

Voicing Silence: A Postcolonial Reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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ABSTRACT

Many African countries have been disposed to colonialism and its consequences on their livelihoods. *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi sets the scene for a long battle well known as the Biafran civil war between the Igbo tribe and its counterpart, the Hausa tribe. For two years, both ethnic tribes fought for leadership and dominance, land and its accompanying resources. This ensued into poverty, diaspora, loss of identity, identity reformation, and the deaths of countless Civilians and soldiers. This paper is an attempt to analyse Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's, *Half of a Yellow Sun* using the post-colonial theory. The study attempts to address the following: the context of the Biafran war, the causes of the Biafran Civil war, how the identity of the Igbo tribe was shaped under the Biafran civil war, specifically, reviewing the lived experiences of major characters within the mentioned novel, namely, Olanna, Richard and Ugwu. This study found that the identity of all three characters under preview has been shaped during the Biafran war and as a result, they have emerged from the war well rooted in their culture.

Keywords- Post colonialism, identity politics, Biafran Civil War, Rewriting history.

Literature quickly established its place not only in literature studies but in the field of politics and society as well. Clearly its acceptance as a distinctive and politically significant body of writing owes much to the challenge it presented to established ways of African societies and received understanding of Africa's history and her relationship with the outside world. African writers especially novelists writing in English, offer a more promising point of view from which they try to seek Africa's location within the global system and the way in which aspects of that system are reproduced and resisted within Africa.

From the beginning itself the African novel was stamped with the message that the past was a prime concern of politics. For reasons both of personal emancipation and social responsibility Philip Darby says that:

The nub of our interest lies in the novelist's presentation of history as a space within which to search for meaning, open up new ways of seeing and patterning and posit suggestive connections between then and now and

this may be done by revisiting the past. (*The Fiction of Imperialism* 140)

Postcolonial writing of history and literature make it evident that both history and fiction are discourses constituting systems of signification by which we can capture the essence of the past. Postcolonial version of historical novel labelled by some critics as are intensely self-reflexive and re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge. Post Modernists typically re-write the past from the point of view of those who have been victimized (women, native people, gays, etc). The Postmodern attitude has greatly influenced current writers of historical fiction, often nudging them to be the first into fields that were largely ignored by historians.

The new and different outlook on history was exploded to the full by the later 20th century post colonial novelists. The post colonial novelists questioned the worthiness of the existing history in their attempt to reclaim their past. For them history till then was a western construct. Their awareness of the colonial situation and the social and political ferment it generated in the country

stimulated their interest in the past, which they tried either to recreate or interpret. Their attempt was to make their countrymen understand how the reality was different from what they had been taught by the West.

The gulf between the factual truth and its manipulated official version is a matter of concern for the creative artist in colonised countries. The very act of narration becomes a rebellion against the accepted notion of history, because the novelist in such societies in the process of documenting the human situation also denies the official version of truth. As a historian he should discover the cultural heritage of his people and chronicle all the important events that might have changed the destiny and molded the social pattern of his people.

While standing on the vantage point of view of the present, his mind travels back into the past. Soon he realizes that the past of his people or community is his own past in a way. However he has to be objective and should maintain intellectual integrity and emotional poise in his approach to his cultural heritage. He should curb two irresistible impulses, the impulse of nostalgia and the impulse of idealisation. The two impulses tend to disturb the emotional and intellectual equilibrium of the novelist, causing thereby a deviation from historical and social realism. At times he may find himself in a misty and chaotic environment. This is true of the African writers.

An African writer finds that his people's past has been distorted, his ancestors stereotyped and his cultural heritage despised. He realises that white historians have diverted him and his people of their cultural traditions and civilizations. He should therefore establish the fact that his ancestors did not live in a dark, cultural void. He should be rather affirmative about this fact. He should also erase the blemishes from the face of his cultural past. Then alone can he proceed to create the true features of the personality of his people.

This is what Africa's emerging Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie attempts through her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* which revisits the theme of one of the most painful episodes in the history of Nigeria, the Nigerian Civil War of 1967. The novelist's interest in history tends to depict the characters as the innocent victims of larger forces, the spindrift of impersonal waves. Through this novel Adichie shows how history's victims can also be the perpetrators of its excesses. Adichie in one of her interviews commented that:

I wrote this novel because I wanted to write about love and war, because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra, because I lost both grandfathers in the Nigeria-Biafra War, because I wanted to engage with my history in order to make sense of my present, because many of the issues that led to the war remain unresolved today. (www.halfofayellowsun.com)

Perhaps the most important to African writers is the chance to reclaim history, to read about events and society from the perspective of people with whom they identify and whose voices they can trust. That is why Adichie says:

So much of the experience of our generation of Africans is about how we find ourselves reacting to our times based on wars, battles and events that we know little about, but which continue to define us. We need to take control of our history so that we can manage our present. (www.halfofayellowsun.com)

The short history of Biafra in the late 1960s may have become a footnote in modern history text books, perhaps still living only in the memories of those who were around and remember. But to those caught in the violent sectarian struggles that exploded among the different communities in Nigeria then, the devastation and horror visited upon their lives and their relationship with people they grew up with couldn't have been more traumatic or shattering. Through this novel Adichie presents the true Biafra story and she remains true to the central events of the time.

In the novel the Nigerian author's recording her ancestor's experience as a displaced person in Biafra, provide a rich platform for the multifaceted approach to the war that shattered Igbo land from an insider's point of view. It focuses on the consequence of armed conflicts and its sequels on daily life and relationships, and highlights the shift in values and changing attitudes to life that people experienced as a result of displacement, restrictions, daily exposure to danger and overwhelming presence of death.

The author carefully portrays the significant moments of that period in Nigerian history and she tells her story by alternating the points of view of three main characters and they include Ugwu, a thirteen year old boy who comes from a village to become a house boy at the house of Odenigbo, a professor and Biafran nationalist, Olanna, a middle class Nigerian, educated daughter of an Igbo business man and Richard, an English expatriate come to Africa to study the Igbo art. Adichie does not describe historical facts, instead she cleverly uses the central characters to describe the unfolding of events. Her insights reflect her personal attitude and tie with this event and the Igbo people. For the reader unfamiliar with African history, the credibility of this fictional portrayal of war is truly enhanced through the use of these three different voices to communicate the experience. The characters are all involved in each other's lives but their emotional responses to the events that confront them display a raw honest that is shared only with close friends.

David Milofsky comments that: "The novel is Tolstoyan in its grasp of history and in its ability to traverse various ends of the social spectrum from a village

manservant to the daughter of wealthy bureaucrats” (www.halfofayellow.sun.com 2 January 2008). Thus the novel encompasses a large cast where individual dramas are set within the panoramic landscape of war. Adichie’s novel provides different kinds of historical truth, not the facile truth of facts, figures and dates but the deeper truth of throbbing, lived experience. Told through multiple points of view, this historical novel is about post-colonial Nigeria, tribal and cultural racism and its results. In her exploration of ethnic, religious and class prejudices and genocide, Adichie focuses on the personal experience of a few memorable individuals experiencing the drama of conflict and the new nation.

Her manipulation point of view and time from the years and during the war, adds depth and perspective to her timely novel as secessionist tensions in the forms Biafra persist. This is a transcendent novel of many descriptive triumphs, most notably its depiction of the impact of war’s brutalities on peasants and intellectuals alike. By concentrating on one family and its close circle of friends and neighbours, Adichie creates an intimate portrait of these people’s lives during both these critical periods. She paints her characters and their ongoing interactions against the panoramic view of events and environments that influence their lives and challenges their peace and even their existence.

The novel begins in the early 1960’s in the good times, when food is in abundance. There are swimming pools, flowers, scented talc and lawn movers, but there is an underlying tension building up with the inevitability of the impending war. Until the second half of the book, the early 1960’s she paints the picture of a normal life among Igbo population. And then by the late 1960’s as these characters begin to progress to the next stages of their lives, political tension in the country elevates to what eventually turned into a massacre of the Igbos. During the war years, intimacies, friendship and loyalties are put to the test. Some are evicted from their homes and have to join the endless stream of refugees to find shelter and food for survival. Others move into remote rural areas to escape the fighting.

Adichie tells her story by alternating the points of view of three main characters whose different perspectives reveal much about the class and racial divisions in Post-colonial Nigeria and provide an insight into the action of history. The novel encompasses a large cast whose individual dramas are set within the panoramic landscape of war.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* Adichie has attempted another device that is, excerpts from a book within a book attached to the end of certain chapters. The book titled *The World Was Silent when we died* succinctly supplies the history that forms the back ground for the intellectual and emotional human drama, that is, the Nigerian Civil War. This second narrative also explains how Nigeria came about as a nation. It also allowed the reader the opportunity to be distanced from what was occurring in

the novel, to learn that these were very real events happening to very real people.

Eleni Coundouritis in his book *Claiming History: colonialism, Ethnography and the novel* comments that:

By looking at African novels-written in both French and English of the colonial periods, *Claiming History* places African literature in its proper context with in the field of post colonial studies illustrates how historical narration not only “answers back” to Europe’s colonialist legacy but also serves as a complex form of dissent among African themselves. (32)

The readers are initially led to believe that this second narrative had been written by Richard who came to Africa to write about its people and culture. However he is not given the opportunity to re-write the past. The decision to give the authorship of the second book to a native Igbo rather than a British white man also allows Adichie to reclaim the past and the present in independent terms. That is why Adichie comments in one of her interviews, “I wanted to make a strongly felt political point about who should be writing the stories of Africa” (www.halfofayellowsun.com 2 January 2008). Her fiction asks questions about the roles played by colonialism and present day corruption in the conflicts of the land of her birth and she refuses to simplify the problems or solutions. It also shows her capacity to demonstrate and look at the family and the wider public sphere with equal regard.

Richard is a writer entranced with a vision of Africa as he perceives it through the “rope pot” as an artist artifact. Richard is presented as impotent on occasion, both in a sexual sense as well as an authorial sense. He writes pages upon pages, but the story has no cohesiveness. He can’t seem to make sense of his experience and ultimately he ends up with little more than a title, which Ugwu later appropriates for his work. But Adichie is careful in presenting the character of Richard. She avoids using him simply as one of the new breeds of colonialists who continues the tradition of his predecessor. Instead he comes to identify himself with the Igbo people he loves and is given a part of the play in reporting the atrocities of the Biafran war to the Western Medias.

Unlike Richard, Ugwu is able to write productively. He begins to record the stories of his fellow Africans, and as Olanna notes in this scene:

Ugwu was writing as she (Olanna) spoke, and his writing, and the earnestness of his interest suddenly made her story important, made it serve a larger purpose that even she was not sure of and what she told him all she remembered about the train fall of people who had cried and shouted and

urinated on themselves. (Adichie 40)

Ugwu's writing is powerful and seems to serve a purpose; where as Richard's own interest leads him nowhere. Perhaps this is because Ugwu is interested in the "real" stories of "real" people, recording the gritty details of life, while Richard was driven by his idealized image of Africa and Africans, and found himself writing a manuscript that was essentially empty of any sense of reality. The "realness" of Ugwu's writing was underscored by the fact that he scribbled on whatever scraps of paper were at hand and he often wrote outside under the shade of a tree. Richard, on the other hand, was sealed off in his study (particularly in the early part of the novel), surrounded by paper, books, and a typewriter – accouterments that only serve to cage his imagination and distance him from the Africa outside his window.

Ugwu showed such a natural intelligence in his tasks that the professor allows him to continue his education. While his education happens largely off stage, Ugwu's growing understanding of the world around him, of people, his compassion and love for the family that he serves, clearly indicates his progression. Later in the novel he joins his mistress Olanna in teaching children in the refugee camps. This shows his development as a character from innocence to knowledge.

Writing for Ugwu (and Adichie) is a protest against the silence that the rest of the world showed towards the cause of Biafra and the conflict that immediately followed. Through this native bona fide African character she tries to rewrite the past, where what the readers get is a different kind of history, other than the official history that the victors wrote after the war. Dulue Mbachu comments that:

"It is an indication that Biafra has not gone away; after a war is fought the victors immediately write the history. But it takes a while for the victims to find their voice and tell their own side of story" (www.news.bbc.co.uk. 8 June 2007)

When Ugwu witnessed a little Igbo boy suffering with the dreadful disease kwashiorkor, in one of the refugee camps, he realized that he would never be able to capture that child on paper, never be able to describe well enough the fear that dulled the eyes of the mother in the refugee camp. But he was resolved that he needed to write because if for nothing else, the "more he wrote the less he dreamed." (Adichie 375)

Adichie is aware of her inability to completely capture Nigeria's war, all the while motivated by the strange impulse that its horrors need to be recorded. She even captured psychologies of different characters in different times in Nigeria and Biafra in a subtle and interesting way. Her book is much more about the psychological landscape than about the physical one.

This technique of fiction within a fiction, where Adichie consciously uses the third person omniscient narrative which appears to be objective. The title of the

second narrative *The World Was Silent When We Died* itself indicts the outside world for its indifference and probes the arrogance and ignorance that perpetuated the conflict. It highlights how the war that came to be synonymous with starvation and supposed in fighting has its roots in a history of divide and white rule.

In this narrative Adichie tried to show many parallels across the world. But she does not intend to compare these events which are central to their own national consciousness. The events or things that Ugwu unfolds through this book mainly come from his experiences from a rural lower class background to a middle class University employer's life, where he come to know about the changes that are happening to his own community and to the rest, including his nation and the whole world.

For the prologue he recounts the story of the woman with the calabash. It is Olanna who experienced this incident and she became a source of inspiration and he noted down all the details. He describes the carved designs on the woman's calabash, slanting lines criss-crossing each other, the child's head inside the calabash:

She (Olanna) tells him how the bloodstains in the woman's wrapper blended into the fabric to form a rusty mauve. She describes the carved designs on the woman's calabash, slanting lines criss-crossing each other, and she describes the child's head inside. Scuffy plaits falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O. (Adichie 82)

After writing this, in the first book, he cites the parallel of other women in different countries undergone the similar experiences. He mentions, "The German women who fled Hamburg with the charred bodies of their children stuffed in suitcases, the Rwandan women who pocketed tiny parts of their mauled babies" (Adichie 81).

By drawing parallels, not making any comparison, Adichie deliberately represents the experience undergone by people, especially women, at the time of different wars across the world. Through this book, the author is re-mapping the lost world. At the same time there is a conscious effort from the author to give the ownership or authority to the insiders themselves to determine their boundaries rather than giving it to the outsiders. Here the woman writer takes on her traditional role as an educator of the present and the future generations to voice this heritage of the past which has been distorted by colonialism and neo colonialism. She addresses the unvoiced members of the community—the wife, the barren woman, the rural boy, the soldier, the expatriate etc. Thus through this novel she is determined to show an Africa that is not one huge refugee camp but a continent with many diverse stories.

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