



People's Democratic Republic of Algeria
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Master Dissertation

Literature and Civilization

Women and War in Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War*

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master Degree
in Literature

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Academic Year: 2024-2025

Declaration

I, Bekhouche Chaima, declare I am the only author of this master dissertation entitled *Women and War in Chinua Achebe's Girls at War* and supervised by Mr. Benabderazak Abdenacer, hereby declare that this research is my own work and has never been submitted or presented before for any academic institution or university for any degree.

Dedication

To my mother,

This thesis is dedicated to you Mother

Your love, support, and sacrifices have been fundamental to my journey. I want you to know that despite the challenges we have faced, I understand and forgive you.

Your strength and resilience have always been a source of inspiration to me. Through everything, you have shown me the importance of perseverance and the power of unconditional love.

This achievement is not only mine but ours, a testament to your enduring support and belief in me. Thank you for being there in your own way, and for all the lessons learned through our shared experiences.

With love and forgiveness

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Mr. Benabderazak Abdenacer for his unwavering support, guidance, patience, and encouragement throughout my research and writing process, I could not have imagined having a better advisor and mentor for my master's study.

I am also profoundly grateful to the jury members for their time and effort in evaluating my work. Their insightful comments and suggestions have greatly contributed to the improvement of my research.

My sincere appreciation extends to the faculty and staff of the Department of English Language and Literature. Their dedication to fostering a supportive and stimulating academic environment has been crucial to my development as a scholar. I would also like to acknowledge the administrative staff, Their efficiency and kindness have made the journey smoother and more manageable. To my fellow students and colleagues, thank you for the stimulating discussions, camaraderie, and mutual support. The shared experiences and collaborative spirit have enriched my academic journey and made it an unforgettable experience.

Abstract

This research investigates the representation of women's experiences during the Nigerian Civil War in Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War*. The current study aims to examine gender dynamics within a postcolonial context, offering insights into the resilience and agency of women during times of conflict. The central problem addressed is the lack of focused studies on women's experiences during the Nigerian Civil War in literature, with a particular emphasis on how these experiences are depicted in Achebe's work. The methodology involves a qualitative literary analysis of *Girls at War*, applying principles of postcolonial feminist theory and supported by secondary sources, including critical essays and studies on African and Nigerian literature. The findings reveal Achebe's skillful portrayal of women's needs and aspirations, highlighting their strength and independence amidst social turmoil. This work contributes to the broader discourse on African literature and feminist studies, and emphasizes the critical role of gender dynamics in understanding the impact of war and social unrest on women, suggesting avenues for future research on similar themes.

Keywords: Nigerian Civil War, Gender Dynamics, Postcolonial Feminist Theory, Women's Resilience, African Literature.

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General Introduction

African literature has long served as a vibrant tapestry weaving together the rich cultural diversity, historical significance, and pressing social concerns of the continent. It stands as a powerful medium through which the complexities of African life and identity are articulated, celebrated, and critiqued. Among the various national literatures, Nigerian literature stands out for its incisive examinations of crucial humanitarian issues such as gender, feminism, postcolonialism, and colonialism.

Nigerian literature is renowned for its bold and sharp insights into these critical themes, offering readers around the world a window into the nuanced and often tumultuous experiences of its people. At the forefront of this literary tradition is Chinua Achebe, one of Nigeria's most illustrious and influential authors. Achebe's contributions to Nigerian literature are monumental, characterized by his controversial yet profound writings and a literary style that has left an indelible mark on the global literary landscape.

Chinua Achebe's works are not merely stories; they are powerful tools that illuminate and critique the challenging social and political realities of Nigeria. Through his narrative prowess, Achebe brings to light the struggles and triumphs of his people, challenging readers to confront the complexities of Nigerian society. His seminal works, such as *Things Fall Apart*, have become essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the intricate dynamics of African postcolonial life.

In *Girls at War*, Achebe delves deep into the harrowing effects of war on women, presenting a profound exploration of their strength and resilience. This collection of stories showcases the multifaceted roles women play in times of conflict and their unwavering courage in the face of adversity. Achebe masterfully intertwines themes of gender, society, and literature, offering a unique perspective on women's lives in postcolonial settings.

Through *Girls at War*, Achebe not only highlights the brutal realities of war but also celebrates the indomitable spirit of women who navigate these challenges with grace and fortitude. His portrayal of women's experiences serves as a poignant reminder of their pivotal role in the fabric of society and the enduring impact of their contributions to the cultural and social discourse. Authors like Achebe have paved the way for future generations of writers, ensuring that the stories of Nigeria and its people remain a vital part of the global literary heritage.

Through their works, we are invited to engage with and reflect upon the intricate tapestry of human experience enriched by the voices and visions of African storytellers.

1. Statement of the Problem

Despite existing studies on the Nigerian Civil War, there still persists a need for more focused examinations of women's experiences during such difficult times in literature. Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War* provides a critical lens through which to explore these themes and offers insights into the broader social and cultural dynamics at play.

The current research focuses on Achebe's short story *Girls at War*, in which he vividly portrays how the Nigerian Civil War impacts women. By placing this analysis within the broader framework of African literature and postcolonial feminist theory, we gain a deeper understanding of how women's needs evolve during conflicts and social unrest.

2. Aims and Objectives

This research primarily aims to analyze how Achebe depicts women's needs and aspirations in *Girls at War*. Another aim is to apply feminist theory to understand the gender dynamics portrayed in the story and highlight women's resilience and independence in the face of conflict and societal changes.

3. Rationale of the Research

This research is conducted to understand the broader issues of gender roles and equality by understanding how women are portrayed in literature, particularly in times of war and social unrest. It adds to the body of literature that strives to analyze women's struggles in similar settings.

4. Main Research Question

How are women's needs and aspirations portrayed in Achebe's *Girls at War*? Moreover, what does his portrayal reveal about the gender dynamics in postcolonial Nigerian society?

How did African literary works challenge colonial narratives and how it present the indigenous perspectives that have been historically marginalized?

5. Methodology

This research methodology depends on the close literary analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War* and applying the principles of postcolonial feminist theory to the analysis. This study's critical analysis of the short story is supported by secondary sources like critical essays on Achebe's work, African and Nigerian literature studies, and theoretical texts on postcolonial feminism. Establishing the theoretical framework in chapters one and two provides an understanding of African and Nigerian literature and a background on Achebe's life and previous works. Moreover, the theoretical background also thoroughly examines feminism and its subsections of African and Nigerian feminism. In the final chapter, this study analyzes Achebe's *Girls at War* from a feminist perspective to fully comprehend the gender dynamics in the short story and the true impact of the Nigerian Civil War on women.

6. Literary Review

Chinua Achebe's collection of short stories *Girls at War*, provides a nuanced exploration of feminism within the context of post-colonial Nigeria. The stories feature female protagonists navigating the complexities of a society recovering from war, highlighting their resilience and agency amidst patriarchal norms. Applying feminist theory, Achebe critiques traditional gender roles and societal expectations, portraying women who challenge and reshape their environments. The protagonist Gladys, for instance, embodies feminist ideals as she negotiates post-war challenges with determination and resourcefulness. Through *Girls at War*, Achebe invites readers

to reflect on the intersection of gender, power dynamics, and cultural identity in a changing Nigerian landscape

In *Girls at War*, Chinua Achebe explores the complex interplay between women's immediate needs and long-term aspirations during the Nigerian Civil War. Through the character of Gladys, the third chapter highlights themes of resilience, empowerment, and transformation, illustrating how women navigate and challenge traditional gender roles in the face of conflict. Achebe's work highlights the importance of addressing both the immediate and broader systematic challenges that women face, advocating for greater gender equality and social justice.

The study of feminism in *Girls at War* by Chinua Achebe reveals a complex interplay of gender, culture, and power. While Achebe's portrayal of women has sparked debate, his stories offer valuable insights into the lives of Nigerian women during a turbulent period. The intersection of gender and war in *Girls at War* provides a rich site for feminist analysis. War disrupts traditional gender roles, creating spaces for women to assume new responsibilities and assert their agency. Critics have noted that Achebe uses the backdrop of war to explore the shifting dynamics of gender relations. Gladys, for instance, moves from being a schoolgirl to a resourceful woman engaged in the war effort, reflecting broader themes of transformation and survival.

Chapter One

cultural Background

Introduction

Africa, the world's second-largest continent, features extensive fertile land and numerous rivers, which played a crucial role in the prosperity of ancient civilizations. The fertile soil and abundant water sources facilitated agricultural practices and supported the growth of thriving communities. However, the continent's rich resources also made it a target for exploitation and conquest, the continent experienced a tumultuous era marked by foreign powers seeking to exploit its vast resources and strategic advantages. The subsequent centuries witnessed the devastating impact of the transatlantic slave trade, a dark chapter that resulted in the forced displacement and enslavement of millions of Africans. This barbaric trade led to significant loss of life, widespread social upheaval, and economic disruption. Communities were torn apart, cultures eroded, and economies destabilized as millions were forcibly removed from their homelands.

During the period known as the Scramble for Africa, In the late 19th century which saw European powers, such as Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Italy, sought to colonize and dominate vast swathes of land for economic gain and geopolitical advantage. This era of imperial expansion was characterized by aggressive competition among European nations, each vying for control over strategic territories and valuable resources. The colonization of Africa resulted in the exploitation of its abundant natural wealth, including minerals, timber, and agricultural produce, which were extracted and exported to fuel the industrial economies of Europe. Additionally, European colonizers imposed their political, social, and cultural systems upon African societies, often at the expense of indigenous autonomy and self-determination.

The consequences of this colonial venture were far-reaching and profound, as it led to the disruption of traditional African societies, the displacement of millions of people, and the imposition of arbitrary borders that divided ethnic groups and fueled conflicts. Moreover, the cultural diversity of Africa was systematically undermined and devalued, as European colonizers imposed their own languages, religions, and value systems upon African peoples, The Colonialism that followed the slave trade, further entrenched systems of exploitation and domination, as European powers carved up Africa through the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. This division of Africa into artificial boundaries disregarded cultural, ethnic, and

linguistic ties, leading to the imposition of colonial rule that exploited resources, suppressed local cultures, and disrupted traditional ways of life. The legacy of colonialism continues to reverberate in contemporary African societies, shaping political structures, economic disparities, and social dynamics (Shih-tsung 1).

1. African Literature Definition and Main Features

African literature encompasses literary works produced by writers from Africa or of African descent, often reflecting the diverse cultures, histories, and experiences of the continent and its diaspora. It encompasses various genres such as novels, poetry, drama, and oral literature, spanning multiple languages and traditions, in the archives of history, Western society's portrayal of African literature stands as a stark statement to the pervasive influence of colonial attitudes and stereotypes. African literary works were unjustly relegated to the margins, dismissed as primitive, inferior, or exotic by Western scholars, educators, and literary critics, Works authored by Africans were often treated as novelties and were rarely included as mandatory reading material in university literature courses. Prevailing beliefs among scholars and educators in Europe, America, and much of colonial Africa asserted that Africa lacked any significant written literary tradition worthy of serious examination, such depictions were not merely academic assessments but reflections of entrenched Eurocentric notions of cultural supremacy and racial hierarchy, which cast Africa and its literary heritage as mere shadows in comparison to the luminance of Europe (Aldukhayil 408 – 413).

African literature was reduced to mere folklore or myth, their profound cultural significance diminished in the face of Western literary norms. Even written works by African authors faced the harsh scrutiny of Western standards, their merit measured against an arbitrary yardstick of literary excellence that perpetuated the devaluation and neglect of African literary achievements, Systemic racism and Eurocentrism within the Western literary establishment led to the dismiss of African literature as inferior or irrelevant. African writers and their works were often overlooked or relegated to the margins of literary discourse, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices about African cultures and societies, the Western world has often failed to recognize the complexity and diversity of African literature, instead relying on simplistic and stereotypical portrayals of the continent, This lack of nuanced representation has contributed to a limited

understanding of African experiences and perspectives in the global literary landscape (Tuchscherer and Fyle 1). (Ogede).

However, these misconceptions were quickly debunked as scholars began to delve deeper into African literary works, African literature possesses a set of distinct characteristics that marks it as a dynamic and lively literary heritage. These traits mirror the varied cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds of African communities across the continent and within the worldwide African diaspora. Below are the principal attributes that define African literature:

Oral Tradition

The telling of stories, advice, and history to new generations often uses mythical and fairytale elements through spoken word. It involves both the material that is spoken and the setting in which it is spoken. While it has been adapted for modern use, oral tradition is still alive and remains a very meaningful mode of storytelling for many Africans. Serving as a means of preserving cultural heritage, transmitting knowledge, and entertaining communities, Oral storytelling was a dynamic and transformative force that shapes the true African identities, fosters social cohesion, and engages with the complexities of African societies past and present

The term *Oral literature* has become widely adopted to denote the subject matter, signifying literature communicated verbally. It has proven immensely valuable for scholars investigating the cultural dynamics between literate and non-literate populations or, in more scholarly terms, exploring the interplay between orality and literacy. The premise underlying this concept is that certain narrative techniques effective in oral literature may not translate well to written forms, and conversely, there exist techniques and elements in written literature that can be traced back to or influenced by oral traditions. Consequently, these diverse techniques and elements have become a compelling focus for comparative analysis, revealing intricate connections and influences between oral and written literary traditions (Okpewho 3 – 4).

Slave Narratives

In African literature, slave narratives refer to autobiographical accounts and stories written by formerly enslaved Africans or their descendants. These narratives provide a profound

and often harrowing depiction of the experiences of enslavement, capturing the brutal and inhumane conditions that enslaved individuals endured. They chronicle the immense struggle for freedom, highlighting the resilience, courage, and determination of those who fought against the oppressive systems that sought to dehumanize them. These narratives also document the journey to emancipation, detailing the personal and collective efforts to achieve liberation and the profound impact of gaining freedom. Through vivid and poignant storytelling, slave narratives offer invaluable insights into the historical, social, and emotional dimensions of slavery, preserving the voices and experiences of those who lived through one of the darkest chapters in human history, these narratives confront historical injustices and challenge dominant narratives about the past, shedding light on the complexities of identity and memory (Fisch 24).

Slave narratives hold a significant place within African literature, serving as powerful testimonies to the enduring legacy of slavery and colonization on the continent. These narratives bear witness to the harrowing experiences of enslaved individuals and their struggles for liberation, dignity, and justice, primarily focusing on the experiences of individuals who were enslaved within Africa itself or who were captured and sold into slavery through various slave trading networks, including the transatlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades. These narratives provide firsthand accounts of the brutalities, injustices, and complexities of slavery within African societies and the broader global context.

Many narratives begin with the capture of individuals, often through raids, warfare, or kidnapping. These individuals were then subjected to various forms of exploitation and bondage, including forced labor, domestic servitude, and military service. For those who were sold into the transatlantic slave trade, narratives often describe the harrowing journey across the Atlantic Ocean, known as the Middle Passage. These accounts detail the overcrowded and inhumane conditions aboard slave ships, as well as the physical and psychological trauma endured by enslaved people during the voyage. Despite the dehumanizing conditions of slavery, many narratives also document acts of resistance, resilience, and solidarity among enslaved individuals. This may include escape attempts, rebellions, acts of sabotage, and the preservation of cultural traditions and identity. Some narratives also chronicle the experiences of individuals who were able to gain their freedom through various means, such as manumission, self-purchase, or escape. These stories provide insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by formerly enslaved

people as they sought to rebuild their lives, these narratives contribute to broader discussions about historical memory, trauma, and social justice, shedding light on the harrowing experiences of enslaved Africans and the devastating consequences of the transatlantic slave trade. By preserving the stories of those who lived through this dark period (Moody 109 – 127).

African Novel

An African novel is a work of fiction written by an author of African descent that reflects the experiences, cultures, histories, and social realities of African people. These novels are characterized by their rich storytelling traditions, diverse narratives, and unique perspectives on various aspects of life on the African continent. The African novel is a diverse and rich literary tradition that encompasses a wide range of themes, styles, and languages. It serves as a mirror that reflects the collective consciousness, values, and sensibilities of African societies, exploring the complexities of African life and experiences. African novels often grapple with the legacies of colonialism and post-colonial challenges, offering insights into the social, political, and economic issues that shape African societies. Prominent examples of African novels include Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngũgĩ waThiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. These works, among others, have significantly contributed to the global understanding of African cultures and histories, establishing African literature as a vital and influential literary tradition.

African novels also celebrate the resilience and vibrancy of African life, showcasing the rich cultural heritage and traditions that define African societies. The novel often credited with paving the way for African literature is *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Published in 1958, the novel explores themes of traditional Igbo society, colonialism, and the clash between cultures. It is considered groundbreaking for its portrayal of African culture and for challenging Western stereotypes about Africa, inspiring many African writers to embrace their own cultures and languages in their literary works. It also highlights the tensions between tradition and modernity, individualism and collectivism, and change and continuity. African novels provide valuable insights into the social, political, and economic issues that shape African societies. They serve as a mirror that reflects the collective consciousness, values, and sensibilities of African societies, offering a unique perspective on the African experience (Nnolim 29 – 53).

2. Nigerian literature

Nigerian literature is characterized by its linguistic diversity and intricate historical narratives. It celebrates the country's diverse ethnic groups, including the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and others, each contributing unique customs and traditions that enrich the thematic depth of narratives. The literature prominently engages with colonial and postcolonial themes, exploring struggles for independence, the formation of national identity, and the enduring impacts of political instability and corruption. Language plays a pivotal role, as Nigerian writers seamlessly weave English, Pidgin English, and indigenous languages together, creating a vibrant linguistic mosaic that authentically mirrors the nation's multicultural fabric.

Historical events such as the Biafran War provide a backdrop for narratives that critique established historical narratives and serve as a vehicle for collective memory. Social and political critique is pervasive, addressing issues ranging from corruption and gender inequality to poverty and human rights abuses, often advocating for social change and fostering resistance movements. The incorporation of folklore, mythology, and oral traditions imbues Nigerian literature with a deep cultural resonance, underscoring the significance of storytelling in Nigerian society. Exploring themes like the urban-rural divide and examining complex issues of gender roles and feminism, Nigerian authors such as Buchi Emecheta and Sefi Atta offer profound insights into societal dynamics. Themes of diaspora, migration, and the interplay of religions such as Christianity, Islam, and indigenous beliefs reflect global influences and the challenges of cultural integration. In sum, Nigerian literature serves as a profound reflection of the dynamic complexities and vibrant spirit of Nigerian life, enriching global literary discourse with its diverse narratives and perspectives. (Gazelle)

3. Chinua Achebe

Life and Literary Contributions

Chinua Achebe, born on November 16, 1930, and passing away on March 21, 2013, was a Nigerian novelist, poet, and critic widely recognized as a leading figure in modern African literature, he is one of Africa's most celebrated authors, he was a literary titan whose impact reverberates through the corridors of literature and history. It is necessary to acknowledge his

unparalleled contributions to African literature, his unflinching commitment to truth-telling, and his unwavering advocacy for social justice (Innes 4 – 6).

On a world scale, he has proven his worth among English-speaking African novelists by representing the African social and political environment in a thoroughly realistic way. His novels depict life within a particular historical background and convey a sense of growing disgust and unrest within Nigerian society, a society that has started to emerge from the colonial complex' caused by years of denigration and self-abasement.

A Man of the People (1967) is Achebe's fourth novel. It describes Nigeria in its post-independence phase, during which time the country became a 'cesspool of corruption and misrule in the context of colonial-style social and economic development, a situation that resulted in conflict between the emergent, elitist middle class and the general population.

Achebe's reputation as a novelist rests on his impartial understanding of, and ability to represent the Nigerian environment, His realistic characterization, and diagnosis of his country's malaise have the power to inspire a revolution informed by African ideologies (Vachaspati 3).

Depicting the real situation of his country, Nigeria, in terms of political instability and corruption, Achebe is a Nigerian author who writes about different aspects of his country during his lifetime and the reflection of his society could be noticed very clearly in his literary works; especially, in his selected novel. Achebe based his most prominent characters in his novels like *M.A. Nanga* and *Odille* on some political figures of his time that have a major role in the corruption in Nigeria (Bekhal 41).

Main Literary Works

Achebe's education in English and exposure to European customs have allowed him to capture both the European and the African perspectives on colonial expansion, religion, race, and culture. His decision to write *Things Fall Apart* in English is an important one. Achebe wanted this novel to respond to earlier colonial accounts of Africa; his choice of language was thus political. Unlike some later African authors who chose to revitalize native languages as a form of resistance to colonial culture, Achebe wanted to achieve cultural revitalization within and through

English. Nevertheless, he manages to capture the rhythm of the Igbo language and he integrates Igbo vocabulary into the narrative (Fagrutheen 10 17 30).

Sugar Baby is a short story that, while not as widely celebrated as Chinua Achebe's renowned African Trilogy (Weiss), significantly enriches Nigerian literature through its thematic depth, cultural commentary, and stylistic contributions. Achebe's narrative prowess shines in his critique of the enduring effects of colonialism on Nigerian society, using the protagonist's addiction to sugar as a poignant metaphor for the country's historical dependence on colonial powers, shaping its economy, cultural norms, and societal values. This critique extends to broader themes of post-colonial identity and the ongoing struggle to reconcile traditional values with modern influences, a tension central to much of Achebe's literary canon. Furthermore, *Sugar Baby* delves into universal human experiences and societal issues through its exploration of addiction, illustrating how personal desires and dependencies can reflect larger socio-economic and cultural dynamics within Nigeria. Culturally, Achebe's story vividly portrays Nigerian life, capturing social interactions, cultural practices, and everyday challenges. The symbolic use of sugar adds layers of meaning that resonate deeply within Nigerian society, prompting reflection on economic dependencies, cultural shifts, and personal aspirations. This allegorical approach not only enhances the story's interpretive depth but also showcases Achebe's skill in using symbolism to enrich the literary experience.

Stylistically, Achebe employs clear and accessible language that makes his narratives approachable to a wide audience, democratizing literature and making it inclusive and relevant both locally and globally. By grounding his storytelling in traditional African narrative traditions, Achebe preserves Indigenous storytelling techniques while elevating them within the realm of written literature, affirming the cultural richness of Nigerian storytelling. Beyond its literary merits, *Sugar Baby* serves as a platform for discussing pressing socio-political issues within Nigeria, sparking critical dialogue on themes such as post-colonial identity, cultural integrity, and societal progress. Achebe's ability to weave these themes into compelling narratives inspires future generations of Nigerian writers, encouraging them to explore similar themes with creativity and social consciousness. (McManus)

Conclusion

Through the voices of African writers, literature not only documents the past but also critically engages with contemporary issues, offering a lens through which the complexities of identity, resistance, and resilience are understood. As African literature continues to evolve, it remains a vital and dynamic field, challenging readers to reconsider preconceived notions and fostering a deeper appreciation of Africa's rich cultural heritage.

African writers have always been at the forefront of articulating their communities' stories and struggles. These narratives often highlight the resilience of African people in the face of colonization, apartheid, and various forms of socio-political oppression. Writers like Chinua Achebe use their literary prowess to shed light on both historical events and contemporary issues and often delve into the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and ethnicity, providing a more comprehensive picture of what it means to be African in various contexts. Similarly, the themes of resistance and resilience are not just historical, they are vividly present in contemporary works that address issues such as corruption, gender inequality, and the struggle for democracy and human rights.

Chapter Two

Postcolonial Feminism and Literature

Introduction

Throughout much of history, women have faced oppression not solely due to their reproductive roles, such as bearing and raising children, but also through the systematic devaluation of these tasks by men as they establish societal norms. Additionally, women have been subjected to sexual exploitation, evidenced by the rape of conquered women by victorious forces, the exploitation of lower-class women by those in positions of power, the enduring presence of organized prostitution over millennia, and the societal pressure on unmarried women to prioritize marriage and family over other pursuits. Furthermore, women have been collectively oppressed through unequal access to education compared to men and, notably, through prolonged exclusion from political representation and governance, a disparity that has persisted longer for women than for any other demographic group (Bennett 254).

The endeavor to enhance inclusivity through the examination of not only women but also the intersection of race, class, and gender offers several notable advantages. Elevating race and class to equal significance alongside gender enables feminist scholarship to integrate the valuable insights garnered from practical feminist activism, which, particularly in the 1970s, often centered on the concerns of middle-class, white women, although not exclusively. By recognizing gender as just one aspect within a multi-faceted framework, we can more accurately reflect the diverse realities experienced by women, whose identities are shaped by a multitude of factors beyond just biological sex. Focusing on the intersectionality of various factors allows for the exploration of connections between different systems of oppression that are frequently treated as separate and unrelated.

Moreover, by explicitly forging connections between historians of women and their natural allies within the academic community, such as labor and African-American historians, efforts can be made to dismantle the isolation of women's history, prompting other fields of historical study to consider the implications of gender within their own narratives (Bennett 7).

1. Feminism

The term Women's Liberation originated in the United States in 1964 and gained traction in print by 1966, evolving overtime to encompass various orientations and perspectives (Oyekan 2), Feminism encompasses a range of beliefs and principles within the broader social and political movement dedicated to advancing women's equality. Serving as the guiding philosophy for the women's movement, feminism both shapes and is influenced by its participants. Women advocate for equality across various domains of life, employing diverse strategies to achieve this objective. While feminism extends beyond the realm of law, legal frameworks have played a significant role in the struggle for women's rights, serving as both a target for reform and a tool for enacting change. Consequently, feminism holds particular significance for the legal community (Fiss413).

Feminism is a social movement aimed at liberating women from the cultural, structural, and patriarchal constraints they face. It encompasses a diverse range of political ideologies utilized by the women's movement to advocate for gender equality and challenge sexist theories and practices of social oppression. As described by Mama, feminism encompasses various epistemologies, methodologies, theories, and forms of activism dedicated to ending the oppression and subordination of women by men. Intellectual feminists have played a crucial role in the African feminist movement, contributing significant intellectual, ideological, and social capital to efforts aimed at transforming gender relations on the continent through their strategic involvement in feminist struggles across different contexts (Nana and Omodafe 4 – 5).

Central to feminism is the fundamental goal of advocating for women's equality and justice across all facets of life, striving to ensure that women have equitable access to resources that are typically more readily available to men. Given its expansive scope, feminism addresses various areas of inquiry, including the examination of the historical oppression of women and efforts to overcome the "anxiety of authorship" by establishing a literary canon reflective of women's experiences. Feminism represents a rigorous endeavor to analyze, understand, and elucidate the myriad psychosocial and cultural constructs surrounding femininity. This paper aims to delineate some fundamental assumptions and principles of feminism while tracing the Theoretical origins of the movement through an exploration of influential works in feminist literary theory. (Pelagia Goulimari)

Feminist theory posits that throughout human history, women have been relegated to a subordinate position within societies dominated by masculine discourse and Western philosophical traditions. Across civilizations, women have lacked avenues to reclaim their distinct identities without revisiting, exploring, and ultimately reshaping history through their own perspectives. Defining themselves in contrast to male-informed ideals perpetuated through generations, women have been conditioned to accept societal values, resulting in their marginalization and objectification. This systemic oppression extends beyond social and philosophical realms to include the exploitation of the physical environment, equating women and nature as passive entities to be manipulated by male dominance. Essentially, women's historical marginalization forces them to define their existence in relation to men, while epistemic and philosophical systems have often rendered them as inferior or insignificant entities. Feminist thinkers challenge these notions by questioning traditional gender roles and advocating for women's agency and autonomy within theoretical and philosophical frameworks, prompting a reassessment of history to establish a more inclusive feminist literary canon. Feminist literary theory thus extends feminism into a theoretical framework to analyze the root causes of women's inferior status and explore women's literary traditions, dismantling phallogocentric ideologies and gradually asserting women's unique and autonomous identities, which have long been denied across generations (Raina 2 – 3).

The *Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir is a seminal work in feminist literature that profoundly influenced the feminist movement. In this book, de Beauvoir explores the existentialist philosophy to analyze the status of women in society. She argues that women have historically been relegated to the position of the Other in relation to men. In the chapter *Dreams, Fears, Idols* from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, she explores the challenges women face due to societal expectations. From a young age, society dictates how girls and women should behave, creating confusion as they try to be both pure and attractive to men. This leads to anxiety about their place in the world. Women often use dreams and imagination to escape these pressures, but even in their dreams, they fear judgment and mistreatment. Beauvoir criticizes the ideal of the perfect woman, which turns women into

Objects of men's desires. Despite these challenges, she offers hope for women to break free, take control of their lives, and fight for equality. She urges recognition of women's experiences and working towards a future free of sexism and discrimination (De Beauvoir and Parshley 150).

In the chapter *Social Life*, she examines how gender shapes social interactions and experiences. She argues that societal expectations for behavior are not natural but imposed by culture, laws, and power dynamics. Society divides life into public and private spheres, confining women to the private realm while men dominate public spaces, limiting women's opportunities and reinforcing their lower status. Beauvoir discusses how women are often othered, and judged in relation to men rather than as individuals, leading to marginalization. She criticizes double standards where women face harsher judgment for not conforming to traditional roles. Beauvoir also notes that experiences are influenced by race, class, and sexuality, not just gender. Despite these challenges, she highlights women's ability to resist and challenge societal norms, encouraging readers to question and change these norms (De Beauvoir and Parshley 504).

Likewise, in *Women's Situation and Character* from *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir analyzes how societal expectations shape women's identities in patriarchal societies. She argues that social constructs limit women's autonomy and perpetuate their subordination, critiquing the idealized image of womanhood that restricts their agency. Using an existentialist perspective, Beauvoir emphasizes the importance of women asserting their freedom and defining their own identities. She also highlights the compounded oppression faced by women from marginalized groups due to intersecting factors of race, class, and sexuality. Beauvoir critiques the double standards in morality that judge women more harshly than men and examines the relational roles imposed on women. She calls for challenging patriarchal structures and advocates for women's liberation and empowerment to assert their individuality and autonomy (De Beauvoir and Parshley 565).

The Waves of Feminism

The initial wave of feminism emerged during the early 1800s and extended into the early 20th century across Europe, North America, Egypt, Iran, and India. While it had global reach, the first wave was particularly vibrant in the United States and Western Europe, drawing inspiration from early feminist writings like Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*

(1792) and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Central to the first wave was the concept of the New Woman, challenging societal constraints imposed by a male-dominated culture. This movement focused on addressing women's limited rights in areas such as employment, education, property ownership, reproductive rights, marital status, and overall social empowerment.

A key aspect of the first wave was the advocacy for women's suffrage, championed by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (1904). First-wave feminists utilized organized protests, public gatherings, speeches, and written publications to advance their cause, like the first female-owned and edited newspaper in the United States, alongside publications like the French *Le Voix des Femmes* in Europe. These platforms played a crucial role in disseminating feminist ideas and fostering a sense of solidarity among women during this transformative period. To present a more comprehensive view of femininity, emphasizing women's professional capabilities and incorporating women of color into the concept of womanhood to challenge the narrow portrayal found in popular women's magazines of the time, such as *The Lady's Magazine* and later *Ladies' Home Journal*. This shift aimed to address issues of gender and racial discrimination in the professional sphere, the initial wave of feminism often marginalized women of color, as highlighted by Sojourner Truth in her impactful *Ain't I a Woman* speech at the 1851 Ohio Women's Rights Convention, where she criticized the movement for excluding women of color from its agenda (Malinowska 3).

The third wave of feminism emerged in the early 1990s, led by members of Generation X who were born in the 1960s and 1970s. This wave built on the legal and social gains of the second wave but also critiqued its limitations, particularly its focus on the experiences of middle-class white women. Third-wave feminists embraced diversity and individualism, seeking to redefine what it meant to be a feminist. They emphasized the importance of intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, which examines how different forms of oppression, such as race, gender, and class, intersect and impact individuals' lives. This wave also saw the rise of new feminist currents and theories, including sex-positivity, vegetarian ecofeminism, transfeminism, and postmodern feminism. The movement was significantly influenced by the 1991 Anita Hill hearings, where Hill's testimony about sexual harassment by Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas highlighted the ongoing issues of gender and racial

injustice Rebecca Walker's 1992 article *Becoming the Third Wave* is often credited with coming the term and galvanizing the movement. Third-wave feminists utilized the internet and other media to reach a global audience, advocating for the abolition of gender-role stereotypes and the inclusion of diverse racial and cultural identities

(Begum).

3. Feminism in Africa

Western feminism often emerged from concerns about individual rights and gender equality within capitalist societies, while African feminism has been shaped by resistance to Western influence and colonial legacies within African cultures. In Western societies, factors like economic prosperity, education, and shifts in family structures led to movements focused on reproductive rights, sexual autonomy, and individual empowerment. These movements were influenced by post-World War II human rights agendas and the women's rights movements of the 1960s. However, African feminism takes a different path. It arises from the integration of women into corporate and agrarian societies with strong cultural traditions, disrupted by traumatic colonization. Women in these societies faced marginalization during transitions to independence, leading to economic dependence and unique challenges. This difference in context has led to friction between Western and African feminists, particularly on issues like Female genital mutilation, Child marriage, and widespread sexual violence. African feminists often overlook topics like the female body, lesbianism, and radical feminism, which receive considerable attention from Western feminists. Instead, African feminism tends to prioritize heterosexual relationships, prenatal attitudes, and the preservation of the family structure. This focus underscores a distinct cultural emphasis, where concerns revolve around traditional family values and societal cohesion (NaasinDiseye 21 – 27),

Furthermore, the implementation of policies promoting "women in development" by Western governmental actors has often resulted in tension with their African counterparts. This friction arises from differing perspectives on gender roles and development priorities. Western policies tend to emphasize individual rights and gender equality, often influenced by feminist ideologies. In contrast, African counterparts may prioritize community-based approaches and cultural contexts, which can sometimes clash with Western ideals. Additionally, there is tension

between Western and African nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on women's activities. Western NGOs often bring resources and international visibility but may impose their own agendas, which can overshadow local needs and knowledge. African NGOs, on the other hand, strive to address women's issues within their specific cultural and socio-economic contexts, advocating for solutions that resonate more deeply with the local population. This dynamic creates a complex landscape where collaboration is essential but challenging, requiring sensitivity to cultural differences and a commitment to genuinely inclusive development practices. (Mikell 2 – 5)

Womanism

While African women recognize the value of international feminism, they reject its Western model. This is not because feminism is irrelevant to African women, who also face sexism in their cultures and from Western influences in education, religion, and employment. Therefore, the demands of Western feminists are pertinent to the needs of African women. Despite facing dual oppressions, African women do not fully embrace international feminism, but this isn't due to indifference. Filomena Steady suggests that African women often exhibit feminist traits more out of necessity than choice. Womanism differs from Western feminism by focusing on individual empowerment rather than addressing the continent as a whole, acknowledging Africa's cultural and political diversity. Alice Walker describes a womanist as a Black feminist or a feminist of color committed to the survival and wholeness of all people. (Chidammodzi 41 – 46).

Womanism focuses on liberating women and emancipating all African people from oppression, Womanists believe mainstream feminism fails to address issues relevant to Africans and does not authentically represent them. They see Western feminists as complicit in oppressing black men and women, leading them to align more with African men in the fight for freedom rather than with middle-class white feminists who overlook the interconnectedness of racism, capitalism, and sexism. Womanists advocate for color-blind feminism through womanism or exclusively support womanism for black feminists, Another difference is in prioritization: womanists focus more on family-related issues before broader societal concerns, though they address both as needed. Marie Eboh notes that comparing African women to Western feminists is difficult, as African women are often seen as either culturally diluted or traditionalist. This

oversimplified view neglects the complexities of feminist issues across cultures and perpetuates conflicts within feminism (Chidammodzi 41 – 46).

Examining Africa from a uniquely African viewpoint entails acknowledging and valuing the diverse perspectives, histories, and cultures that exist across the continent. It involves recognizing that Africa is not a monolithic entity but a complex tapestry of nations, peoples, and traditions, each with its own unique stories and experiences. By centering African voices and narratives, we move away from the hegemony of Western perspectives that have historically dominated representations of Africa in academia, media, and popular culture. African viewpoints offer insights and understandings that are often overlooked or misunderstood by Western narratives. They provide nuanced interpretations of African history, politics, and societies, rooted in local knowledge systems and lived experiences. For African women, in particular, this means acknowledging the intersectionality of their identities and the multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization they may face based on gender, race, class, ethnicity, and other factors. Western lenses, while claiming universality, often impose Eurocentric norms and values onto African contexts, leading to misrepresentations and stereotypes. African women, in particular, have been subject to exoticization, objectification, and paternalistic portrayals that fail to capture the complexity and agency of their lives. By privileging African perspectives, we challenge these distortions and empower African women to tell their own stories on their own terms. Furthermore, examining Africa from a uniquely African viewpoint enables us to uncover hidden histories, amplify marginalized voices, and engage with the legacies of colonialism and imperialism that continue to shape African realities. It allows for a more holistic understanding of the continent's past, present and future, grounded in the experiences and aspirations of its people (Oyekan 5 – 6).

Womanism, a social theory deeply rooted in the experiences and perspectives of Black women, has been significantly influenced by a variety of literary works. This theory emphasizes the unique struggles and strengths of Black women, advocating for their empowerment and recognition within broader social justice movements. Key texts that have shaped womanism include *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* by Alice Walker, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* by Bell Hooks, and

How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. These works collectively underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique experiences of Black women and advocating for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to social justice.

Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* is a foundational text for the concept of womanism. Walker, who coined the term "womanist," uses this collection of essays to explore the intersection of race, gender, and culture. The essays delve into the historical and cultural experiences of Black women, celebrating their creativity, resilience, and contributions to society. Walker's work emphasizes the importance of heritage and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and strength. By highlighting the often-overlooked contributions of Black women, Walker provides a framework for understanding their unique position within society. Her articulation of womanism has inspired subsequent generations of writers and activists, making it a cornerstone of womanist thought.

Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* critically examines the impact of racism and sexism on Black women. In this seminal work, hooks challenges the exclusion of Black women from mainstream feminist movements and calls for a more inclusive approach. The book addresses the historical devaluation of Black womanhood, the intersectionality of race and gender, and the need for solidarity among women of all backgrounds. hooks argues for a feminism that acknowledges and addresses the specific challenges faced by Black women. Her work has been instrumental in broadening the scope of feminist theory to include the voices and experiences of Black women, advocating for a more intersectional approach to gender equality. By doing so, hooks have significantly contributed to the development of womanist thought and practice.

How We Get Free, Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective, edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, highlights the contributions of the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black feminists and womanists who were pivotal in shaping contemporary social justice movements. This anthology includes essays and interviews that discuss the collective's work on issues such as racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. It emphasizes the importance of intersectionality and collective action in achieving social justice. The Combahee River Collective's statement is considered a key document in the history of Black feminism and

womanism. The anthology underscores the ongoing relevance of their ideas and strategies in contemporary activism, highlighting the collective's role in advocating for the rights and recognition of Black women. (NegestiKaudo)

4. Feminism in Nigeria

In pre-colonial Nigeria, the position of women varied widely across the diverse ethnic groups of the region. Their status was linked to both the structures of their communities and their roles within the economic framework of society. Despite the prevalence of patriarchal systems, women played complementary roles to men within their households. Yet, they often found themselves in subordinate positions, with few individual rights outside of their relationships with men, whether as daughters, wives, or kin. While women had certain rights, such as the ability to cultivate their husband's plots and engage in market activities, these were typically subject to the permission of their male counterparts. Any profits generated from such endeavors were commonly shared among the family. Moreover, traditional notions of inheritance largely excluded women from entitlement to property, a concept upheld until significant legal rulings, began to challenge these norms. Particularly within Igbo society, women were often regarded as property themselves, to be inherited or shared upon the death of their husbands. This practice of widow inheritance underscored the broader societal attitudes towards women's roles and ownership (NaasinDiseye 21).

Despite constitutional provisions safeguarding gender equality and non-discrimination, Nigerian women continue to grapple with pervasive discrimination, violence, and systemic injustices. These struggles are multifaceted, encompassing a range of issues deeply entrenched within Nigerian society. High rates of violence against women remain a pressing concern, with statistics revealing alarming figures: one in three women aged fifteen to forty-nine have experienced physical violence, while one in four girls has endured sexual violence before reaching the age of eighteen. Furthermore, early marriage poses a significant challenge, with a staggering forty-three percent of girls being married off before they turn eighteen, and sixteen percent forced into marriage before they even reach fifteen. Maternal health remains another critical issue, with Nigeria contributing to nearly twenty percent of global maternal deaths,

highlighting the urgent need for improved healthcare infrastructure and services. Additionally, women's representation in politics remains dismally low, with only twenty-one out of four hundred sixty-nine seats in the National Assembly occupied by women as of two thousand twenty-two. Despite these formidable obstacles, Nigerian women have demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination in their pursuit of gender equality, advocating for systemic reforms, raising awareness, and mobilizing communities to effect positive change. Through collective action and solidarity, women's movements in Nigeria continue to challenge patriarchal norms, empower women and girls, and strive towards a more inclusive and equitable society for all. (Nkama)

Nigerian women face a multitude of challenges rooted in societal norms and legal frameworks that perpetuate gender inequality. Inheritance laws often favor male heirs, relegating women to secondary status in matters of property and wealth distribution. Child marriages persist despite legal restrictions, with cultural and economic factors driving the practice, robbing young girls of their autonomy, education, and health. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains prevalent in certain regions, violating women's rights to bodily integrity and health. The pervasive issue of rape contributes to a culture of fear and impunity, with survivors often facing stigma and inadequate access to justice. Domestic violence affects women across all socioeconomic backgrounds, exacerbated by social norms that condone or excuse abuse. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires comprehensive legal reforms, education, economic empowerment, and community-based interventions to promote gender equality and protect women's rights in Nigeria (Naasin Diseye 26 – 27).

Women's groups play a crucial role in grassroots politics, despite that they encounter numerous challenges that hinder their full potential in leveraging opportunities for economic development and political empowerment. These challenges include a lack of political agenda alignment, limited funding, and constraints that limit their engagement in political matters at local, state, and national levels. The low level of engagement of women's groups in political affairs in Nigeria, particularly in regions like Osun state, underscores the urgent need for measures to enhance their involvement. The steady progress of women in contributing to Nigeria's socio-economic development has had a significant impact on the national political landscape, prompting successive governments to respond positively in various ways. (Okafor and

Akokuwebe 5 – 7) This includes the creation of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and its associated body, the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), which serve as additional official channels to promote women's issues and enhance their role in national development. Additionally, more women have been or are being appointed to key political and decision-making positions, such as Ministers, Judges, Permanent Secretaries, and Director-Generals. However, despite these significant achievements, the substantial disparities between men and women in terms of access to socioeconomic opportunities, including participation in politics and decision-making, make it extremely challenging for women to fully realize their potential to contribute to national development. (NaasinDiseye 45)

Conclusion

The exploration of feminism in Africa reveals a rich tapestry of diverse voices and experiences that challenge monolithic narratives and highlight the continent's unique socio-cultural dynamics. African feminism, distinct yet interconnected with global feminist movements, addresses specific issues such as colonial legacy, indigenous traditions, and contemporary socio-political challenges. This chapter has delved into the various dimensions of African feminism through the examination of literary works, activist movements, and theoretical frameworks, showcasing the resilience and creativity of African women in advocating for gender equality and social justice.

Although African women see the value in international feminism, they reject its Western model. This isn't because feminism is irrelevant to them; African women also face sexism in their own cultures and from Western influences in education, religion, and employment. Consequently, the demands of Western feminists are relevant to the needs of African women. Despite experiencing dual oppressions, African women do not fully embrace international feminism, but not out of indifference. Filomena Steady suggests that African women often display feminist traits more out of necessity than choice. Womanism differs from Western feminism by emphasizing individual empowerment rather than addressing the continent as a whole, recognizing Africa's cultural and political diversity.

African feminism's focus on intersectionality, considering the overlapping identities of race, class, and gender, sets it apart and adds depth to its discourse. The analysis of influential

African feminist writers and activists has revealed how their works and actions have contributed to a broader understanding of feminism that is rooted in African realities and aspirations. Their efforts in promoting women's rights, education, political participation, and economic empowerment have been instrumental in challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for systemic change.

Chapter Three

Women's Needs vs. Women's Aspiration

Introduction

Through his short story *Girls at War*, Chinua Achebe places the plot of his narrative amid the Nigerian Civil War and depicts the complex relationship between women's needs and their aspirations during such difficult times. Women's traditional roles and expectations are constantly reshaped during times of war and conflict, which provides a deeper view into their experiences.

This chapter examines how women combine their pressing needs for social and personal change with their more profound aspirations. Achebe uses his characters, particularly Gladys, to display the complexity of women's lives during the chaotic conditions of war and how they balance their fears, aspirations, and newly found convictions.

1. Voicing Women's Fears

The riotous environment of war increases women's fears, ranging from physical safety to the loss of social and economic stability. In *Girls at War*, these fears are vividly portrayed through the experiences of Gladys, who must confront the immediate dangers of conflict while struggling with the societal expectations placed upon her (Brubaker). Her initial fear of losing her identity and autonomy is profound as she transitions from a schoolgirl to a soldier to a black-market trader. This evolution highlights the pervasive anxiety about survival in a war-torn society, where traditional protections and support systems are often dismantled. The narrative highlights how women's fears are personal and reflect broader societal vulnerabilities, making their struggle for security a central theme.

From a feminist perspective, *Girls at War* sheds light on the aggravated oppression that women experience during war times when the imbalances between genders are further tested (Bamane²³). The concerns that Gladys experiences regarding the loss of her identity and independence are reflected in the more prominent battle women must endure in patriarchal countries when their identities and duties are often strictly controlled by male-dominated systems. War often disrupts these systems, not as a means to liberate women, but to further exploit and place women in positions of vulnerability.

Gladys' transition from a schoolgirl to a soldier and then to a black-market trader highlights the intersectionality of her fears. As A soldier, she contends with the physical dangers of combat and the psychological toll of warfare, environments traditionally dominated by men where women must navigate their roles with heightened caution. As a black-market trader, her fear of exploitation and the loss of social stability come to the forefront, reflecting the gendered economic inequalities worsened by the conflict (Bamane 23).

Moreover, this short story places significant focus on the social expectations put on Gladys, which further adds to her anxiety. Women's roles in patriarchal societies are often restricted to being housewives or mothers, as Gladys finds herself forced to challenge these traditional roles by joining the forces (Akanegbu 62; Bamane 22). By stepping out of the usual social restrictions due to the war, Gladys also faces new kinds of exploitation and patriarchal control, such as being sexually assaulted or financially dependent. Therefore, most of Gladys's concerns are mere responses to the systematic injustices that limited her independence and aspirations. Chinua Achebe uses Gladys's fears to criticize gender inequalities that persist during social unrest. He highlights the vulnerabilities and anxieties experienced by women and calls for the unbiased reconstruction of society, a change that would overthrow systematic gender-based oppression.

Girls at War tells the story of women's struggles during the Nigerian Civil War and calls for supporting women's needs and goals by reconstructing equal social and economic structures for both genders. The narrative advocates for the reconstruction of equal social and economic structures for both genders, highlighting the resilience and strength of women in the face of conflict. Through its portrayal of women's experiences, the story calls for a more equitable society where both men and women can thrive and contribute equally.

2. Women's Roles and Social Expectations

Traditionally in postcolonial societies, gender norms and cultural expectations are very important and are the main aspects that shape women's identities and roles in both family and community. Usually, these expectations are deeply rooted in historical practices and persistent cultural beliefs that reinforce gender-specific obligations and responsibilities (Lamoureaux and

Rottenburg), In Chinua Achebe's "Girls at War," social customs dictate the behavior and roles of female characters, influence how they make their decisions and choices, and limit their opportunities for personal and professional growth by restricting them to basic roles. Achebe skillfully depicts social expectations and the way they influence women's roles through the Character of Gladys. This character, Gladys, is an example of the traditional norms that shape her identity and specify her responsibilities. At the beginning of the narrative, Gladys tries to conform to social expectations through her work as a teacher, an occupation usually deemed more suitable for women. However, as the war begins to disrupt her life; Gladys is forced to cope to the new events around her that defy the traditional gender roles.

The societal expectations of women are also reflected in the domestic scope, as women are often expected to be caretakers and homemakers. This traditional role is often imposed on women and restricts them to remain in isolated roles instead of more public domains. In his short story "The Voter," Achebe portrays a woman who is represented through her domestic responsibilities. This short story emphasizes the strict scope of her role in family and community, she is not given any real decision-making power nor an active role in managing the family's lifestyle. This portrayal accentuates the passive, gender-based roles imposed on women that restrict their participation in society.

Furthermore, the social expectation of women as submissive to men is evident in several interactions between male and female characters. In *Sugar Baby*, the female protagonist, who is involved with a corrupt politician, navigates a complex relationship that highlights her dependency on male authority. This dynamic demonstrates how social norms reinforce male dominance and female submissiveness, limiting women's agency and autonomy.

In *Girls at War*, another explored theme is the conflict between traditional gender roles and the changing roles of women. Gladys transitions from the traditional female role of a school teacher to a wartime survivor who takes an active part in the defense against the colonizer demonstrating the conflict between personal aspirations and social expectations. Her challenge of the norms stems from her attempt to confront the harsh reality of wartime struggles. Her transition is a vital example of the extensive challenges women face in their attempts to accept their roles in times of social and political unrest.

The broader socio-political context of the Nigerian Civil War further complicates women's roles. Wartime conditions exacerbate the existing societal expectations and create new challenges for women. The unrest and chaos of wartime impose non-traditional roles on women as a necessary step to recruit more volunteers, thus challenging the usually inflexible gender roles. In *Girls at War*, Gladys enters the black market of currency exchange and socializes with soldiers as a way to cope and adapt herself, these character traits contradict the usually traditionally passive role expected of women.

Through analyzing these depictions established by Achebe, this study provides readers with a deeper understanding of the short story and the gender-based social expectations. In "*Girls at War*," Achebe actively seeks to highlight the resilience and adaptability of women navigating their lives during wartime chaos and instability. By depicting various experiences of female characters, this work reveals the profound ways that norms and social expectations both shape and restrict their lives.

3. Barriers to Women's Empowerment

In *Girls at War*, female characters are depicted as strong and resilient, facing many obstacles that make it exceedingly hard to become independent in a time of social chaos. The numerous economic and social barriers obstruct the professional and intellectual growth of women and limit their ability for financial independence and stability. The discrimination against women, subtle or explicit, adds to the existing inequality and limits the extent of women's participation in society.

Achebe's *Girls at War* provides a vivid portrayal of the many struggles of women against such economic and social barriers. For example, Gladys represents the economic aspect of these barriers and the financial difficulty women endure. Her work as a teacher provides only temporary comfort, as the war's air raids intensify and the social conditions worsen, she finds herself in a deteriorating economic situation as a direct result of the war. This situation forces Gladys into risky and transactional relationships to survive and manage the scarcity of food to survive. Her worsening condition and shift symbolize the lack of women's financial chances and weakness during wartime.

Moreover, the character's limited access to education is another significant barrier highlighted in the narrative. Gladys finds herself forced to leave her stable teaching position for economic independence, like many other teachers, leaving students unable to continue their education. As the war continues, this issue worsens because schools and other educational institutes are forced to close impacting female teachers and students alike.

Another barrier in the narrative is gender discrimination. It is quite frequent for women to experience both overt and covert forms of discrimination that restrict their roles and reinforce the rooted gender norms (McKay). Gladys's interactions with male characters, for example, demonstrate the underlying gender biases. As other male characters are frequently condescending and objectifying her regardless of her strength or intellect. This behavior shows society's tendency to overlook and underestimate women's abilities and contributions.

The Nigerian Civil War's broader social and political conditions further complicate these issues due to the state of chaos and uncertainty in wartimes. With the breakdown of social orders, the basic needs of individuals become increasingly difficult to attain pushing women further to the far edges of society leading them to vulnerable situations of exploitation and abuse. This painful reality is depicted in Achebe's short story as he tries to shed light on the vulnerability of women and the obstacles they face during war.

For instance, during one encounter, Gladys is working at a checkpoint in a position of apparent power. However, she finds herself objectified by men despite her being in the position of control, this scene not only highlights the illusion of power women are given but also highlights the physical dangers women face during times of conflict and social unrest (McKay). This scene also represents the social issues of power imbalance, gender power struggles, and exploitation. Gladys' predicament at the checkpoint symbolizes women's broader struggles who must navigate a society that continuously marginalizes them, both in times of peace and conflict.

This analysis sheds light on the persistent challenges that hinder women's progress and explores potential avenues for addressing these issues. Specific examples from *Girls at War* provide a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of economic, and social barriers that women face in postcolonial settings. This understanding is crucial for developing strategies to promote gender equality and empower women in similar contexts.

4. Recognizing Aspirations

Despite the oppression and the hard circumstances women experience, their aspirations are the beacon of hope that serves as the driving force for their actions. In this short story, Gladys is a character who represents the hopes and ambitions that women feel for the future, even in the risky situations they find themselves in (Bamane 23-24). Gladys decided to enter the black market initially out of financial necessity, symbolizing her deep desire for economic sufficiency. Her hopes challenge the traditional gender roles and create new and broad chances for what women can achieve. Achebe depicted Gladys's ambitions as her inner strength and her pursuit of empowerment.

From a feminist perspective, *Girls at War* is a story that recognizes women's aspirations and the powerful ability of self-determination in facing systematic oppression. As Gladys seeks financial stability and independence, she defies the patriarchal norms that confine her and other women to dependent and passive roles. By involving herself in black-market work, she asserts her autonomy in a male-dominated field and overthrows the established traditional expectations of women's economic passivity (Brubaker).

Achebe portrays Gladys as a character who strives for economic independence; her drive directly criticizes the sexism against women in labor that restricts their economic situation and work opportunities. Gladys's work in the black market and her subsequent success in a risky, male-dominated industry illustrates women's true resilience and competence when they are given (or take) opportunities despite rooted gender norms. This defiance of gender norms asserts the feminist belief that women are just as capable as men in entering and succeeding in male-dominated businesses.

Furthermore, as depicted by Achebe, women's aspirations reflect the broad feminist call for women's independence and self-fulfillment. Gladys's journey from financial dependency to self-reliance represents her fight for all women's rights and highlights the significance of economic independence as the basis for equality in broader fields such as society and politics. Gladys's pursuit of her goals is Achebe's way of recognizing the importance of achieving ambitions on women's journeys, as the story encourages women to take active roles in their personal and social lives. This recognition supports the feminist perspective on the principles

advocating for creating equal chances for women and against gender-biased systems in patriarchal societies.

Girls at War supports the resilience and ambitions of women and suggests that despite times of conflict, women's aspirations are the driving force to achieve their personal empowerment and economic independence. Achebe's narrative supports the feminist view of society wherein women's ambitions are recognized and nurtured, contributing to a more equitable world.

5. The Road to Achieving Aspirations

Considering the previous barriers, there still remains many ways in which women could achieve their aspirations and overcome the restrictions imposed on them by society and norms. In *Girls at War*, Chinua Achebe discusses themes of female agency, resourcefulness, and solidarity that emphasize the possibilities for women to transcend their imposed social restrictions and wartime hardships.

One of these crucial possibilities is education, as it arms women with much-needed knowledge and skills they utilize to affirm their sense of independence and contribute meaningfully to society. In *Girls at War*, the character of Gladys symbolizes this possibility. Despite the war disrupting educational institutions and opportunities, it was Gladys's prior educational background that granted her a chance to become a teacher. Her teaching role gave her a sense of purpose and identity and placed her in a position of influence on future generations of young impressionable women, highlighting the transformative power of education, especially in times of conflict.

Economic independence, achieved through employment or business activities, enable women to make autonomous decisions and support themselves through any hardships they encounter. Throughout his narrative, Gladys's continuously tries to maintain economic stability, reflecting her profound need for this pursuit. Despite the challenges she faced, Gladys shows a great sense of adaptability by transforming her circumstances by first resorting to teaching, then engaging in the black-market trade business. Her tactful sense is shown as she enters the currency exchange market through one of her acquaintances in an attempt to support herself,

demonstrating the importance of economic and business endeavors in providing means for women to overcome wartime hardships and assert independence.

Moreover, solidarity and social networking play an important role in this story as Gladys's networks help her cope, find financial stability, and achieve her aspirations. Achebe's novel depicts how Gladys's friendships and approachable demeanor gain her support and likeability, which assist her in navigating her way around her community. These acquaintances are both practical and supportive of Gladys's journey. The collective strength and solidarity among women act as a crucial possibility to achieve their aspirations, reinforcing the idea that support can significantly enhance individual resilience and female empowerment.

By understanding these barriers and hardships, this analysis can identify effective measures for promoting gender equality and enhancing women's capabilities in similar postcolonial contexts. This study also considers the implications for policy and practice, suggesting that interventions could help overcome barriers and create more inclusive environments for women. For instance, the policies that prioritize women's access to education and economic opportunities, coupled with initiatives that encourage supportive social networks, can significantly enhance women's ability to achieve their aspirations. Through such improvements and policies, societies can move towards greater gender equality and empower women to fully realize their potential, even in the face of hardship.

Girls at War by Chinua Achebe provides a deep portrayal of the many possibilities through which women can achieve their aspirations amid social and wartime challenges. The story sheds light on the importance of education, economic independence, and social support for the advancement of women's opportunities and offers insights into the strategies that can empower women in similar contexts.

6. New Convictions

Experiencing civil war and its trauma led to women forming new convictions and reshaping their roles and positions in society. Gladys's worldview was heavily shifted as she faced the war's harsh realities, social conflicts, and her interaction with Reginald Nwankwo (Akanegbu 66). She gains a sense of strength and control over her life, which heavily influences her

personality from her pre-war self. These changes symbolize the broader changes women experience as they take charge of their lives and begin to feel more active participants in shaping their lives instead of silent victims of circumstances. Achebe demonstrates that these new convictions are created through experiencing hardships that lead to more robust and assertive female identities (Akanegbu 62). Such convictions also reflect the rejection of the patriarchal systems that have typically marginalized women and led women towards more equal and just societies (Bamane 22).

From a feminist perspective, the central theme of *Girls at War* is the ability of war to transform gender roles. Gladys's transformation from passive to active participant in her life and society is an excellent example of the feminist principle that conflict can strengthen individuals. Her increasing sense of control and resilience demonstrates the strength and capability of women once they are forced to face and overcome social problems.

Achebe depicts Gladys' transformative journey as a criticism of patriarchal systems that work to keep women restricted from reaching their full potential and reinforce rooted gender inequalities. Throughout history, the Civil War tears down the oppressive systems, allowing women like Gladys to take on roles that men usually dominate. Not only does this significant change challenge gender roles, but it also supports the idea and principle of women's equality and capability of change. By displaying the way Gladys' new found beliefs impact her, Achebe is applying feminist principles and advocating for breaking down patriarchal barriers and recognizing women's full potential. Gladys's journey reflects the broader feminist call for women to be seen and treated as equal partners in all spheres of life. Her assertiveness and empowered identity underscore the feminist belief that women must be involved in shaping their destinies and the world around them.

Girls at War aligns well with feminist ideas and principles that suggest that women should be active participants rather than passive victims of society. Gladys's journey mirrors the feminist principle that women should be seen and treated as equals in all aspects of life. Feminism supports the idea that women are entitled to an opinion in their own lives and the world they live in.

Likewise, the new convictions shaped by Gladys on her journey highlight how their problems all affect each other. *Girls at War* recognizes the way women's experiences and identities are profoundly shaped by many forms of oppression, such as gender, economic status, and social expectations. By overcoming these oppressions, Gladys lives up to the feminist vision of an inclusive and equal society where women's rights and contributions are recognized and valued.

Conclusion

In *Girls at War*, Chinua Achebe intricately explores the complex interplay between women's immediate needs and long-term aspirations during the Nigerian Civil War. Through the character of Gladys, Achebe delves into the multifaceted experiences of women in wartime, shedding light on their resilience and ingenuity in the face of adversity. Gladys's character embodies themes of resilience, empowerment, and transformation, serving as a poignant representation of how women navigate and challenge traditional gender roles amidst the tumult of conflict.

Achebe's narrative masterfully portrays the duality of Gladys's struggle, balancing the urgency of survival with the pursuit of broader aspirations for a better future. Her journey reflects the broader societal shifts and the redefinition of gender roles precipitated by the war. The story highlights how women, often relegated to the margins, emerge as pivotal figures in the socio-political landscape, their contributions essential yet frequently overlooked.

Furthermore, Achebe's work underscores the importance of addressing both the immediate and systemic challenges that women face. The narrative advocates for a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics, emphasizing that true social progress requires a commitment to gender equality and social justice. By illuminating the stories of women like Gladys, Achebe calls attention to the need for societal transformation that acknowledges and rectifies the deeply ingrained inequalities.

In essence, *Girls at War* is not merely a tale of conflict but a profound commentary on the enduring strength and potential of women. Achebe's portrayal of Gladys is a testament to the indomitable spirit of women who, despite facing immense hardships, continue to strive for a

future where their contributions are recognized and valued. Through this narrative, Achebe makes a compelling case for the reevaluation of traditional gender roles and the promotion of a more equitable society.

General Conclusion

The current study explores the intricate relationship between women's needs and aspirations in Chinua Achebe's short story 'Girls at War' within the broader contexts of African and Nigerian literature and postcolonial feminist theory. By closely examining the character of Gladys, her experience vividly illustrates the transformative power of war in redefining women's roles and defying the entrenched patriarchal systems. Achebe's narrative underscores the remarkable resilience, agency, and evolving convictions experienced by women facing hardships, thereby reflecting the feministic critique of gender inequality.

This study illuminates how social and political conflicts can impact women's lives by examining the Nigerian short story in the broader context of African literature and feminist theory.

The research commences with an in-depth examination of the cultural and literary contexts of African and Nigerian literature. African literature, with its rich oral traditions and profound engagement with socio-political issues, provides a foundational setting for understanding Nigerian literature's unique contributions. Nigerian literature, as explored in Chapter One, is particularly renowned for its critical engagement with themes of colonialism, postcolonialism, and gender. The life and literary contributions of Chinua Achebe are discussed to situate 'Girls at War' within the broader narrative of Nigerian literary history. Achebe's work is of paramount importance in portraying the complexities of Nigerian society, offering a perspective through which the struggles and resilience of its people, particularly women, can be comprehended.

Chapter Two provides the theoretical framework for analyzing "Girls at War." The chapter's discussion on feminism, focusing on African and Nigerian contexts, highlights the unique challenges and perspectives that shape feminist discourse in Africa. Feminism in Africa, specifically Nigeria, is deeply connected to colonial history, socio-economic struggles, and cultural norms. By applying postcolonial feminist theory, this chapter sets the stage for understanding gender dynamics in Achebe's work.

Chapter Three provides a meticulous reading of 'Girls at War,' focusing on the themes of women's fears, aspirations, and new convictions. The analysis uncovers several significant findings. Firstly, the story vividly portrays the multifaceted fears faced by women during the

Nigerian Civil War, ranging from physical dangers to the loss of social and economic stability. Secondly, Gladys' evolution from a schoolgirl to a soldier and then to a black-market trader

Under scores the inescapable anxiety about survival and the breaking of traditional support systems. Thirdly, despite the oppressive circumstances, women's aspirations remain a potent driving force. Gladys embodies the desire for economic independence and self-determination. Furthermore, her involvement in the black market, initially out of necessity, reflects a deeper ambition to break free from conventional gender roles and assert her agency. Additionally, the harsh realities of war catalyze a transformation in Gladys, leading her to form new convictions and develop a sense of agency and resilience noticeably different from her pre-war self. This transformation mirrors a broader awakening among women, who begin to see themselves as active participants in shaping their destinies.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in postcolonial literature. By depicting women's experiences in "Girls at War," this research highlights women's resilience, agency, and evolving roles in a time of conflict. Achebe's narrative not only critiques the patriarchal structures that marginalize women but also advocates for their empowerment and greater gender equality.

"Girls at War" is a meaningful narrative that captures the complexities of women's lives during the Nigerian Civil War. Chinua Achebe accurately represents women's needs and aspirations and offers valuable insights into their struggles and achievements, emphasizing their resilience and capacity for transformation. The current study demonstrates the importance of literary analysis in understanding the broader socio-cultural and gender dynamics in postcolonial societies.

The study encourages future researchers to continue studying the representation of women in literature and advocates for an inclusive acknowledgment of their contributions. Achebe's work remains relevant today, resonating with ongoing discussions and modern activists about gender equality and social justice. This study contributes to the broader discourse on women's rights and removes oppressive structures in postcolonial contexts by shedding light on the intricate experiences of women.

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الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث تمثيل تجارب النساء خلال الحرب الأهلية النيجيرية في رواية "فتيات في الحرب" لشينوا أتشيببي. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى دراسة الديناميكيات بين الجنسين في سياق ما بعد الاستعمار، وتقديم نظرة ثاقبة حول قدرة النساء على الصمود والقدرة على الفاعلية في أوقات النزاع. وتتمثل المشكلة الرئيسية التي تتناولها الدراسة في نقص الدراسات المركزة على تجارب النساء خلال الحرب الأهلية النيجيرية في الأدب، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على كيفية تمثيل هذه التجارب في أعمال أتشيببي. تتضمن المنهجية تحليلاً أدبياً نوعياً لرواية "فتيات في الحرب"، مع تطبيق مبادئ النظرية النسوية لما بعد الاستعمار، ومدعومة بمصادر ثانوية، بما في ذلك المقالات والدراسات النقدية عن الأدب الأفريقي والنيجيري. تكشف النتائج عن مهارة أتشيببي في تصوير احتياجات النساء وتطلعاتهن، وتسليط الضوء على قوتهن واستقلاليتهن وسط الاضطرابات الاجتماعية. يساهم هذا العمل في الخطاب الأوسع نطاقاً حول الأدب الأفريقي والدراسات النسوية، ويؤكد على الدور الحاسم لديناميكيات الجنسين في فهم تأثير الحرب والاضطرابات الاجتماعية على المرأة، ويقترح سبلاً للبحث في المواضيع المماثلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحرب الأهلية النيجيرية، ديناميكيات الجنسين، نظرية النسوية ما بعد الاستعمار، صمود المرأة، الأدب الأفريقي