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Doing Motherhood, Doing Home: Mothering as Home-Making Practice in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract: Home and motherhood are tightly interwoven, particularly in the dominant conceptualizations of home as a physical and emotional refuge from the public world. However, a closer look into these concepts helps question the naturalization of both motherhood and home, revealing them as shaped by complex lived experiences and relations instead. I argue that such a rethinking of home and motherhood beyond essentialist discourse is prominent in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's postcolonial novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Drawing on concepts and theories from the fields of gender studies and geography, and taking into account the postcolonial, Nigerian context of the novel, I address how Adichie's 2006 piece of historical fiction thematizes the intersection point of motherhood and home as a relational practice. Adichie provides alternative conceptualizations of motherhood and home through her focus on performative, ritualized mothering practices that also function as relational home-making practices and that stretch beyond gender and biological relations. Through the central ambivalence that emerges in the novel when the female protagonist chooses and practices a traditional mother role but simultaneously does not correspond to the dominant Nigerian ideal of a mother, Adichie destabilizes binary views of both home and of motherhood.

Keywords: performativity; home; home-making practice; mothering; postcolonial novel; gender; care

1. Introduction

There is a long-standing custom that pictures the mother and her child as the epitome of homeliness. In her article on Australian housing in the 1950s', Carla Pascoe notes a frequent conflation of home with a caring mother figure and explains that "[w]omen and children have traditionally been associated with the home as a place of shelter" (Pascoe 2017, p. 185). This notion of a caring mother figure who resides in and creates a "homely home" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 26) is a persisting, powerful image carried on into the 21st century. However, what is at stake in such a view is the plurality and complexity of both home and motherhood as complex lived experiences that are neither universal nor static. Closer inspections of how diverse mothering practices may create and shape specific forms of home can contribute to a broader and more fluid understanding of both home and motherhood. As I will show, such a re-evaluation of the relationship between home and motherhood also lies at the heart of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's historical novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie's literary engagement with family, home, and gender has been subject to extensive research and analysis (Heinz 2019; Ogunyemi 2018; Uwakweh 2012; Nadaswaran 2011). The author's identification with feminist values and fight for women's rights (Adichie 2013) has sparked even further attention to her literary treatment of said issues. Although her most recent publication *Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) deals explicitly with motherhood, the author's interest in mothering and in the highly ambivalent role of mothers in the Nigerian society is noticeable in some of her earlier work as well. Adichie's previous engagement with motherhood has, however, so far remained understudied. As I aim to show, in the author's 2006 historical, postcolonial novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, motherhood is portrayed as a performative practice that is neither limited to a particular gender nor to biological

relations and thus subverts essentialist and biologizing gender norms. The traditional-yet-subversive mothering practice featured in the novel also functions as a central home-making practice and serves to challenge dominant, essentialist readings of home. Through shared mothering practices for a child they are not related to, two protagonists who do not correspond to the dominant Nigerian conception of a mother simultaneously disturb dominant ideals of home and homeliness.

Set in the turbulent era of the Nigerian civil war, Adichie's novel not only offers a fresh take on historical events but also draws on a violent period of Nigerian history to explore wider social change. As national borders shift and as people's lives are transformed irrevocably, conceptions of gender, motherhood, and home are subjected to a revision as well. In a country where female fertility was and still is frequently understood as a yardstick against which women's worth is to be measured (Dimka and Dein 2013, p. 103), the literary treatment of non-biological mother-child relationships carries subversive potential by offering an alternative to dominant representations of femininity and motherhood in Nigeria. Although Adichie's novel is set in the 1960s' Nigeria, an analysis of the revolutionary events depicted does not have to limit itself to how a past era is re-created and re-imagined. As Christopher Babatunde Ogunyemi points out, in Adichie's writing, "the historical is imagined through the lens of [the] present" (Ogunyemi 2018, p. 129). Considering the author's public speaking in favor of feminist values and of more complex, diverse literary narratives (Adichie 2009, 2013), I agree that Adichie's re-imagining of the past is strongly shaped by a present where the notion of mothering as a highly gendered practice is a topic of unabated significance not only in a Nigerian but also in a global context. The present analysis will, however, focus more strongly on Adichie's reworking of Nigerian norms of gender, motherhood, and, ultimately, of home.

This paper is divided into three sections. To begin with, I outline previous contributions to the conceptualization of home and discuss how the mother may emerge not only as a central figure in the creation of home but also in the possible subversion of dominant ideologies of home. In the following section, I take a closer look at different conceptualizations of motherhood and establish a connection with postcolonial and anti-essentialist perspectives on gender. My subsequent close-reading of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* explores the novel's subversive portrayal of two characters' mothering-practices-as-home-making practices.

2. Home as a Relational Practice

Among the manifold emotional and material experiences, expectations and realizations of home, a romanticized evaluation of home as a place of safety, of refuge, or of relaxation (Pascoe 2017; Allen 2008) features as a dominant interpretation. However, it is vital to look beyond such a normative conception of home and to consider the coexistence of multiple meanings and the resulting complexity and variability of the concept (Allen 2008, p. 94). Feminist critics have, among others, questioned essentialist definitions of the house as a homely place and pointed out that home is not necessarily a safe place for everyone (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 10) but might easily turn into a site of oppression (p. 15). Moreover, although the terms house and home have been used interchangeably in the past, this conflation has been heavily criticized given that a house need not be a home and a home need not be a house (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 10). Instead, the processes by which a dwelling may become a home have gained increased attention (p. 88) in more recent scholarly work. In a postcolonial context, what Kowino calls the "problem of locating home" (Kowino 2011, p. 38) is moved into the spotlight. Postcolonial research alerts to individuals' as well as to entire diasporic communities' struggle for a sense of belonging following their forceful "relocation" in colonial times (see also Kläger and Stierstorfer 2015). The ongoing negative repercussions of artificially and colonially created national borders further highlights how notions of home and of homeland are not stable but have to be renegotiated along with changed political and economic circumstances.

Contemporary research helps question simplifying and static views of home that are frequently based on a neat distinction between public and private spheres. Instead, the reciprocal influence of these inseparable domains comes to the forefront. As a result, the idealized notion of domesticity inherent in

the image of the devoted housewife and mother who provides a home away from the instability of the public arena cannot hold because home is a "dwelling intimately connected to sites and relations beyond it" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 114). Power relations on a large scale are increasingly shown as inseparable from the "intimate and personal spaces of home" (p. 21). This inseparability is a central tenet of Adichie's novel as well, given that civil war constantly intrudes upon her protagonists' "domestic" lives. The notion of the domestic space has, however, also experienced a rethinking in recent years. Jennifer L. Johnson works with a wider definition of domestic spaces as "dynamic, fluid and permeable," (Johnson 2020, p. 285) a view that is reminiscent of Blunt and Dowling's conceptualization of home. While, for Johnson, home is only one possible version of a domestic space, she ultimately defines both as relational and inseparable from public and political spheres (p. 286). Such an interpretation of home also emerges centrally in Blunt and Dowling's argumentation, where home is described as a "*relation* between material and imaginative realms and processes" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 254). The fact that meanings of home are continually formed and negotiated in an in-between "space" that stretches beyond neatly separable spheres disturbs essentialist understandings of home.

Defining home as a relation means to draw heightened attention to the relational processes or practices that create a home. In acknowledging that "home does not simply exist, but is made," Blunt and Dowling question an essentialist understanding of home as a pre-existing space and point to the practices that continuously constitute and shape home instead (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 23). More precisely, they explain that "[h]ome is lived; what home means and how it is materially manifest are continually created and re-created through everyday home-making practices" (p. 254). The fact that home-making practices are dependent on the relationships of those who inhabit and create a home has been stressed repeatedly in the past (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Allen 2008; Johnson 2020). In her compelling analysis of Nigerian migrants' religious home-making practices in the Netherlands, Nienke Pruiksma similarly highlights the significance of rituals and social interrelations between people in and outside the domestic sphere that contribute to shaping a multi-faceted version of home (Pruiksma 2017). In the context of the present analysis, the role of "intimate, familial relations" that (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 15) identify as central to the "doing" of home is of special significance. Allen highlights the "tensions that are negotiated on a daily basis by its inhabitants in order to socially co-construct and sustain a place called home" (Allen 2008, p. 85). Johnson emphasizes the role of the mother in the home when she points out that "[i]t is at this nexus of understanding home as constituted through people's intimate relationships to one another that mothers figure predominantly" (Johnson 2020, p. 286). While it is vital to point out that home-making practices go beyond family relations and that home is not dependent on the presence of a mother figure, a focus on how relational home-making practices create home de-stabilizes essentializing accounts of home and is therefore highly useful to an analysis of Adichie's novel.

The role of the mother in home-making highlights a contradiction that is inherent in all home-making practices and that is highly relevant to a reading of mothering practices in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Blunt and Dowling point out that home-making practices generally stand in a paradoxical relationship with "dominant ideologies of home," given that they may substantiate and disrupt these ideologies at the same time (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 93). In such "dominant ideologies," (p. 93) gender comes in as a crucial factor because "[h]ousehold and domestic relations are critically gendered, whether through relations of caring and domestic labour, affective relations of belonging, or establishing connections between the individual, household and society" (p. 15). Thus, from a gender studies perspective, "domestic labour and mothering" are particularly relevant home-making practices because they "simultaneously cement, contest and spatially extend [a] gendered vision of home" (p. 110). For example, mothers' consumption practices have been identified as a central activity constitutive of a mother's role within a family and hence also constitutive of family relations (Molander 2014). While not all mothering practice is subversive and may even reaffirm essentialist notions of motherhood, it is vital to recognize that, as Adichie's novel skillfully demonstrates, a closer look at the contexts and details of these performative practices may bring to light their subversive potential.

3. Performing Motherhood

Essentialist perspectives on motherhood have long dominated public discourse but they are being replaced by more flexible and multi-faceted views that accommodate the diversity of women's and mothers' experiences. A biological determinist interpretation that conflates femininity with motherhood and that generalizes mothers' experiences has received ample criticism in the past decades. While feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir largely criticized patriarchal, biologizing conflations of femininity and motherhood, contemporary views tend to place greater emphasis on the varied, lived realities of women and mothers (Neyer and Bernardi 2011), for example by pointing out the existence of mothers' ambivalent emotions towards their children (LaChance Adams 2014) or by highlighting the possible positive ramifications of motherhood (de Marneffe 2004). Foregrounding this diversity also means to provide contextualized analyses and views of motherhood, especially considering that essentialist discourse on femininity and motherhood has shaped feminist discussions of women's lives in the Global South for decades. Such research can, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out, provide a better picture of "the contradictions and complexities of women's lives and roles" (Mohanty 2003, p. 527). With respect to African writing about motherhood, Olayiwola and Olowonmi speak of a "paradigm shift" as well and find that the "plurality of views" offered calls into question "mythic norms of wifehood and motherhood" (Olayiwola and Olowonmi 2013, pp. 144–45). In African women's literary engagement with motherhood, the unsettling of binaries such as "victim/agent" or "fertile/infertile" has previously been featured as a central theme, amongst others in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, as Hilary Chala Kowino finds in his 2013 article. In such accounts, when motherhood is freed from its linkage to victimhood, a connection frequently assumed in earlier feminist writing, it is portrayed as a complex practice that is accompanied by ambivalent experiences instead (Nnaemeka 5). When African writers highlight the oppressive aspects of motherhood in patriarchal contexts while also pointing to the possible emotional gains of mothering, they can "give a human face to motherhood," as Nnaemeka further argues (5). Thus, by featuring the multifaceted reality of motherhood in their works, African writers may challenge discourse that characterizes motherhood in a strict either/or fashion.

By setting her novel amidst a struggle for freedom from British colonial rule, Adichie draws attention to, but also challenges, concepts and theories situated in European culture and religion. I agree with Atanga et al. who argue that it is not necessary to wholly discard theoretical concepts not indigenous to Africa (Atanga et al. 2012, p. 5). Although they are grounded in different cultural values, it would make little sense to "reinvent the field for a particular continent or region" (p. 5). Instead, it is possible to adapt theory that has been imported from the Global North to better apply to various African regional, ethnical, or even diasporic contexts (pp. 12–15). As Sadia Zulfiqar Chaudhry further points out, for some African women writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the wholesale re-writing of gender notions originating in "Western" societies is not necessarily an issue (2014, p. 12). At the same time, Adichie has expressed a need for narratives that regard the complexity of "African" subjectivities and that offer an alternative to patronizing and universalizing discourse (Adichie 2009). When writers like Adichie provide culture-specific literary accounts of women's emancipatory struggles within particular contexts (Zulfiqar Chaudhry 2014, p. 12), they not only appropriate concepts originating in the Global North for their own use, but they provide a more apt picture of multifaceted human life.

Drawing on research that focuses on the everyday performance of motherhood and home, I point out how diverse performative practices form the intersection point of home, motherhood, and gender in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Performativity as a concept has previously been employed in a West African research context (Ebron 2007; Wilson-Tagoe 2007) and also lends itself to an interpretation of Adichie's portrayal of motherhood and home in postcolonial Nigeria. If, as Judith Butler argues, "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results," (Butler 1990, p. 25) then motherhood, too, can be seen not as a fixed identity but rather as a set of performed and performative practices (see also Merley Hill 2011). While only those with female reproductive organs can become pregnant and give birth, and their bodies should not be ignored in discussions surrounding motherhood, it is vital to note that mothering

practices are neither tied to a specific gender nor can they be carried out only by biological mothers. This is especially relevant for an analysis of Adichie's novel, considering the ongoing stigmatization of infertile women in Nigeria. Kowino proposes "a *tentacled* motherhood—one that recognizes women who adopt or extend motherly care to children the same way it does those with biological children" (Kowino 2013, p. 26) as a possibly transformative reconceptualization of motherhood in Nigeria. Maternalist and feminist scholars in the Global North have similarly conceptualized mothering in terms of (care) practices (Ruddick [1989] 1995; O'Reilly 2009). Frost, Capdevila, and Johnson point out that "[d]oing motherhood involves engagement in choices in relation to a range of practical activities" (Frost et al. 2015, p. 104). Thus, although pregnancy and childbirth are experiences still tightly connected to conceptualizations of femininity, heightened attention to mothers' practices helps destabilize biologizing accounts of motherhood and gender. Due to the dominant representation of the mother as a central figure in the home, a closer examination of mothering practices further serves to disturb restrictive views of home.

4. Doing Motherhood—Doing Home in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

In Adichie's novel, the "doing" of motherhood and the "doing" of home are interlinked and in sharp focus. Coats and Fraustino explain that certain "texts […] encode powerful schemas that tell us how mothering should and should not be performed in the larger world. They set our expectations of what a good mother is and does and who can perform mothering work" (Coats and Fraustino 2015, p. 108). I argue that, through her portrayal of two characters' mothering practices, Adichie simultaneously addresses normative views of motherhood and distances herself from them; providing a more flexible and open interpretation of mothering instead. Although several mother-child relationships are described in terms of different practices in the novel, the triadic relationship between the female protagonist Olanna, her houseboy Ugwu, and Olanna's adoptive child Baby is of particular relevance to a discussion of motherhood and home-making. In the following, I address directly how the care practices performed by two non-biological mothers are shown to construct motherhood in the same performative sense that biological mothers' actions do. In the process, the elevated status of biological motherhood and the marginalization of infertile women in the Nigerian society (Dimka and Dein 2013; Omosun and Kofoworola 2011) are challenged and essentialist notions of motherhood are subverted. Moreover, Olanna and Ugwu's childcare routine and their relationships to each other function as central home-making practices that destabilize normative, gendered, and essentializing concepts of home. In the civil war ensuing the decolonization of Nigeria, these practices are moved into the spotlight as Olanna's family is repeatedly required to make a new home in highly unstable contexts.

The relationship between Olanna and her adoptive child Baby illustrates how the repetitiveness of everyday tasks constitutes motherhood in Adichie's novel and thus accommodates non-biological mothers. Sara Ruddick emphasizes that any person may assume the role of carer and develop an emotional relationship with a child regardless of whether a biological connection exists between them (Ruddick [1989] 1995). Additionally, as Obioma Nnaemeka neatly summarises in her introduction to Huma Ibrahim's article on "Ontological Victimhood," a woman's choice of adoption as an alternative route to motherhood may allow her to "[define and participate] in motherhood as mothering on her own term" (Nnaemeka 1997, p. 5). Acknowledging that childcare practices constitute motherhood in a performative sense helps to de-essentialize motherhood and to provide alternative conceptualizations that better align with mothers' lived experiences. Especially feeding or bathing practices are frequently gestured toward in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Baby first appears in the story in the midst of a bathing scene, together with her adoptive mother Olanna. Although the reader is, at this point, not yet aware of the connection between the two, a mother-child dynamic is almost automatically assumed. The fact that this link is deduced from a bathing scene highlights how specific practices are very much conceived of as tasks usually carried out by mothers. Bathing as a care practice is closely connected to motherhood in social discourse and thus also interpreted as constitutive of motherhood. The prevalence of bathing as a practice constitutive of motherhood particularly in Nigerian discourse is also recognizable in the

fact that Ugwu thinks about his employer Odenigbo's mother as "this woman who had bathed Master as a baby" (Adichie [2006] 2014, p. 85). Baby's bathing remains a vital part of the entire remaining storyline and takes on an almost ritual-like character when Olanna insists on its re-iteration in times of distress and times of ease alike.

Through her repetitive enactment of caring tasks such as bathing, Olanna not only expresses her love for Baby, but she performatively constructs her own role as a mother by adhering to a script of "good motherhood," while simultaneously "doing" a specific version of home. The dedication with which Olanna commits herself to her role as a mother, despite a missing biological link between herself and the child, shows that her continuous performance of tasks that she perceives as constitutive of the role of the mother also renders her a mother. This redefinition of motherhood "beyond the binary logic of fertile/infertile" helps to destabilize normative biologizing notions of the concept (Kowino 2013, p. 25). Olanna has chosen to be Baby's mother but her self-defined and self-determined form of motherhood must be constantly re-iterated, in a variety of acts that establish her as Baby's caregiver and main dependant. Through these practices, Olanna positions herself as a "good" mother in a community that is highly critical of non-biological motherhood and fulfills her own standards of "good" mothering. The central role of the mother in some dominant ideologies of home is also partly re-iterated through Olanna's mothering practice in the home. At the same time, because Olanna has chosen for herself an, albeit traditional, mother-role and practices this role in a social context that is skeptical of non-biological mothers, the home that is "done" in the novel also does not correspond to a dominant ideal of homeliness mainly created by biologically related family members. By introducing this central ambivalence—by allowing for the co-existence of seemingly opposing values—Adichie destabilizes binary conceptualizations of motherhood and home.

In addition to tasks such as bathing, the naming of her child also plays a constitutive role in Olanna's mothering practice, especially given the significance attached to names in Igbo culture. As (Okagbue et al. 2017, p. 73) point out, the choosing of a name is an act that Igbo parents will not take lightly, given that first names are viewed as powerful predictors of a person's future. Olanna and Odenigbo discuss possible girl names immediately after Odenigbo's mother has brought Baby to their house. "Mama named her Obiageli," Odenigbo explains (Adichie [2006] 2014, p. 253), but Olanna refuses to accept the name, thinking that "[h]is mother had no right to name a child she had rejected" (p. 254). Instead, Olanna claims the right to name the baby. "We'll call her Baby for now until we find the perfect name. Kainene suggested Chiamaka. I've always loved that name: God is beautiful" (p. 254). Finally having a child to call her own, Olanna continuously confirms the child-status of her adoptive daughter by naming her Baby. When Baby is already a couple of years old, Kainene mentions to Olanna that "it's about time the girl began to called Chiamaka. This Baby business is tiresome," (p. 344) but Olanna ignores her sister's comment. Olanna has discovered agency in her role as a mother and through the continuous emphasis on her child's infant-status that is reflected in the name "Baby," she re-constitutes herself as Baby's mother on a day-to-day basis.

Yet another mothering-as-home-making practice that repeatedly emerges in Adichie's novel is the repetitive enactment of Baby's feeding. Frost, Capdevila, and Johnson identify feeding as a central practice constitutive of motherhood when they argue that "[d]oing motherhood involves engagement in [. . .] a range of practical activities, a key one being feeding, with biological discourses positioning mothers as largely responsible for providing sustenance" (Frost et al. 2015, p. 104). Because the provision of food by mothers is frequently understood to create and uphold family relations (Molander 2014), and because this practice typically takes place at home, it can also be seen as constitutive of traditional images of home and homeliness. Throughout the novel, Baby's bathing and feeding are first and foremost on Olanna's mind, a fact that not only highlights the strong bond between them but that simultaneously shows how Olanna's expression of care in terms of specific practices is socially conditioned. Olanna views herself as mainly responsible for Baby's care, and she not only seeks to fulfill the child's needs, but she also asserts her own role in their relationship through claiming the responsibility that is traditionally placed on mothers. A key scene that highlights

the imminence of Baby's needs in Olanna's mind takes place when Olanna begins to regain control after she has suffered severe shock following the discovery of her relatives' corpses. Ugwu brings food to Olanna's bedside and she immediately asks him, "[h]as Baby eaten?" (Adichie [2006] 2014, p. 161). Although Olanna herself is barely able to eat and only just begins to see past her traumatizing experience, her concern for Baby comes to the forefront, and by expressing this concern in terms of a mothering practice, Olanna reaffirms her status as Baby's mother.

Olanna's choice of the highly traditional role of the mother is simultaneously subversive of dominant perspectives of motherhood and home and draws attention to the ambivalent nature and complexity of both. On the one hand, Olanna's ritualized mothering practice serves to create an equally traditional, idealized version of home centering on the mother. On the other hand, her active choice of motherhood and relational enactment of this role despite a missing biological link to Baby is subversive of "dominant ideologies of home" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 93). I argue that the novel thus highlights the ambivalence that is, according to Blunt and Dowling (p. 93), inherent in all home-making practices. Among the manifold practices that may "do" home, childcare is traditionally assigned a central place, given that mothers and their children are frequently interpreted as the epitome of home as a "safe" space (Pascoe 2017). The performance of Olanna's mother-role through specific practices such as bathing or feeding therefore also clearly serves to create a version of home that corresponds to a dominant idea of home and of motherhood. Although Olanna conforms to this ideology of home and homeliness, the fact that she "does" home through her "doing" of a non-biological mother-child relationship disturbs universalizing and static conceptions of home.

The exploration of mother-child relationships and the ability to challenge naturalizing axioms of motherhood and of home in *Half of a Yellow Sun* further extends to the relationship between Ugwu, Olanna, and Baby. Gendered concepts of care that establish women as more "natural" caregivers with a biological predisposition to perform childcare tasks are questioned in the novel through the portrayal of Ugwu's care for Baby. Not only can the fact that Ugwu plays a decisive role in raising Baby be argued to establish him as a co-mother, but it also underlines that all childcare may be performed equally well by persons of any gender, a fact that calls into question the elevated state of the institution of motherhood itself. Moreover, while Ugwu's role as a domestic worker in Olanna's household evokes a traditional vision of home, his childcare practices also challenge a gendered and essentialist view of both motherhood and home. Instead, the relational character of home-making practices (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Allen 2008) is repeatedly made evident in the triangular relationship between Olanna, Ugwu, and Baby.

Already in the very first scene that features Olanna, Ugwu, and Baby together, the degree of sharing that takes place between Ugwu and Olanna with regard to Baby's care becomes apparent. Just having returned from a visit to his hometown, Ugwu finds Olanna bathing Baby and immediately suggests that he might prepare Baby's food in the meantime, a task that normally falls to him. However, Ugwu's participation in Baby's daily care goes beyond merely cooking for the child. When Olanna suggests that Baby might wear "that blue dress Arize made for her," Ugwu tells her that "[t]he pink one is better" (Adichie [2006] 2014, p. 123) because the other one does not fit Baby. The fact that Ugwu knows best which clothes fit Baby can be read as a clear indicator of his continuous, day-to-day involvement in the child's upbringing. Additionally, Olanna and Ugwu's relationship is shown to go beyond an employer-employee dynamic when Ugwu's initiative and active role are repeatedly foregrounded. While Olanna might be responsible for Baby on a different level than Ugwu, his everyday care shows that mothering tasks may be shared between several people who are not biologically related to a child.

Although it could be argued that caring for Baby is only one among several aspects of Ugwu's daily work, the fact that Ugwu is emotionally involved in the child's upbringing further shows how the quality of a person's care or mothering practice is not reliant on their gender. Ugwu is portrayed not as a mere servant but as someone who performs his child-rearing tasks with great affection. He plays with Baby, sings to Baby, and his need to "shield" the child (p. 143) from various sorts of danger is repeatedly dramatized. Again, it is a scene that features Baby's bathing which serves well to illustrate

Ugwu's emotional connection to his charge. "Ugwu helped Baby up and took her inside. 'Bath time,' he said, although it was a little early. 'I can do it myself,' Baby said, and so he stood by and watched her bathe herself for the first time. She splashed some water on him, laughing, and he realized that she would not always need him," Adichie writes (p. 424). Ugwu's realization resembles that of a parent who watches his or her child become independent. Thus, Ugwu's emotional involvement highlights that care is not portrayed as a "transferable commodity" (Stephens 2011, pp. 12–13) in the novel. The fact that Ugwu obviously performs his caring tasks with great devotion and that Baby returns Ugwu's affection challenges naturalizing discourse. A biological mother-child connection is no longer portrayed as the ideal foundation of a child's healthy upbringing and women's superior suitability for childrearing is questioned. Likewise, Ugwu's childcare practices contribute to a de-gendered view of home that can be "done" by any person.

Given that Ugwu and Olanna share Baby's everyday caring tasks to a large degree, it is possible to describe Ugwu's participation in Baby's upbringing as co-mothering. Neither Olanna nor Ugwu are biologically related to Baby, and yet both establish their relationship to the child through their childcare practices. Thus, Ugwu's tasks can similarly be understood as constitutive of motherhood. The difference between parenting, mothering, and fathering is a highly debated issue. Some researchers and gender equality activists have proposed that all childcare work performed by mothers and fathers might be subsumed under the title of "parenting," a redefinition that omits gendered divisions. Sarah N. Gatson, however, brings up a valid question when she asks whether this "de-gendering" does not result in "simultaneously erasing the bodies doing the work" (Gatson 2014, p. 33). While some would argue that Ugwu's practice could, at most, be described as co-parenting, I maintain that the gendered reality of the novel's setting must be considered so as not to erase the "bodies doing the work" (Gatson 2014, p. 33) in the story's historical context. A performative view of motherhood shows that the term mother "need no longer apply to adult women who have given birth to a child" and that "[i]n effect, [. . .] anyone could perform the maternal, including men" (Merley Hill 2011, p. 17). At the same time, lumping these practices together under the label of "parenting" for the sake of gender equality risks a blurring of the realities of caretaking. In societal contexts where neither the lived experiences nor the social expectations of motherhood and fatherhood are identical, subsumption of mothers' and fathers' practices under the label of parenting is hardly meaningful. The discrepancy in society's reactions to mothers' versus fathers' actions is only one highly illustrative example of the gendered reality of parenting (see also Donath 2017). With regard to Adichie's novel, it is especially noteworthy that Odenigbo as Baby's only biological relative in the household seems least involved in her day-to-day care, while the bulk of childcare tasks falls to women or domestic workers such as Ugwu.

To describe all childcare as "mothering" partly contradicts a performative view of motherhood and additionally bears the risk of re-inviting biologizing accounts of care that naturalize the role of woman as well as the role of mother. However, Adichie's novel repeatedly focuses on Olanna's physicality; her inability to bear children leads the protagonist into a fierce struggle with her body and to perceive herself as "useless" (Adichie [2006] 2014, p. 232). While the novel's emphasis on Olanna's physical longing for pregnancy might be interpreted as naturalization of femininity and motherhood, the fact that Olanna and Ugwu perform motherhood via specific practices despite a missing biological link undermines biologizing norms of gender and of motherhood. The novel thus allows for multiple, co-existing, and apparently contradictory narratives of motherhood and of gender. Ugwu's performance of caring tasks undermines essentialist conflations of femininity and care—his participation in a highly gendered practice in the 1960s' Nigerian society causes him to disrupt gender norms. At the same time, because Adichie attributes a central role to the body and to the unique capability to bear children, she portrays motherhood not in a binary fashion but as both performative and biological.

Olanna and Ugwu's mothering-practice-as-home-making practice takes on an additional layer of significance when war drastically alters the small family's life. As they are forced to move from

one place to another, Olanna and Ugwu continuously "do" home through their repetitive mothering practices in in-between spaces. Although Olanna and her family must face a steady downgrade in their living standards—ultimately, they are forced to share a single room—specific mothering practices that functioned as central home-making practices in pre-war days are continued and serve to uphold some level of stability. Baby's bathing and feeding take on a highly ritualized character in Olanna's struggle with the atrocities and imminent dangers of war and help to create an emotionally safe space for the family. Olanna's prioritization of Baby's bathing is repeatedly thematized throughout the wartime chapters of Adichie's novel. The prominence that Baby's bathing takes in Olanna's mind is made especially evident in a moment of crisis when the family has to leave their Nsukka home in a rush and when Olanna's first thoughts go to how she "had already packed the albums [and] had bathed Baby" (Adichie [2006] 2014, p. 195). At another point, Olanna "[is] giving Baby an evening bath when the siren alarm [sounds] again" (p. 275). As the repetitive emphasis on Baby's bathing suggests, Olanna's preoccupation with specific mothering tasks serves to ensure her own as well as her child's mental stability in times of crisis. Metaphorically speaking, her ritualized bathing practice enables Olanna to clean war's dirt off her child. In a more literal sense, the actual dirt that Olanna's child now plays in functions as a steady reminder of their social descent and clashes with her expectations of "good" motherhood. Although her focus on Baby's care in a ritualized manner may be understood as part of a mechanism of repression, her preservation of specific practices allows her to create a home that functions as an emotionally "safe space" for her family. While they struggle to practice a home that functions as a shelter from the imminent dangers of war, Olanna and Ugwu are constantly reminded that civil unrest cannot be stopped from entering their home. Adichie's characters' mothering-as-home-making practices take place in an all-encompassing instability which constantly permeates and blurs the lines between domestic and public life.

5. Conclusions

In Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the shifting social reality of the Nigerian post-colonial era provides a fitting historical background for the simultaneous exploration of changing norms with regard to motherhood, gender, and home. I showed that mothering is portrayed as a multi-faceted, performed, and performative practice that "does" home in Adichie's novel. This practice is neither dependent on gender nor on blood ties between those who create home in a relational manner. Jennifer L. Johnson closes her recent contribution to the *Routledge Companion to Motherhood* by asking herself and her readers, "[w]hat is the potential of home-making, and why does it continue to be of such importance?" (Johnson 2020, p. 291). I argue that it is exactly this potential of home-making practices that is moved into the spotlight in Adichie's 2006 piece of fiction. Uniting seemingly contradictory values regarding motherhood and home, the author offers an artful approach to a topic of great relevance in a Nigerian context. Olanna's and Ugwu's shared "doing" of home highlights what Blunt and Dowling (2006) identify as a central characteristic of all home-making practices: while they conform with and reproduce certain ideologies of home, they simultaneously disturb others. Although Olanna and Ugwu, as mother(s) and domestic worker(s), embody a dominant, normative understanding of home as the place where the mother is and where children are raised, their work simultaneously serves to disturb essentialist notions of home. The fact Olanna and Ugwu do not correspond to the dominant, biologized conceptualization of the mother in Nigeria renders their mothering-as-home-making practices a challenge to restrictive and normative interpretations of home and of motherhood.

A number of mothering practices also emerge as key home-making practices in the novel. Bathing and feeding, two practices that are traditionally associated with a mother's role in providing for a family, are shown to create home before and during war alike. Thus, Adichie highlights that home is not necessarily tied to a specific physical location. Considering Olanna's choice of non-biological motherhood in a context where infertility and adoption are stigmatized as well as the shared mothering that takes place between herself and her male servant, her performance of these practices gains

subversive potential in Adichie's novel. Although Adichie explores Olanna's physical need for a child and thus establishes a link between femininity, the body, and motherhood, she also un-links motherhood, gender, and biology. Ugwu's care for Baby renders him a mother alongside Olanna who creates her role as Baby's mother through highly similar practices. Interpreting Olanna and Ugwu's care for Baby as a shared form of motherhood means to consider the novel's historical context, where the majority of childcare is typically performed by women. In Adichie's novel, the fact that there are "bodies doing the work" (Gatson 2014, p. 33) and that these bodies have needs and specific functions is not contrary to a performative view of motherhood and home. Instead, Adichie portrays home and mothering as areas of ambivalent and conflicting experiences and expectations that defy categorization in an either/or fashion.

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