Joy. "Mothers in War: 'Responsible Mothering,' Children, and the Prevention of Violence in Twentieth-Century War." *History and Theory* 56.4 (2017): 119-134.
- Dimka, Ritgak A., and Simon L. Dein. "The Work of a Woman is to Give Birth to Children: Cultural Constructions of Infertility in Nigeria." *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 17.2 (2013): 102-117.
- Diop, Cheikh Anta. *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and of Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity*. London: Karnak House, 1989.

- Donath, Orna. *Regretting Motherhood: A Study*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2017.
- Dove, Nah. "African Womanism: an Afrocentric Theory." *Journal of Black Studies* 28.5 (1998): 515-539.
- Eboiyehi, Friday A. "Convicted Without Evidence: Elderly Women and Witchcraft Accusations in Contemporary Nigeria." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 18.4 (2017): 247-265.
- Ebron, Paula A. "Constituting Subjects through Performative Acts." *Africa After Gender?* Ed. Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 171-190.
- Einhorn, Barbara. "Citizenship." *Gender: The Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Falola, Toyin. *The History of Nigeria*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Falola, Toyin, and Matthew M. Heaton. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Fernandes, Leela. *Transnational Feminism in the United States: Knowledge, Ethics, and Power*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." By Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983. 208-228.
- . *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Frost, Nollaig, and Deborah Rodriguez. "'And It Was All My Choice But It Didn't Feel Like a Choice': A Re-Examination of Interpretation of Data Using a 'Rhetoric of Choice' Lens." *Women's Studies International Forum* 53 (2015): 192-199.
- Frost, Nollaig, Rose Capdevila, and Sally Johnson. "Special Issue of Women's Studies International Forum: Choosing Mothering? The Gendering of Agency." *Women's Studies International Forum* 53 (2015): 103-106.
- Gatson, Sarah N. "Multiracial Motherhood: A Genealogical Exploration." *Patricia Hill Collins: Reconceiving Motherhood*. Ed. Kaila Adia Story. Bradford: Demeter Press, 2014. 13-37.
- Gill, Aisha K., Gina Heathcote, and Emma Williamson. "Violence." *Feminist Review* 112.1 (2016): 1-10.
- Gilligan, Carol. "In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and of Morality," *Harvard Educational Review* 47.4 (1977): 481-517.
- Heerten Lasse, and A. Dirk Moses. "The Nigeria-Biafra War: Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide." *Journal of Genocide Research* 16.2-3 (2014): 169-203.
- Held, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2006. 24 Nov. 2019.
<<https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0195180992.001.0001/acprof-9780195180992?rskey=hUS73z&result=1>>.
- Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood*. London: Harvill Secker, 2018.
- Ibrahim, Huma. "Ontological Victimhood: 'Other' Bodies in Madness and Exile – Toward a Third World Feminist Epistemology." *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*. Ed. Obioma Nnaemeka. London: Routledge, 1997. 148-162.

- Imbua, David L. "Robbing Others to Pay Mary Slessor: Unearthing the Authentic Heroes and Heroines of the Abolition of Twin-Killing in Calabar." *African Economic History* 41 (2013): 139-158.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Zur Geschlechterdifferenz: Interviews und Vorträge*. Wien: Wiener Frauenverlag, 1987.
- Kailing, Xie. "The Naturalisation of Motherhood Within Marriage and its Implications for Chinese Academic Women." *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* 9.1 (2019): 59-84.
- Kawash, Samira. "New Directions in Motherhood Studies." *Signs* 36.4 (2011): 969-1003.
- Keller, Jean. "Rethinking Ruddick and the Ethnocentrism Critique of *Maternal Thinking*." *Hypatia* 25.4 (2010): 834-851.
- Keller, Reiner. "Michel Foucault: Discourse, Power/Knowledge and the Modern Subject." *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*. Ed. Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner. London: Routledge, 2017. 67-81.
- King, Angela. "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5.2 (2004): 29-39.
- Kowino, Hilary C. "From Victims to Agents: Rethinking Motherhood and Feminism." *Journal of the African Literature Association* 8.1 (Fall 2013-Spring 2014): 24-38.
- LaChance Adams, Sarah. *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a "Good" Mother Would Do: The Ethics of Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia UP, 2014.
- Mandara, Mairo. "Family Planning in Nigeria and Prospects for the Future." *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics* 117 (2012): 1-4.
- Marneffe, Daphne de. *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2004.
- Marroquín, Andrés, and Colleen Haight. "Twin-Killing in Some Traditional Societies: An Economic Perspective." *Journal of Bioeconomics* 19.3 (2017): 261-279.
- McCracken, Darrah, and Joan C. Tronto. "Care." *Gender: The Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Meyer, Cheryl L., and Michelle Oberman. *Mothers Who Kill Their Children: Understanding the Acts of Moms from Susan Smith to the 'Prom Mom'*. New York: New York UP, 2001.
- Merley Hill, Alexandra. "Motherhood as Performance: (Re)Negotiations of Motherhood in Contemporary German Literature." *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 35.1 (2011): 74-94.
- Miescher, Stephan F., Catherine M. Cole, and Takyiwaa Manuh. "Introduction: When Was Gender?" *Africa After Gender?* Ed. Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 1-14.
- Mohanty, Chandra T. "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through Anticapitalist Struggles." *Signs* 28.2 (Winter 2003): 499-535.
- . "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *boundary 2* 12.3-13.1 (Spring – Autumn 1984): 333-358.
- Mottarella, Karen E., Barbara A. Fritzsche, Shannon N. Whitten, and Davina Bedsole. "Exploration of 'Good Mother' Stereotypes in the College Environment." *Sex Roles* 60 (2009): 223-231.
- Muwati, Itai, Zifikile Gambahaya, and Tavengwa Gwekwerere. "Africana Womanism and African Proverbs: Theoretical Grounding of Mothering/Motherhood in

- Shona and Ndebele Cultural Discourse." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 35.1 (2011): 1-8.
- Neuhaus, Stefan. *Literaturvermittlung*. Konstanz: UVK, 2009.
- Neyer, Gerda, and Laura Bernardi. "Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction." *Historical Social Research* 36.2 (2011): 162-176.
- Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana M. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.
- Nnaemeka, Obioma. "Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins." *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*. Ed. Obioma Nnaemeka. London: Routledge, 1997. 1-25.
- Ogunyemi, Christopher B. "Gender (Re)configuration in Nigerian Literature through Time and Space." *Journal of Literary Studies* 34.4 (2018): 122-134.
- Okagbue, Hilary I., Abiodun A. Opanuga, Muminu O. Adamu, Paulinus O. Ugwoke, Emmanuela C.M. Obasi, and Grace A. Eze. "Personal Name in Igbo Culture: A Dataset on Randomly Selected Personal Names and their Statistical Analysis." *Data in Brief* 15 (2017): 72-80.
- Olayiwola, Abiodun, and Adekunle Olowonmi. "Mothering Children in Africa: Interrogating Single Parenthood in African Literature." *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 25 (2013): 141-159.
- Omosun, Adenike O., and Odeyemi Kofoworola. "Knowledge, Attitude and Practice towards Child Adoption amongst Women Attending Infertility Clinics in Lagos State, Nigeria." *African Journal of Primary Health Care & Family Medicine* 3.1 (2011): 1-8.
- Oyewumi, Oyeronke. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Pande, Raksha. "Strategic Essentialism." *The International Encyclopedia of Geography*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2017.
- Pfennig, Daniela. *Parallelwelten: Raumkonzepte in der Fantastischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur der Gegenwart*. Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2013.
- Reich, Jennifer A. "Neoliberal Mothering and Vaccine Refusal: Imagined Gated Communities and the Privilege of Choice." *Gender and Society* 28.5 (2014): 679-704.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. 1989. Boston: Beacon, 1995.
- Russo, Nancy F. "The Motherhood Mandate." *Journal of the Social Sciences* 32 (1976): 143-153.
- Schor, Naomi. "Feminist and Gender Studies." *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*. 2nd ed. Ed. Joseph Gibaldi. New York: MLA, 1992. 262-287.
- Shaw, Rhonda. "Performing Breastfeeding: Embodiment, Ethics and the Maternal Subject." *Feminist Review* 78 (2004): 99-116.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. 1993. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Stephens, Julie. *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking: Feminism, Memory, and Care*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011.
- Tazi-Preve, Mariam I. *Motherhood in Patriarchy: Animosity Towards Mothers in Politics and Feminist Theory – Proposals for Change*. Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2013.

- Thomas, Lynn M. "Gendered Reproduction: Placing Schoolgirl Pregnancies in African History." *Africa After Gender?* Ed. Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 48-62.
- Tronto, Joan C. "Beyond Gender Difference to a Theory of Care." *Signs* 12.4 (1987): 644-663.
- T'Shaka, Oba. *Return to the African Mother Principle of Male and Female Equality*. Vol. 1. Oakland: Pan African Publishers, 1995.
- Turshen, Meredith. "Women's War Stories." *What Women Do in Wartime*. Ed. Meredith Turshen, and Clotilde Twagiramariya. London: Zed Books, 1998. 1-26.
- Uadia, Patrick O., and Abiodun M. Emokpae. "Male Infertility in Nigeria: A Neglected Reproductive Health Issue Requiring Attention." *Journal of Basic and Clinical Reproductive Sciences* 4.2 (2015): 45-53.
- United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division. *World Population Prospects 2019: Total Population (Both Sexes Combined) by Region, Subregion and Country, Annually for 1950-2100 (Thousands)*. August 2019. *UN World Population Prospects 2019 Download Center*. Web. 2 Dec. 2019.
- . Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Context of Transitional Justice*. October 2014. *OHCHR Documentation and Reports*. Web. 2 Dec. 2019.
- Uwakweh, Pauline. "(Re)Constructing Masculinity and Femininity in African War Narratives: The Youth in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Gorretti Kyomuhendo's *Waiting: A Novel of Uanda at War*." *Journal of the African Literature Association* 7.1 (2012): 82-106.
- Weare, Siobhan. "Bad, Mad or Sad? Legal Language, Narratives, and Identity Constructions of Women Who Kill their Children in England and Wales." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 30.2 (2017): 201-222.
- . "'The Mad', 'The Bad', 'The Victim': Gendered Constructions of Women Who Kill within the Criminal Justice System." *Laws* 2 (2013): 337-361.
- Wilson-Tagoe, Nana. "Representing Culture and Identity: African Women Writers and National Cultures." *Africa After Gender?* Ed. Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 224-238.
- Zulfiqar Chaudhry, Sadia. "African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender." Diss. U of Glasgow, 2014.

10. Appendix

10.1. English Abstract

Motherhood, as a topic that is tightly interwoven with socio-culturally and socio-historically dependent conceptualisations of gender, has sparked a vast amount of research as well as public interest over the past decades. In addressing how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2006 historical novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* portrays the gendered reality of motherhood in 1960s Nigerian society, my thesis joins in this ongoing conversation and highlights the subversive potential of Adichie's literary engagement with motherhood as a gendered practice. Drawing on a conceptual and theoretical gender studies framework that further takes into account the postcolonial, Nigerian context of the novel, I address how this literary work thematises the intersection point of two highly normed concepts – motherhood and gender – in the course of my close reading. I argue that *Half of a Yellow Sun* not only throws into sharp relief the discursive construction and social monitoring of essentialist views of motherhood and gender, but that the novel additionally provides alternative and subversive conceptualisations of both. Via the portrayal of a wide range of possible 'motherhood(s)', via its unlinking of care and femininity, its focus on the performative aspects of motherhood, and its attention to mothers' agency, Adichie's novel contributes to a reconceptualisation of motherhood beyond essentialist gender norms that is not only relevant in the historic and cultural story context, but that may challenge still-standing gender-normative, essentialising discourse.

10.2. German Abstract

German Abstract

Mutterschaft ist ein Thema, welches aufgrund seiner Verflechtung mit soziokulturellen sowie soziohistorischen Genderkonzepten in den vergangenen Jahrzehnten ein enormes Forschungsinteresse und öffentliche Aufmerksamkeit auf sich gezogen hat. In der vorliegenden Arbeit beteilige ich mich an dieser andauernden Konversation, indem ich darlege, wie Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies historischer Roman *Half of a Yellow Sun* diese genderbasierte Normierung der Mutterrolle aufgreift. Dabei wird unter anderem das subversive Potential von Adichies literarischer Beschäftigung mit

der engen Bindung von Mutterschaft an Geschlechternormen thematisiert. Vor dem konzeptuellen und theoretischen Hintergrund der Genderforschung sowie unter Berücksichtigung des postkolonialen, nigerianischen Kontexts befasse ich mich mit der Schnittstelle zweier normierter Konzepte: Mutterschaft und Gender. Dadurch lässt sich erkennen, dass in *Half of a Yellow Sun* nicht nur die diskursive Entstehung und die soziale Überwachung essentialistischer Ansichten von Mutterschaft und Geschlecht deutlich hervortreten, sondern auch, dass der Roman alternative sowie subversive Konstruktionen beider Konzepte ermöglicht. Die Darstellung einer großen Bandbreite möglicher 'Mutterschaften,' die Loslösung von Fürsorgekonzepten von Weiblichkeit, die Fokussierung auf eine performative Konstruktion der Mutterrolle, sowie die Handlungsmacht, die der Roman Müttern zuteilwerden lässt, tragen zu einer Deessentialisierung der Mutterrolle, sowie von Geschlechterkonzepten bei. Diese Kritik essentialistischer und biologisierender Normen von Mutterschaft und Gender ist nicht nur im historisch-kulturellen Kontext von Adichies Erzählung relevant, sondern stellt auch andauernde, normalisierende und biologisierende Einstellungen zu Mutterschaft in Frage.