

# Superwoman: Enhanced Femininity in Contemporary Nigerian Women's Fiction

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## Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which two contemporary female Nigerian novelists, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sefi Atta, portray enhanced female characters who are designated as superwomen. It focuses on four texts: Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow*. It argues that such characters represent a growing realisation that Nigerian women are less prepared to bemoan gender injustice than to make conscious efforts to improve their own lives. The notion of superwomanhood is discussed, and the various elements that comprise it are described, including the attainment and maintenance of personal autonomy, the ability to reverse the dynamic of patriarchy, and the development of insight and foresight. The paper also argues that female characters in the texts undergo a "trajectory of becoming" on their way to attaining the status of superwomen.

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## Key words

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, female characters, contemporary Nigerian fiction

## Introduction

The portrayal of female characters in Nigerian fiction has been subject to considerable scrutiny. Such attention is centred on the motivations of the literary artists who have been doing the presenting, the "authenticity" of the images of female characters, and the implications they pose for the development of Nigerian fiction. This essay proposes to look at the way in which the phenomenon of superwomen has radically influenced this dynamic.

The authenticity issue centres upon the genuineness of the portrayals,

namely the extent to which they can be said to be true-to-life or truly reflective of the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour of women in a given society. This question is often confused by arguments over whether “authenticity” is necessarily proportional to positive or negative portrayals of women. The question of motivation has often been predicated upon the gender-consciousness of the literary artist in question. In some cases, such as that of Chinua Achebe, there appears to have been an evolution from relative gender insensitivity, as demonstrated in the portrayals of women characters in *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*, to pronounced gender consciousness, as seen in the depiction of female characters in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

The larger implications of literary portrayals of women in Nigerian fiction relate to the way in which these portrayals simultaneously shape and reflect perceptions of women in society. For example, increased interest in women as subjects of fiction is often regarded as an indication of increasing sympathy for their concerns.

This paper looks at the development of superwomen status in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, as well as Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow*. Both Adichie and Atta are among Nigeria’s leading contemporary female novelists.

### Notion of the Superwoman

Toni Morrison (2008) argues that the “archetypes created by women about themselves are rare, and even these few that do exist may be the result of a female mind completely controlled by male-type thinking” (p. 22). The idea of the superwoman is an example of a female-created archetype, one that enables women to construct “a solid counter-universe whence they can challenge the males” (de Beauvoir, 2008b, p. 116).

As a designation of enhanced femininity, “superwoman” is troubled by issues of definition. For example, Betty Friedan (1997) points out the term’s apparent subordination to prevailing patriarchal notions of the woman’s place in society. Even less charitably, it appears to join ostensibly similar characterizations like “iron lady” and “alpha female” to do nothing more than represent the distaff side of masculine oppression and dominance. It seems that the best-known manifestation of super-

woman is that of the female version of the Hollywood superhero character Superman: a sinewy, attractive female in a skimpy costume which arguably panders to the worst aspects of conventional gender prejudice. It can be argued that the term actually transcends such biases and stereotypes, and therefore does not convey the implied associations of inevitable virilisation that are usually implicit within them. Some authorities have also argued that “superwoman” is simply a continuation of existing pejorative tendencies. Though its origin is recognisably Western, it is a term which travels well, the “super” already having positive connotations in many societies. Examples are found in both Nigeria’s male and female national football teams – Super Eagles and Super Falcons.

However, superwoman is an oxymoron in many regards. The term in a way repudiates notions of “a female aesthetic as an aesthetic of suffering” (Morris, 1993, p. 84) and substitutes for it an aesthetic of empowerment. In order for a superwoman to be who she is, to become what she wants, she has had, like Elaine Showalter’s New Woman, (Showalter, 1990, p. 38), to defy convention, contradict expectations, discomfit the comfortable, and even sow doubt, fear and hatred. Such strategies are necessary if the superwoman is to find her place in the jungle of a society that has been structured to devalue her very essence as a woman.

Some women are superwomen because they possess traits that enable them to attain the pre-eminence that sets them apart from other women, especially in a society like that of contemporary Nigeria. With close reference to the selected texts of Adichie and Atta, an attempt will be made to crystallize these characteristics and demonstrate the ways in which they interact with one another to create outstanding women.

As seen in the texts, the characteristics of superwomen may be grouped into three categories: the attainment and maintenance of personal autonomy, the ability to reverse the dynamics that entrench gender inequity, and the development of advanced insight and foresight.

### *Personal Autonomy*

The most outstanding characteristic of the superwoman as manifested in contemporary Nigerian women’s writing is her personal autonomy. This may be defined as the possession of an acute sense of self, a pro-

nounced capacity for independent action, and a desire to be true to her notions of who she believes she is, regardless of the strictures of society and family. Personal autonomy is the foundation of superwomanhood; it is what enables her to define herself, not only in relation to others, but also in opposition to conventional notions of what women are supposed to be and do. She is a living repudiation of the infamous stricture: “A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong” (de Beauvoir, 1998, p. 534).

The high value superwomen place upon their personal autonomy is probably why they are seen to privilege their own perceptions so highly, and are prepared to defend them so vigorously. Many of the texts depict differences of opinion between superwomen and others, and the articulateness and verbal dexterity with which these women put their views across are presented as exemplary. Such verbal aggressiveness is what endows many superwomen with what Sefi Atta (2005) in *Everything Good Will Come* calls “a sharp mouth” (p. 17). Conventionally, many women in Nigeria are stereotyped as talkative. The reason for this is to simultaneously belittle women and ennoble men on the basis of supposedly inherent gender differences. The dismissal of women’s speech as noisy and irrelevant makes it easier to ignore them entirely. In effect, the voices of women do not count because they have nothing to say that is worth listening to. Superwomen characteristically repudiate such stereotypes: not only do they have important things to say, they aggressively assert their right to say them, and seek to say them in the most creative ways possible. The central importance of personal autonomy for superwomen is very clearly seen when their relationships are considered. In many of the texts, they begin by being overly dependent on the affection and approval of their parents. Gradually they come to understand that they are capable of less-dependent relationships when they encounter compatible individuals from outside the immediate family. For example, in *Everything Good Will Come*, Enitan’s horizons widen substantially when she meets her next-door neighbour, Sheri; in *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili’s eyes opened to the possibility of different kinds of relationships when she stays with Auntie Ifeoma and her cousins. These encounters enable them to realise the shortcomings of what they had hitherto thought to be normal or unquestionable relationships, and prepare them for more meaningful associations. As they ma-

ture, they encounter loss and betrayal. In spite of the pain and hurt they feel, they develop the inner strength that enables them to get on with their lives. Ultimately, they realise that nothing must be allowed to compromise their self-respect, the authentic foundation of any relationship.

What independence superwomen bring to bear upon many of their relationships is crystallized by a recurring motif of the search for a real or imagined father figure, whose betrayal, inadequacy or non-existence convinces the superwoman to rely upon herself. In *Everything Good Will Come*, *Swallow* and *Purple Hibiscus*, the major female characters eventually come to realise that the fathers they hold in such high esteem actually have “feet of clay”: in the case of Enitan in *Everything Good Will Come*, it is the historical infidelity of her father; in *Swallow*, it is Tolani’s growing suspicion of her late father’s impotence. Kambili, in *Purple Hibiscus*, discovers that her father is a cruel tyrant. The father, in effect, becomes the superwoman’s first adversary who must be confronted and overcome on her long and arduous journey to a full understanding of herself and her place in the world.

The superwoman’s personal autonomy can also be seen in her pronounced unconventionality, her “wilful and ignoble indulgence of self” (Willis, 1995, p. 165). The superwomen of the fiction of Adichie and Atta habitually defy convention: many are co-habiting with boyfriends, as can be seen in *Half of a Yellow Sun* in the case of Olanna and Kainene; their attitudes to sexual and other issues are relatively tolerant. Superwomen from relatively wealthy homes like Enitan and Kambili continually struggle against the constrictions of their social class as they instinctively rebel against its greed and hypocrisy. Often seen as discourteous to their parents and elders, rudeness acquires a specific connotation with regard to superwomen: it is less a behavioural failing than a measure of a readiness to confront conventional mores and values which they regard as obstacles to their progress in life.

### *Reversing the Dynamic of Patriarchy*

In order to create a nurturing place for herself in a society where none has been prepared, the superwoman’s main strategy of operation is that of playing the jaundiced assumptions of patriarchal society against themselves, or reversing patriarchy’s dynamic. Far from being new, it is

in fact a tried-and-tested gambit whose antecedents reach into antiquity. What is different is the innovativeness the superwoman brings to it as a means of self-assertion and self-actualisation. Although it is tempting to see the reversal of the dynamic of patriarchy as no more than an attempt to ease the burden of gender discrimination, to make the chains less chafing, it is actually a project whose ultimate aim is nothing less than the complete reformulation of what it means to be female. At its most fundamental level, reversing the dynamic of patriarchy entails the overt rejection of conventional stereotypes of womanhood. The most pervasive of these is the notion of women as sex objects designed to gratify men's sexual desire, designed to complement them by cooking their meals and bearing their children, otherwise massaging their delicate egos. Adichie and Atta demonstrate the manifestation of this stereotype in various ways: the casual infidelity of men, which conveys their assumption that women are to be "enjoyed," the praise of feminine beauty and the corresponding denigration of female intellect. Other manifestations are the continuous emphasis on wifehood and motherhood as the supreme achievements of womanhood; the conflation of assertive female sexuality with prostitution, as compared to male sexuality which is inevitably synonymous with virility; the denigration of female outspokenness and independence of thought as unnatural; the upholding of female powerlessness as a natural virtue. These assumptions and attitudes, held by women as much as men, constitute the cultural backdrop against which superwomen are made to define themselves, is what Willis (1995) describes as "the discourse of deviance that defines women as by nature defiled, unwhole, unwell, and potentially unholy" (p. 165). It must be noted that altering the order of battle, changing the rules of engagement, and levelling the playing-ground are vital to any possibility of attaining successful superwomanhood.

The very titles of the texts chosen for this study convey the notion of reversing patriarchy's dynamic. *Purple Hibiscus* may refer ostensibly to a particular sort of flower, but it also emphasises the triumph of the innovative, and implicitly suggests that the unusual is not necessarily bad. *Everything Good Will Come* is an optimistic reversal of the traditional Yoruba curse which roughly translates as "nothing good will come/happen to you"; in the novel, it is aimed at a woman who ultimately realises that she possesses the capacity to turn the curse into a blessing. *Swallow*

is another ironic title whose reversal of conventional meanings is evident: the novel is actually about a refusal to swallow, a rejection of the repellent things women have been forced to ingest for the ultimate benefit of men. Indeed, such subversive titling is an indication that the authors reverse the dynamic of patriarchy just as much as their central characters. It is, as Morris (1993) observes, part of a now-entrenched tradition in women's writing:

Working within an unsympathetic cultural tradition, women writers have turned their very anger into a source of creativity, have laughed away the female monsters threatening them in male texts, wittily reshaped male canonical forms, reworked old myths, turned apparent conformity into artistic innovation and boldly challenged high culture on its own ground. (p. 27)

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set in the tumultuous era of the early to late 1960s Nigeria, when crucial decisions were being taken that would critically alter the nation. Such cultural disruption and social chaos provided the perfect opportunity for conventions shaping gender roles to be exposed as the arbitrary constructs that they are. Its most significant event was the civil war. It was a period of change so profound that it constituted a series of continuous and interrelated inversions. It was a time when men became boys, and boys became men, when the ostensibly masculine traits of courage were manifested in women, and the supposedly feminine traits of fear and conflict-avoidance were found in men. It was a period when white expatriates were more loyal to the cause of the seceding Biafra than many members of its indigenous elite. The capacity of the civil war to dissolve supposedly potent gender distinctions is symbolised in the figure of Mrs. Muokelu, who might "have been better off being born a man" (Adichie, 2006, p. 270).

The reversal of patriarchy's dynamic is shown in the way Olanna turns Odenigbo's infidelity into the basis of increased intimacy rather than the disruption such a betrayal of trust would naturally imply. As it is, the components of the situation suggest that it is yet another reflection of male irresponsibility and female vulnerability: a seemingly

barren Olanna, a virile Odenigbo, his impatient mother, and a compliant village maiden. But the script does not go according to plan: the offspring is a girl, the young mother refuses to nurse the child, and the scheming mother-in-law is disconsolate. Olanna is able to demonstrate the paradoxical combination of emotional detachment and heartfelt empathy that are required to avert a tragedy. She decides that they will raise Odenigbo's love child as hers, but without denying its provenance. The social conventions which put women in passive roles in such situations are overturned.

Another way in which the dynamic of patriarchy is reversed is through the authors' manipulation of gender roles in such a way as to show the arbitrariness of such roles, and by extension the equal capability of women to perform such roles. By doing this, they demonstrate the truth of Showalter's assertion that "masculinity is no more natural, transparent, and unproblematic than 'femininity.' It, too, is a socially constructed role, defined within particular cultural and historical circumstances" (1990, p. 8).

In *Purple Hibiscus*, for example, Eugene Achike's traditional male-headed family is compared with the unconventional family set-up presided over by his sister, Auntie Ifeoma. The former's inadequacies as husband and father are exposed almost casually, tragically symbolized by his abortion-inducing spousal abuse. Ifeoma, on the other hand, is able to run her family with just the right mix of love, tolerance, and discipline, even though she is facing financial problems. Also in the novel, conventional notions of fatherhood are called to question. Biological fatherhood, as exemplified by Eugene, is set against the spiritual paternity of Father Amadi. Adichie makes the point that it is the celibate, ineligible bachelor Amadi who truly understands the empathy and patience that are vital for true fatherhood, as opposed to the mere ability to sire offspring.

### *Insight and Foresight*

To become who she is, the superwoman has to develop an insight into exactly how her society functions and acquire the foresight that is needed to exploit that knowledge to the maximum. This is vital, for it is the inability to develop independent perspectives that have made



women so vulnerable to gender prejudice: “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf, 2008, p. 89). In a similar vein, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie argues that:

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Her own reaction to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear dependence complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. (Davis, 2007, p. 562)

Insight and foresight are perhaps the two main characteristics that predispose the superwoman to being different from other women. They are the reasons why she can be born female in a male-dominated society, experience the low expectations and jaundiced assumptions that confront her on all sides, and still embark on a process of self-transformation that enables her to transcend the limitations of gender. Like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Adichie and Atta seek to create “a picture of a strong, determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being” (Davis, 2007, p. 565).

In seeking to establish parameters for the nature of the superwoman’s insight and foresight, it will be helpful to utilize perspectives offered by what may be called the Circe Phenomenon. Circe is the infamous sorceress of Greek myth who lures the followers of the hero Odysseus to her island and turns them into swine, but is forced by Odysseus to change them back into their original form (Graves, 1961, pp. 358-359). Most interpretations of the myth portray her as the archetypal seductive temptress who combines looks, witchcraft, and an amoral ability to manipulate men by exploiting their weaknesses. It can, however, also be argued that Circe’s most devastating weapon is the depth of her insight into the nature of men rather than her physical beauty or sorcery. When the Circe Phenomenon is applied to superwomen, it is seen that, they, like her, develop the ability to understand the men and women they encounter in their quest to achieve their aims.

For most of the female characters designated for this study as superwomen, the acquisition of insight and foresight do not come easily. Indeed, most of them initially suffer from a profound ignorance that is partly attributable to their upbringing and their own naïveté. Several of them are guilty of class-mediated ignorance, a lack of knowledge which stems from their occupation of a relatively high social class whose societal expectations and worldview differ radically from those of their poorer compatriots. Kambili of *Purple Hibiscus* is probably the exemplar in this regard. Overcoming such ignorance is part of the process of resolving the dilemmas of being rich in a country that is so poor, and being so sentient in a country that is so unaware. The transformation from ignorance to insight is often mediated by iconic moments in the texts, specific situations of great distress for superwomen which give rise to stunningly brief periods of great clarity when the superwoman is forced into an unambiguous understanding of circumstances, and is compelled to plot strategies for surviving and thriving accordingly. They are often confrontations in which the superwoman's assumptions about some important aspect of life are brutally exposed and their inadequacies laid bare. These incidents often reveal a weakness or shortcoming in the superwoman's approach to life. They convey significant insights into society as well: for example, Enitan, Kambili, Tolani, and Olanna all painfully learn that a hypocritical attention to propriety can take precedence over clear notions of right and wrong: thus, the appearance of a happy marriage is more important than the reality of a happy marriage. Women can attain any station in life, as long as they know their place. In so doing, they understand the way in which "the myth of woman ... is a static myth" (de Beauvoir, 2008a, p. 95). As a result of such experiences, superwomen are imbued with an awareness that enables them to view their society and themselves with new eyes. Before the visit to her aunt, Kambili had thought the world of her father; after the visit, she no longer regards him as infallible.

The superwoman who becomes aware of the way her society is constituted quickly realizes the ambiguous nature of her relationship to other women. As a superwoman, she is necessarily a nonconformist; she is exceptional because she is an exception to the rule. This sometimes makes it difficult for other women to relate to her, as her exceptionality can be easily mistaken for arrogance. Her iconoclasm may also arouse

the ire of those women for whom progress involves staying within the limits prescribed for women in society. Despite this, the superwoman understands that, as a woman, she belongs to a group whose most potent weapon in the struggle against oppression is unity. The failure of women to jointly work together to obtain greater opportunities is a recurring motif in many texts. This reaching-out by superwomen is first manifested in childhood friendship; then in the strategic alliances that are formed in pursuance of mutual goals, ranging from simple companionship to survival. The main way in which these relationships are established is through a system of enhanced interactions that involve the sharing of stories. These are more than ordinary, everyday exchanges of information: they represent sincere attempts to by women to understand one another. Thus, they are devoid of the negative features which characterize other kinds of interaction, especially patterns of domination and subordination, deceit and hypocrisy.

### **Trajectory of Becoming**

The superwoman's trajectory of becoming refers to the progressively greater stages of self-knowledge she traverses as she undergoes the transformation from woman to superwoman. It is a virtual rite of passage that is necessary to the removal of entrenched obstacles: "For a great many women the roads to transcendence are blocked: because they do nothing, they fail to make themselves anything. They wonder indefinitely what they could have become, which sets them to asking about what they are" (de Beauvoir, 2008a, p. 99). Like any other process of emotional development, it passes through different phases that reflect the progress made. Although it corresponds roughly to more conventional patterns of physical maturity, the superwoman's trajectory of becoming can be distinguished from these patterns. It is not strictly aligned with biological age, physical development, education, or adherence to the norms of conventional morality. It is essentially a very gradual process of self-understanding in which the superwoman comes to know herself intimately – her strengths and weaknesses, perfections and flaws, likes and dislikes. It is self-discovery, self-evaluation and self-renewal, and it incorporates physical experiences, dreams and intuition, chance and accident, and conscious planning.

This study contends that the trajectory of becoming for superwomen encompasses four stages: self-recognition, self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-forgiveness. Self-recognition is the phase in which the superwoman first discovers herself as a sentient being, and not just someone's daughter, sister or wife. Self-awareness is that phase when the thrill of initial discovery has started to wear off, and the superwoman becomes more conscious of herself as a member of a community and the way in which she fits into society, and realizes the need to be her own person. Self-acceptance represents the fruition of the superwoman as she arrives at a comprehensive understanding of who she is, what she wants, and how to get it. Self-forgiveness is the paradoxically recurring phase of self-renewal, when setbacks and failure compel the superwoman to come to terms with her flaws and shortcomings, and move on with life. Even though they are characterised as phases, these categories are, in fact, mutually constitutive, shaping and being shaped by one another. Their designation as a trajectory does not mean that they are a series of relentlessly upward movements; in reality, it is an ebb and flow, full of missteps, false starts and mirages. This is why self-forgiveness is such a crucial part of the overall process.

### *Everything Good Will Come*

The significance of the trajectory of becoming is especially clear when it is considered in the context of *Everything Good Will Come*. Enitan's discovery of her body is precisely that – a discovery. Her shock and apparent disgust at the sight of her own genitals is a complex reflection of the way in which her culture denies girls and women full knowledge of themselves. Enitan's genitalia are an indispensable and natural part of her: they are a normal part of what makes her female and should not ordinarily arouse revulsion in their owner. She reacts the way she does because the prevailing cultural values of her society do not provide her with the tools to really see herself as she is. She can be genitally mutilated with official sanction, but culturally-mediated notions of modesty prevent her from viewing them, to say nothing of the intense contemplation her friend Sheri forces her to undergo. Her surprise is actually the shock of true self-knowledge: for the first time, she is looking at herself as an autonomous entity. It is the first of a series of enhanced

views in which Enitan becomes intimately acquainted with herself: the insights she gains help her in the tortuous journey of finding out who she is.

Enitan's journey to ultimate self-acceptance is regularly interspersed with occasions of self-forgiveness, as she tries to learn from the errors and vicissitudes of life. Self-awareness for Enitan comes gradually as she encounters different experiences that constantly force her to re-evaluate her perception of herself. It makes her more conscious of herself in opposition to authority figures like her parents; some events help her to see hitherto-unknown aspects of her own personality, such as her capacity for love, her acute sense of betrayal, and her inner strength; other events reconcile her to the challenges of Nigerian life. These experiences provide a context within which she is able to acquire a better understanding of who she is. As she informs her boyfriend Mike: "I'm one of those women who wants to trust somebody" (Atta, 2005, p. 89). Enitan's lack of trust fills her with guilt, and negatively influences her strained relationship with her mother, as well as her father and Mike, especially after both let her down. However, she eventually realizes that her sceptical nature is actually a defence mechanism that protects her from the disillusionment of disappointed expectations. Thus, from wanting to be "one of those girls chosen for our annual beauty pageants" (p. 50), she understands that "Prettiness could encourage people to treat a woman like a doll, to be played with, tossed around, fingered, dismembered, and discarded" (p. 109). Such changes of perspective crystallize into profound insights that demonstrate the extent of her self-awareness. She observes that, "A woman was used to the humiliation by the time she reached adulthood. She could wear it like a crown, tilt it for effect even, and dare anyone to question her" (p. 172). The consequences of this familiarity with humiliation are all around her: "In my 29 years no man had ever told me to show respect. No man ever needed to. I had seen how women respected men and ended up shouldering burdens like one of those people who carried firewood on their heads, with their necks as high as church spires and foreheads crushed" (p. 190). She is aware enough to understand her peculiar dilemma. As the offspring of comfortable, upper middle-class parents, she is ostensibly immune to most of the inadequacies of Nigerian society. However, she finds instead that she is enmeshed within its in-

tertwinced paradoxes. She won't starve, but is starved of affection. She is offered painless illusion when she would prefer painful honesty. Material ostentation is to be a viable substitute for poverty of the spirit. With self-awareness comes the end of self-delusion. It is in this regard that self-acceptance represents Enitan's hard-won realisation that no social obligation, family commitment or filial tie should ever take precedence over the need to be true to herself and faithful to her ideals, no matter how unconventional or "improper" they are. It is ironic that this realisation is brought home by her experience of childbirth, a phenomenon that is often used to lock women into stereotyped gender roles. "From childhood, people had told me I couldn't do this or that, because no one would marry me and I would never become a mother. Now I was a mother" (p. 330). As she tells her husband, Niyi: "I'm not the same" (p. 330). This new fidelity to self serves to anchor her in a country whose unstable policies are a metaphor for the arbitrariness that characterises the lives of its citizens. After years of following other people's prescriptions "about how best to behave" (p. 11), she has finally realised that only she can take responsibility for what she makes of her own life, and by implication, the quality and worth of her contributions to the advancement of her society: "How terrifying and sublime to behave like a god with the power to revive myself. This was the option I chose" (p. 337). This is why she decides to leave her husband; after years of being told what to do, she has come to understand that she can no longer tolerate it, even from the father of her child: "My husband asked why I was leaving him. 'I have to,' I replied. Three words; I could say them. 'What kind of woman are you?' Not a word" (p. 336). Enitan may not be quite certain of the kind of woman she is, but she is sure of the kind of woman she does not want to be. Her decision is made even more imperative by the fact of motherhood because she realizes that she has a duty to ensure that her daughter's life is not constrained by the same forces that circumscribed hers.

### *Purple Hibiscus*

The trajectory of becoming is even more significant in *Purple Hibiscus* because it is a coming-of-age novel that deals with the making of a superwoman. Appropriately enough, given its title, it reveals the flower-

ing of its main character, Kambili, who ostensibly transforms from the chrysalis of a painfully shy young girl into the butterfly of a self-assured woman who is well able to manipulate social, economic, and political structures to her own benefit.

Adichie's overarching narrative strategy also enables the trajectory of becoming to be clearly realized within the text. She sets up what is essentially a set of contrasts that help to illuminate different attitudes and perspectives on life by bringing them into direct confrontation with one another. Thus, the novel pairs Catholicism and African Traditional Beliefs; strict and tolerant parenting; rigid self-control and the open expression of feeling; the garden and the jungle; Father Benedict and Father Amadi; Jaja and Obiora; Kambili and Amaka. In addition to serving as the psychic background against which the superwoman must discover herself, these pairings also serve as a measure of her progress by gauging the extent to which her attitudes and behaviour are independent of these approaches to life. Kambili's ability to negotiate these seemingly-opposed dualities rather than merely aligning with one or the other determines the extent to which she has understood herself and is able to shape her own outlook upon life. In the light of these personality pairings, it is not surprising that Kambili's moment of self-recognition comes during one of her many clashes with the extrovert Amaka, who has repeatedly confronted her over her shyness and verbal reticence. It is not simply a matter of replying to a question by answering, she will be simultaneously speaking, speaking up, and speaking out. In speaking she confirms her humanity by performing a uniquely human act. Speaking up enables her to assert her personality; speaking out serves to proclaim herself to the world. The importance of Kambili's reply to Amaka cannot be underestimated. Hitherto, her life at home had been portrayed in terms of her inability to speak, her refusal to speak, her dread of speaking, her resort to non-verbal means of communication, the ritualization of silence, the repression of speech, the demonization of noise (as disorder, and therefore evil), and the canonization of silence (as peace, and therefore holy). Her answering of Amaka thus amounts to a virtual repudiation of the underlying principles of her existence: it is self-recognition in its most revolutionary sense.

Kambili's discovery of her voice prepares her for the achievement of

self-awareness. In meeting Father Amadi, she encounters a person whose actions and attitudes overturn her notions of spirituality, faith, and interpersonal relationships. For a girl whose life has been dominated by a father who “burnt” his love into her, the handsome, personable, and empathetic Amadi poses a troublingly pain-free alternative. Kambili inevitably compares him to her revered father and is disturbed to find that the latter does not win hands down as usual.

Kambili’s attainment of self-awareness comes during her interaction at the stadium with the spiritual father who is counterpoised to her real father. Amadi has just enquired if she wears lipstick, and instead of responding with extreme embarrassment as usual, she responds with a smile: “... I felt the smile start to creep over my face, stretching my lips and cheeks, an embarrassed and amused smile ... I smiled. I smiled again” (Adichie, 2004, p. 177). This smile is Kambili’s first unmediated and un-suppressed reaction to a stranger in the novel. She does not react the way she has been conditioned to react; she reacts the way she wants to react. Like Enitan, she has just discovered herself as an autonomous, sentient being, one who is capable of responding naturally to another person. Just as naturally, Kambili’s awareness of herself progresses to the next stage: “I laughed. It sounded strange, as if I were listening to the recorded laughter of a stranger being played back. I was not sure I had ever heard myself laugh” (p. 179). Like speech, laughter is the outward expression of individuality; it is an indication of a person responding independently to external stimuli, and a demonstration of self-will and self-belief. In the light of her almost-catatonic reactions to situations around her, such smiles and laughter constitute the beginnings of a process of self-assertion.

Kambili’s experience with Father Amadi triggers multiple dimensions of self-awareness. His ability to relate easily to others makes her realize the value of human contact; his tolerant approach to indigenous culture undermines her instinctive hostility to it; his appreciation of her physicality gives her new perspectives on herself and what she is capable of. Most importantly, it is he who provides a bridge of reality as Kambili’s unquestioning affection for her father starts to decline. It is he, rather than her father, who now provides the backdrop to her consciousness: “I did not need to write his name down to see him ... I recognized a flash of his gait, that loping, confident stride, in the gardener’s. I saw



his lean, muscular build in Kevin and ... even a flash of his smile in Mother Lucy” (p. 204). Since the distortion of her personality was perpetrated by her father, it is only fitting that her attainment of self-acceptance is characterised by her rejection of him. Away from his overbearing influence, she has begun the process of understanding herself, and is naturally reluctant to lose what she has just found. Old loyalties battle with a newfound independence of spirit as Kambili struggles to come to terms with the implications of her broadened perspectives. Her trajectory of becoming not only implies increased self-knowledge but also a greater openness to the world around her – a world her father had done his utmost to shield her from. The acquisition of self-awareness has also enabled her to directly examine issues she had hitherto avoided, especially the gulf between her family’s public and private personae. Self-acceptance involves reconciling this artificial divide to form a coherent whole, and it cannot be done without the repudiation of the man whose neuroses caused it in the first place.

Kambili’s transition to self-acceptance starts when she and her brother return from their first visit to their cousins and discover their alienation from their own home: “... it did feel different to be back ... our living room had too much empty space, too much wasted marble floor that ... housed nothing. Our ceilings were too high. Our furniture was lifeless ... the Persian rugs were too lush to have any feeling” (p. 193). This lack of familiarity extends to her relationship with her father, as Kambili can no longer identify herself so closely with him: “... I did not think about his hands soaked in hot water for tea, the skin peeling off, his face set in tight lines of pain. Instead, I thought about the painting of Papa-Nnukwu in my bag” (p. 197). As was the case with Father Amadi, another person has displaced her father in her mind; his destruction of the painting and brutalization of his daughter merely accelerates this process. Despite this, it is not easy for Kambili to change the habits of a lifetime. As she admits to herself: “I did want to talk to Papa, to hear his voice ... And yet, I did not want to talk to him; I wanted to leave with Father Amadi, or Auntie Ifeoma, and never come back” (p. 268). Her conflict over her relationship with her father is in fact a struggle to accept herself for what she is: on the one hand, the familiar role of being her father’s daughter; on the other, the assertion of her own personality as an autonomous human being. The complexity of this con-

flict can be seen in her mistaken perception of the crisis in her family as “things falling apart” (p. 3). Rather than disintegration, what is taking place is actually a restoration, as Kambili, Jaja, and their mother struggle to reclaim their lives from a father who blasphemously usurps God’s role as he forcibly tries to recreate them in his own jaundiced image. Overcoming this inability to see things as they really are is part of Kambili’s attainment of self-acceptance because it will unambiguously show that she has the psychological resources to encounter the world as it is, rather than as she wishes it to be.

She confronts the harshest of realities with her father’s death. It is a brutal introduction to the real world: the man who had “seemed immortal” (p. 287) has gone the way of all flesh, and it is in the resulting vacuum that Kambili is compelled to emerge fully as an individual in her own right. Her father is dead, her mother is an emotional wreck, and her brother is in jail. She must now take charge, and help the family to acquire new principles for living. Her task is made more difficult by the departure of Auntie Ifeoma and her cousins, as well as Father Amadi, but she now knows that it is her duty to persevere. As grim as things seem, she can laugh because she can at least accept herself for who she is, regardless of what others think: “As we drove back to Enugu, I laughed loudly, above Fela’s strident singing. I laughed because ... Nsukka could free something deep inside your belly that would rise up to your throat and come out as a freedom song. As laughter” (p. 299).

### *Half of a Yellow Sun*

As its title suggests, *Half of a Yellow Sun* examines various sorts of incompleteness, manifested in unfulfilled lives, unmet aspirations, deferred dreams, and dashed hopes, all of which are starkly displayed against the surreal backdrop of civil war, itself a violent attempt to achieve wholeness through secession. The novel is fundamentally about intertwined responsibilities, mutual betrayals, and shared weaknesses, making it imperative for any prospective superwoman to fully understand who she is as she ventures into this moral minefield. It is in this regard that Olanna, the text’s acknowledged superwoman, must embark on a journey towards self-recognition that basically involves coming to terms with

herself. Unlike Enitan and Kambili, Olanna is already an adult when this process begins, an accomplished woman who apparently already knows what she wants from life. Perhaps because she is an adult and her perceptions are consequently less amenable to change, Olanna's self-recognition is a somewhat drawn-out process.

Olanna's unrealized need for self-recognition is revealed in her quiet assertion: "I am not like white people" (Adichie, 2006, p. 47). Delivered in response to an observation about her attitudes, it conveys her natural resentment of any suggestion of colonial mentality, in conformity with the reflex nationalism of the early sixties. Such associations are especially galling for one whose independent spirit resists categorization. But Olanna's disavowal of affinity with foreigners is actually an unwitting demonstration of her essential restlessness, an inability to fully identify with other individuals in an unproblematic way. She does not get on well with either her parents or her sister. She feels out of place in a social class already notorious for its hedonistic materialism, and is reluctant to marry Odenigbo, even though she clearly loves him. Her famed good looks conspire to alienate her; like most beautiful women, her beauty effectively objectifies her – she is variously denounced as "a distracting Aphrodite" (p. 27), "illogically pretty" (p. 50), and a "water mermaid" (p. 50). Olanna ruefully confirms her dubious status as a prized item of consumption: "My sister and I are meat. We are here so that suitable bachelors will make the kill" (p. 61). Her personality is unwittingly distorted by her looks and social status, in effect making her a poor little rich girl.

Olanna's essential rootlessness is symbolized in her paradoxical combination of ignorance and knowledge, a quality recognised by Richard Churchill, who is "... charmed by that quality of hers that seemed both sophisticated and naive, an idealism that refused to be suffocated by gritty reality" (p. 67). Olanna is made up of two disconnected halves that shape her attitudes and perspectives, and self-recognition will involve identifying these disparate components and bringing them together.

This is what happens during the crisis perpetrated by the aggressiveness of Odenigbo's mother, who seeks to get her own choice of a wife for him. It unsettles many of the comfortable assumptions that hitherto undergirded her ostensibly cosmopolitan approach to life. The events

that constitute this crisis force Olanna to re-examine herself because qualities she previously considered positive are portrayed as character flaws and cruelly exposed to the world. Mama caustically puts her down as “just a woman who is living with a man who has not paid her bride price” (p. 216). This harsh summation of Olanna’s position in Odenigbo’s home also refers to her existential predicament of simultaneous belonging and alienation as well. With relentless vigour, Mama hurls her family’s history in her face, challenges the worth of her learning, and questions her status as a woman. Unleashing her ultimate weapon on Olanna’s unconventionality, Mama denounces her as a witch: “Neighbours! There is a witch in my son’s house! Neighbours!” (p. 99).

Olanna’s urbane cosmopolitan outlook collides with Mama’s unapologetic parochialism, and she is thoroughly worsted: “Odenigbo’s mother’s visit had ripped a hole in her safe mesh of feathers, startled her, snatched something away from her. She felt one step away from where she should be” (p. 107). In re-examining her relationship with Odenigbo, she finds that she also has to re-evaluate herself as well. She discovers that she is not quite as self-sufficient as she thought: she “felt as if she had somehow failed [Odenigbo] and herself by allowing his mother’s behaviour to upset her” (p. 104), even though it is obvious her resentment is justified; she vacillates between visions of dependency and autonomy, wishing “there was somebody she could lean against; then she wished she was different, the sort of person who did not need to lean on others ...” (p. 106). Such is her confusion and distress that she turns in desperation to that most conventional anchor of romantic relationships – having a baby.

In essence, Olanna painfully discovers that she is neither as resilient nor as atypical as she thought she was, and her already-shaken assumptions are further assaulted by Odenigbo’s infidelity. His action is devastating, not just because it amounts to a betrayal, but because it also demonstrates her vulnerability in a way almost nothing else can. It takes the blunt pragmatism of Aunty Ifeka and Edna, two very different women, to push her towards self-awareness. The former tells her “Your life belongs to you and you alone” (p. 230); the latter asks her “Why isn’t what you are enough?” (p. 236). Thus encouraged to think of herself as an individual, she engages in an act of retaliatory infidelity that fills her “with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace” (p.

237). Incomplete halves are reconciled: she is worldly enough to engage in an affair, and naive enough to adopt Odenigbo's love child. As she takes the latter action, she actually experiences a conscious sense of completeness: "It was as if it were what she had always wanted to do" (p. 257). Such fulfilment stands in marked contrast to the lack of connectedness that had characterized previous experiences. In acting so decisively, without regard to conventional notions of propriety, social class, and good breeding, Olanna discovers herself.

Olanna's attainment of self-awareness is more traumatic. It occurs when she finds herself in one of the many anti-Igbo pogroms that occurred in northern Nigeria just before the outbreak of civil war. It is significant that her initial perceptions of the "riots" convey the cool-headed urbanity that has shaped much of her attitudes to life. She responds slowly to Mohammed's urgency, and her alarm is at first no more than an extension of his: she is "suddenly frightened at how frightened he looked" (p. 150). However, when the horrific reality dawns on her, she alone must bear the extreme revulsion that floods her being. Once again, the cosmopolitan outlook bestowed upon her by upbringing, social class, and personal disposition fail her in this encounter with an extreme manifestation of parochialism. Nothing has prepared her for the astounding brutality whose grim results are all around her. Surrounded by death, she is forced into an acute awareness of her own mortality; in the midst of Igbo corpses, the worth of Igbo life is thrust upon her.

When considered from an ethnic perspective, the mutations Olanna undergoes during the killings are remarkable for their rapid contrast. She is first an Igbo-speaking cosmopolitan Nigerian engaged in civilized discourse with a Hausa friend; when danger manifests itself, she is disguised as "a proper Muslim woman" (p. 149) and thus escapes to eastern Nigeria, where she becomes defiantly Biafran. These alterations in ethnic identity chart the emergence of Olanna's self-awareness and the simultaneous narrowing of her cosmopolitan outlook. The horrific experience of beholding the mutilated corpses of close relations calls in question almost everything she holds dear and the physical repercussions of seeing the unseeable are almost unbearable in their intensity. "Her eyes burnt. She felt as if there were a mixture of peppers and sand inside them, pricking and burning her lids. It was agony to blink, agony

to keep them closed, agony to leave them open. She wanted to rip them out” (p. 152). So traumatic are her experiences that they lead to the so-called “Dark Swoops” (p. 159), a suffocating entombment that coincides with the loss of the use of her legs. On a symbolic level, this condition appears to represent a physical manifestation of her emotional trauma: the immobility is certainly a stark contrast to the freedom of movement she had indulged in so ostentatiously as a member of the country’s emerging jet-set. By extension, the return of her ability to walk portrays the new sense of purposeful action that she has now acquired, and which coincidentally finds immediate expression in the declaration of secession that occurs soon after. Unable to walk just a few days before, she now considers herself to be one of those who “could stand barefoot over red-hot embers” (p. 166).

Having achieved self-recognition in the wake of a lover’s tiff, and self-awareness as a result of ethnic cleansing, it is only fitting that Olanna arrive at self-acceptance by way of war. As the seriousness of the conflicts she is involved in escalates, her understanding of herself deepens and her cosmopolitan perspectives narrow. In spite of the violence she has witnessed in the north, she is unprepared for the actual outbreak of conflict. She, like Odenigbo, believes “that war would not come and that people were simply panicking” (pp. 179-180). When the prospect of war turns into inescapable reality, this sanguinity is replaced by the confidence that “Our soldiers will drive the Nigerians back in a week or two” (p. 181). Even as they evacuate Nsukka, they still believe that they will return soon. Like most of the populace, Olanna simply cannot conceive of war, and this mindset makes its full impact all the more devastating. The conflict plunges Olanna into a surreal world. Social values and cultural norms, already tenuous, give way to the amoral imperative of survival. Rumour and propaganda replace fact; the more outlandish the stories are, the more factual they become. Social standing undergoes subtle shifts, as men of ideas like Odenigbo lose ground to warriors like Okeoma and hustlers like Special Julius. The celebration of life and the endurance of tragedy are so closely intertwined that they are often difficult to distinguish. Olanna’s wedding to Odenigbo is disrupted by an air raid, and her wedding dress suddenly becomes an extremely dangerous item of clothing.

War is suffused with the motif of departure: as the battles rage, peo-

ple are forced to leave their current abodes. Each leave-taking implies diminished belongings, decreased hopes, and reduced expectations. These successive departures profoundly unsettle Olanna. It is not just the disruption of these repeated evacuations; it is the way each exodus forces her to re-evaluate herself anew. As Biafra inexorably shrinks, she has to come to terms with the deaths of friends, the humiliations and deprivations, the terror of air raids, and the emotional highs and lows triggered by victory and defeat. The paradox is that Olanna's self-acceptance emerges from the very detritus of extreme vulnerability in war. With its privations and hardships, war helps her to attain self-acceptance by brutally resolving many of the dilemmas that had contributed to her feelings of rootlessness. The wealth and privilege into which she was born have become meaningless; family tensions sort themselves out under the irresistible pressure of conflict; her nagging sense of a lack of belonging disappears in the mass hysteria of a collective struggle for survival. Instead of thinking she has nothing to lose, she suddenly realizes that she has everything to gain, and therefore something to fight for: "Olanna exhaled, filled with a frothy rage. It was the sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter. She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die. Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life" (p. 286).

Her newfound determination shows itself in the way she overcomes her dread of warplanes. "Caution had become, to her, feeble and faithless. Her steps were sturdy and she looked up often at the clear sky to search for bomber jets, because she would stop and hurl stones and words up at them" (p. 286-287). Even though the privations of war have created many individuals capable of performing prodigies of physical and emotional improvisation, incredibly resilient women like Mrs. Muokelu and Mama Oji, Olanna stands out because she has instinctively realised that survival cannot be reduced solely to the satisfaction of physical needs and must incorporate the ability to negotiate and reconcile the stark discrepancies and contradictions that exist all around her.

Olanna's acceptance of the person she is, and her determination to preserve it becomes even more important when the people closest to her undergo personal crises of their own. Her faith in herself enables her to have faith in them: to trust that the shell-shocked Odenigbo will

get over his mother's death, that the conscripted Ugwu will come back alive, that Kainene will return from her venture across the front lines. As Biafra's demise draws near, it is this self-belief that sustains her as open hostility is replaced by more subtle antipathies. In spite of the reconciliatory rhetoric, it is obvious that things will never be the same, and Olanna will have to rely heavily on her inner strengths as she makes her way in the uncertain world of post-conflict Nigeria.

### *Swallow*

Like Olanna, Tolani's experience of self-discovery in *Swallow* is relatively slow. While the former undergoes an extended process, the latter's self-discovery takes the form of a delayed reaction. Her father died when she was 13 years old, and the pain of his loss was compounded by the spiteful insinuation that he was impotent and that she, in consequence, was an illegitimate child. Tolani represses the shame of this situation because it taints her affection for her parents as well as her perception of herself. These memories are unearthed by the near-total collapse of the strategies she has developed in order to cope with the vagaries of life in Lagos. She becomes socially isolated at work and falls out with her long-time boyfriend. For this pragmatic person, who "came to Lagos to get an education and to earn a living" (Atta, 2008, p. 35), these setbacks conspire to make her question the very foundations of her being: "My head hurt where I'd struck myself. A month before, my life was barely balanced and now it seemed to have tipped over and I was slipping into the black hole Rose had warned me about" (p. 72).

This vacuum triggers Tolani's deeply-buried anxieties over her father's manhood, her mother's honor, and her own peace of mind:

The secret was as huge as a balloon coming out of my mouth. I had to pretend I was talking about someone else to get the words out; otherwise I would not have been able to. I was betraying my mother, father, my entire family, those who had come before me and those who would follow. Perhaps that was why I'd suffered so many mishaps, to make up for what I was about to say. I'm not sure about my father. I mean, I



do not know if he really is my father. I found out the day he died. Someone told me. I pretended not to hear. I was in shock. I cannot describe it. It is like finding out the moon is the sun. You know? As if day is night, and my mother had taught me wrong from the day I was born.’ I was trembling and felt no older than a ten-year-old. (pp. 183-184)

It is in this extreme distress that the drug-smuggling proposition makes its seductive appeal. This activity appears to pose both positive and negative possibilities for Nigerian women – the former because the relatively high remuneration offers chances for self-advancement unavailable elsewhere; the latter because of its indubitably demeaning aspects. In Tolani’s situation, this tantalizing dilemma is particularly clear to her. Her incorrigible friend Rose is an aggressive advocate of the benefits. Tolani’s native caution makes her difficult to convince, and her eventual decision not to embark on this narcotic adventure is due more to instinct than to any high-minded notions of ethical behaviour.

My spirit will not allow me to be a smuggler. I’ve tried and I cannot swallow. I’ve been thinking, ‘Why can’t I do this? Why?’ My tongue wasn’t mine. What is that telling me? That I must have been crazy, very crazy to think of doing such a thing; hiding drugs in my stomach, getting on a plane to go to another country to shit it out. (p. 206)

Her preparedness to face the demons in her past marks the beginning of a process of self-examination in which she will look closely at how her family and personal history have shaped her, and by so doing, help her move into the stage of self-awareness. Because she is developing a new sense of self-worth, she is able to garner the courage she needs to confront her odious boss: “I was ready to fight ... I had to start off by facing the cause of our troubles ... he would not easily forget my name when I finished with him ... (p. 204). It is a measure of her self-awareness that she is able to use the witch stereotype often used to victimize women to end her own victimization. Her sense of

self-awareness is enhanced by the tragedy that befalls Rose, who dies when the drugs she is carrying rupture inside her. She realises that her grief is actually directed inwards, towards herself: "... I vowed that I would not cry for Rose anymore. She'd never cried for herself, and whom was I crying for anyway? ... I was crying over my own loss, my own rage" (p. 235). This tough-minded sense of awareness enables her to attain self-acceptance by rejecting her boyfriend's belated offer of marriage and finally confronting the issue of her paternity. In rejecting the contrite Sanwo, Tolani realises the extent to which conventional perceptions of marriage as the height of female achievement had dominated her thinking. She sees that she had "almost paid" (p. 258) him to marry her; such desperation is now unnecessary because she now understands that the motivations which triggered it were insincere.

Tolani's new emphasis on honesty in all her relationships extends to her search for the truth about her birth. Ironically, the anticipated clash with her strong-willed mother turns out to be an alliance rather than a confrontation. As she intimates her mother with her intention to remain in her hometown, delay marriage, and learn the cloth-dyeing trade, Tolani realizes that the propriety of her mother's actions in the past matter less than the sincerity of purpose that underlay them: "Lies hide between words and the truth need not draw attention to itself. I drew closer to my mother. Would I not let her rest?" (p. 266). Details are therefore unnecessary; what is important is that Tolani is on the way to fully understanding who she is as a basis for the kind of person she wants to become.

### Conclusion

This article attempts to evaluate the ways in which two of Nigeria's best-known contemporary female novelists seek to portray central female characters that are recognizably different from those created by their predecessors. Such characters are called superwomen primarily because of the courage with which they confront the prejudices of societies in which women are deemed inferior to men. The essay argues that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sefi Atta depict characters whose lives represent a coherent response to the challenges of life in a postcolonial African nation.

How realistic are these characters? Do they propose a model of behavior or are they simply an indication of the possibilities open to African women? On the reality question, it may be said that the superwomen of Adichie and Atta are true-to-life, particularly when it is remembered that they are depicted in their full humanity, complete with their flaws of personality and their self-doubts. Perfection is not the goal: the true objective is that of overcoming of those personal and institutional handicaps that prevent them from living fulfilled lives. This is why Kambili, Olanna, Kainene, Enitan and Tolani are not prescriptive models of behaviour. Their widely divergent personalities alone testify to the impossibility of such an approach. What they do is proffer the attitudinal, emotional, and other requirements that African women must develop in approaching the issues that beset them. Thus, these characters have been confrontational or co-operative depending on the situation. Where particular approaches were found to be inappropriate, they were changed. This flexibility is a crucial difference from the perceived belligerence of western feminism, and is an indication of the way in which the authors have taken cultural specificity into consideration.

The African landscape is witnessing an increasing number of women whose rise to prominence is ample testimony to the growth of superwomen. They include Liberian President, Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, her Malawian counterpart, Mrs. Joyce Banda, as well as outstanding professionals like Nigeria's current Minister of Finance, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. Their rise to prominence despite the cultural, institutional, and other obstacles in the way of women's full realization of their potential attests to the validity of the portrayals of Adichie and Atta.

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