

Writing and Discourse: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a Civil War Narrative

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Abstract

This paper discusses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a Civil War fiction. Of particular interest are the discursive techniques including characterization, North-South dichotomy, space, and the manipulation of theme in the reconstruction of history. A textual analysis methodology is adopted, juxtaposing other historical documents including fictional narratives of the civil war from a historical framework.

Keywords: Kalu, Adichie, discourse, writing, écriture, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, ideology

Introduction

During the Industrial Revolution in Europe, the novel served the interest of the bourgeoisie in their quest for monopoly and profit. During the colonial period, it helped to establish a system of economic exploitation of the indigenous peoples of Africa. The twentieth century marked a major watershed in the development of the novel, especially in the 1950s when it became a "miraculous weapon" in the hands of anticolonial protest writers.

The 1960s ushered in the era of independence for most African countries. With independence came disillusionment and frustration. The Africans themselves were clearly not prepared for political leadership at any level, and this led to unprecedented political imbroglio. Helpless Africans watched as their first civilian governments were wiped out by military coups d'état.

Nigeria was not left out, because on the 15th of January, 1966, a group of young Sandhurst-trained middle-level officers toppled the regime of Sir Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa leading to civil unrest which culminated in a 30-month Civil War. Once again, writers used the novelistic medium as a privileged form to express their disgust at the failed political leadership. These writers of the post-independence malaise (ACHEBE, SOYINKA, SARO-WIWA, ADICHIE, etc.) strove to create in the masses a *prise de conscience* as regard the *cul de sac* which nominal independence had become.

The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War provided some Nigerian writers with raw material for literary activity. Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973) narrates the author's bitter experiences with the authorities of Biafra during the war. This largely autobiographical work takes the reader through the author's odyssey, and his eventual return to his native Ikwerre land. His war narrative condemns the domineering attitude of the Igbos who, according to the author, dragged other ethnic minorities of the defunct Eastern region into a senseless and brutal war. Perhaps, Amadi's account of the events of those dark days in the turbulent history of Nigeria has been informed by the palpable fear by the Ikwerre of their Igbo kinsmen, especially the Aro who have lived with them for over four hundred years.

Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1976) deals with the issue of discomfiture during the years following the end of hostilities. The reader observes that those who survived the war are trying to piece their lives together in a post-war society ravaged by chaos, hunger, and disease. Some of the soldiers and ex -militia men who returned from the War turned their un-surrendered weapons against a civilian populace still smarting from the physical and psychological trauma of war. The end of the War therefore gave rise to a dangerous phenomenon which Nigeria has had to grapple with to this day: armed banditry. Yet, others seized the opportunity of the fragile peace to settle old scores. Other Nigerian writers of the civil war fiction include Chukwuemeka Ike (*Sunset at Dawn*, 1976); Eddie Iroh (*48 Guns for the General*, African Writers Series, 1977, *Toads of war*, African Writers Series, 1979). Their works all serve as commentary on that period in the chequered history of a country in turmoil, and which strives till this day to surmount the attendant problems of nationhood. But, by far the most enchanting of all Nigerian civil war narratives is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This paper deconstructs the author's work to uncover the discursive dynamics that writing as *écriture* exploits in the reconstruction of history with its ideological implications.

Half of a Yellow Sun: A Synopsis

Half of a Yellow Sun derives its title from the rising sun motif which we find in the Biafra flag and the coat of arms. The Biafra flag is made up of three horizontal bands of red, black, and green against the background of which a rising sun is foregrounded. According to Chinua Achebe (2012:151) the inspiration for the design of the flag was drawn from the Pan-Africanist doctrines of the renowned Afro-American, Marcus Garvey, and the United Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL). Achebe (2012: 151) expatiates:

The red in Garvey's conception highlighted the blood that links all people of African ancestry, as well as blood shed during slavery and liberation struggles around the globe. In the Biafran context it was used to represent blood during the pogroms and the quest for independence. The black was seen as the affirmation of "an African nation State" by the UNIA-ACL. In Biafra, it was a symbolic ancestral connection to souls of years past. The green in both Garvey's and Biafra's concepts stood for Africa's abundant wealth and resources, and its radiant future. The Biafran flag also highlighted these aspirations with a rising golden sun and rays representing the eleven original provinces in the republic.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a war narrative revolving around characters caught up in an intricate web of love, hope, betrayal, deception, hatred, deprivation and loss. Through the picaresque character, Ugwu, the reader is led into the lives of Odenigbo, a university teacher at Nsukka, and his wife Olanna. The couple, along with a retinue of friends, colleagues, and associates drawn from all walks of life (university teachers and professors, civil servants, and of course soldiers, etc.,) have high hopes of a greater and more prosperous Nigeria during the post-independence era, until such hopes are punctured by the horrors of the Civil War. The central characters in the novel are eyes witnesses to the bloodbath at the different theatres of war. Even the little Ugwu grows up from the naïve villager who has come to stay with, and work for a kinsman in the university town of Nsukka, to a 'knowledgeable' young adult whose innocence was stolen in his prime. The author of *Half of a Yellow Sun* has relied on historical facts to craft her work of fiction. And what gives the text its freshness and fluidity is the authorial masterstroke which blends historical evidence with literary creativity.

Of Fact and Fiction: Historical Sources For *Half Of A Yellow Sun*

Historical events and people often act as impetus for the creation of fiction. A close reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun* reveals its rootedness in verifiable historical facts. The novel has all the trappings of a historical novel which, according to M.H. Abrams *et al* (2005: 201) “not only takes its setting and some characters and events from history, but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and the course of the narrative.” *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a fictional recreation of Nigeria’s post-colonial history, focusing mostly on the events of the Civil War. The setting of Adichie’s novel is not in any way different from the various theatres of the war. We find characters moving between Northern and Eastern Nigeria through cities like Kano, Lagos, Makurdi, Enugu, Nsukka and Port Harcourt. The characters themselves have striking resemblances with the real actors of the War.

Thus, if one considers Alexander Madiebo’s ordeal, (Madiebo, 1980:78-79), and that of Col. Madu (Adichie, 2006:175), one notices connection between fact and fiction: Madiebo’s escape was made possible by a certain Igbo, Mr. Akukwe, who negotiated with another goods train driver of Igbo extraction to facilitate the escape across the Makurdi Bridge. And in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Col. Madu was equally aided by an Igbo kinsman, Mr. Onunkwo. It was this benefactor who provided shelter for Col. Madu in different places until it was safe enough to cross the Makurdi Bridge. During the Civil War, the Makurdi Bridge gained some notoriety as a place where Hausa/Fulani soldiers raided trains in search of fleeing Igbo men and women. In most cases, when these Igbo were discovered they were bayoneted, killed and their bodies thrown into the river.

In writing fiction, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie remains close to verifiable historical facts. Robert Scholes *et al.* (1978: 121-122) in elucidating the relationship between *fact* and *fiction* posit that:

In ordinary conversation, “fact” is associated with those pillars of verbal society, “reality” and “truth”. “Fiction” on the other hand, is known to consort with such suspicious characters as “unreality” and “falsehood”. Still, if we look into the matter, we can see that the relation of “fact” and “fiction” with “the real” and “the true” is not exactly what appears on the surface. Fact still remains for us literally “a thing done.” And fiction has never lost its meaning of “a thing made.” (...) A thing done has no real existence once it has been done. It may have consequences, and there may be many records that point to its former existence (think of the civil war for example); but once it is done its existence is finished. A thing made, on the other hand, exists until it decays or is destroyed. Once it is finished, its existence begins (...). Fact finally has no real existence, while fiction may last for centuries (...). Fiction is not the opposite of fact, but its complement. It gives a more lasting shape to the vanishing deeds of men.

Robert Scholes et al. draw their inferences from the Latin etymology of *fact* and *fiction*. Whereas fact comes from *facere* (to make or to do), fiction comes from *fingere* (to make or shape). How else do we describe Chimamanda Adichie's text, if not as a fictional recreation of events of the past? The masking of several characters with fictional names can hardly vitiate the role of history in her narrative. The author herself tells the reader in her acknowledgements that "Christopher Okigbo's own life and labyrinths inspired the character of Okeoma; while Alexander Madiebo's *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* was central to the character of Colonel Madu" (2006: 521). Whereas Alexander Madiebo was a Nigerian Army Colonel who later became a Major-General and head of the Biafran Army, Chris Okigbo was an accomplished Nigerian poet who died in action at the Nsukka sector of the war in 1967. Okigbo was best known for his collection of poems, *Labyrinths*.

Other historical events that conduce to give narrative depth to *Half of a Yellow Sun* include: the Nzeogwu coup of January, 1966; the counter coup that took place in July of the same year; anti-Igbo sentiments and subsequent pogroms in Northern Nigeria; the refugee crisis; the complicity of the British in the fratricidal war; the Abandoned Property saga during the post-War years, etc. These specific events and a constellation of characters that evolve in the universe of the story form the armature of the narrative. The interactions of these characters with one another in their evolution help to reinforce the thematic constant of the narrative.

Thematic Analysis

Civil war violence serves as a common denominator around which other subthemes are hinged. *Half of a Yellow Sun* portrays the physical and psychological violence suffered by the Igbos living in Northern Nigeria during the pogroms that preceded the Nigeria-Biafra conflict. The pogroms carried out by the Hausa/Fulani are symptomatic of anti-Igbo sentiments fired by the erroneous belief that the Nzeogwu coup (January, 15th, 1966) that cut short the life of the First Republic was a deliberate attempt by officers of Igbo ethnic group to decimate their northern counterparts.

The countercoup of July, 29th, 1966 which claimed the lives of mostly Igbo officers (including that of General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi, the Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces), was therefore a revenge mission orchestrated by middle-ranking northern elements in the Nigerian Army. Frederick Forsythe (1977:52) draws a dispassionate comparative analysis of the two coups:

In the first coup there had been a fiery zeal to purge Nigeria of a host of undoubted ills; it was reformatory in motivation; bloodshed was minimal – four politicians and six officers. It was extrovert in nature and non-regional in orientation. The July coup was wholly regional, introverted, revanchist and separatist in origins and unnecessarily bloody in execution (52)

Frederick Forsythe (Reuters' correspondent during the Civil War years) was acclaimed as one of the most courageous journalists of his day because of the accuracy of his often well-researched reportage. It is therefore worthy of note that the brutality meted out on *Ndigbo* (Igbo people) as a result of the first coup was unnecessary. Violence was thus carried out on an unprecedented scale by one ethnic group against another.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's characterization also helps to reinforce the theme of violence because the characters in her novel portray the Hausa/Igbo dichotomy and the mutual suspicion/distrust resulting from it. Through the misfortunes of characters like uncle Mbaezi, aunty Ifeka, Arize, Olanna, etc, the reader is led into the era of organized ethnic cleansing. Former friends and neighbors have all of a sudden become enemies as a result of ethnic alliance and regional loyalty. The pages of *Half of a Yellow Sun* are replete with episodes of this premeditated violence. Let us first consider the atmosphere of conviviality that prevailed during Olanna's visit to her kinsmen in Kano before the pogroms:

The sun had turned red in the sky before it began its descent, when uncle Mbaezi came home. He called out to Olanna to come and greet his friend Abdulmalik (...) he sold leather slippers close to uncle Mbaezi's stall in the market (...) Abdulmalik pointed at the ripe gourdlike pods on the *kuka* tree and said, 'You come my house. My wife cook very sweet kuka soup.' (56-57)

And, on a later visit to Kano during the crisis, Olanna is horrified at the slaughter of her tribesmen and women, including members of her own extended family. The same Abdulmalik who was quite hospitable has turned a vanguard of the hate campaign against the Igbos. The narrator tells of the horrific episode:

'We finished the whole family. It was Allah's will!' one of the men called out in Hausa. The man was familiar. It was Abdulmalik. He nudged a body on the ground with his foot and Olanna noticed, then, how many bodies were lying there, like dolls made of cloth. (184)

The massacre witnessed by Olanna in Kano left an indelible scar on her psyche. The narrator tells us that she had 'dark swoops' especially on the days she received visitors who had come to commiserate with her. We also learn that she is "too exhausted even to cry, and with only enough energy to swallow the pills Odenigbo slipped in her mouth" (195). The situation is worsened by the accounts of some of the visitors. Some of them say that "the Okafors had lost a son and a family of four in Zaria, the Ibe daughter had not returned from Kaura-Namoda, the Onyekachi family had lost eight people in Kano" (196). The anti-Igbo sentiments which led to the pogroms soon spread like wild fire during the harmattan. At the airport in Kano, Nnaemeka, a young customs officer of Igbo extraction was gunned down by angry soldiers simply because he refused to say 'Allahu Akbar' as instructed by the soldiers. His accent would have given him away, and so "the rifle went off and Nnaemeka's chest blew open, a splattering red mass..." (p.190).

In some instances, Igbos were not killed or maimed, but the stigmatization they experienced was traumatizing. Some foreigners joined in the campaign of calumny against the Igbos. As the narrator puts it:

There were other stories, too, of how British academics at the University of Zaria encouraged the massacres and sent students out to incite the youths, how crowds at the Lagos motor parks had booed and taunted, 'Go, Igbo, go, so that garri will be cheaper! Go, and stop trying to own every house and every shop!' (196)

It is against the backdrop of the inhuman treatment meted out on the Igbos that the regional Governor of Eastern Nigeria declared the Republic of Biafra and pulled out the Igbos from the rest of Nigeria. The consequence of this action was a war on a scale never witnessed before in Africa. The Igbo heartland became the theatre of war, leading to thirty-three gruesome months of suffering; the economic blockade of the General Yakubu Gowon regime led to starvation and death. In some instances, humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross and Caritas were prevented from providing medical aid and food rations to the civilian population in Biafra.

The plight of the Igbos as one observes in *Half of a Yellow Sun* was made much worse by the tacit complicity of the British. Much of the war propaganda was carried out by BBC newscasters in favor of the Nigerian side, and besides, the reader is informed that every single Nigerian shell case from the Nsukka sector "had UK WAR DEPARTMENT on it" (244). Frederick Forsythe confirms this when he comments in the prologue of *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafra Story* (1977: 8): "But nothing can or ever will minimize the injustice and brutality perpetrated on the Biafran people, nor diminish the shamefulfulness of a British government's frantic, albeit indirect, participation"

By far the most traumatizing incident of the Nigeria-Biafra war was the Abandoned Property issue. Most Igbos who returned from the war lost all their property (houses and shops) and even money in various banks. The narrator relates the experience of Richard, the traditional art enthusiast who had gone to Port Harcourt on a visit to Kainene's house. The narrator relates the following conversation that ensued between Richard and a woman he had met in the house:

'Good afternoon,' Richard said. 'My name is Richard Churchill. I'm Kainene Ozobia's fiancé.

'Yes?'

'I used to live here. This is Kainene's house.'

The woman's face tightened 'This was abandoned property. It is now my house.' She started to close the door.

'Please, wait,' Richard said. 'I'd like our photos, please. Can I have some of Kainene's photographs? The album on the shelf in the study?'

The woman whistled. 'I have a vicious dog, and if you don't go now I will turn it on you.'

'Please, just the photographs.'

The woman whistled again. From somewhere inside, Richard heard a dog growl. He slowly turned and left. (512-513)

This white man's experience in *Half of a Yellow Sun* serves in reality to underscore the collective experience of hundreds of thousands of Igbos, and indeed those related to them, who returned to places like Port Harcourt in post-Civil War Nigeria. They discovered to their chagrin that their homestead had been given to another. The psychological violence resulting from this event is better imagined. In most parts of Rivers State, south-south Nigeria for example, streets bearing Igbo names have been changed in favor of indigenous ones. The Igbo lost their businesses, money in the bank and various other properties.

Beyond the theme of violence, other subthemes which permeate the text include the crisis of identity, corruption, and feminism. Identity is a major issue in a world defined by western epistemology. Through the various animated debates that take place in Odenigbo's house, the identity of the Black man is x-rayed. Corruption is a social malaise which has eaten deep into the moral fabric of postcolonial Nigeria. Corruption is exemplified by the looting of the collective wealth, aggrandizement, ineptitude, nepotism, etc. Olanna and Kainene's father represents the rotten and debauched political class who indulge in all kinds of sleaze. They are the 'political profiteers' of the ten percent fame to whom Major Nzeogwu made reference during his 1966 coup broadcast.

Writing and Discourse

Language is at the centre of literary creativity. Through language use, a writer tries to persuade his target audience in order to achieve a posited end. According to Roland Barthes (1953), writing is also *écriture* and presupposes an ideological position. The literary artist uses language to reproduce/reshape the world by deliberate “linguistic action” (Akwanya, 2015:175). This is to say that there is no innocent way of looking at the world. Akakuru (2009:104) posits that “there is no way in which a writer can operate in an ideological vacuum: every speech act in context is ideologically determined, and so is literature.”

Half of a Yellow Sun is a literary text (i.e. a piece of literature) which by its very nature tells a story. And the story “is the material that is presented, ordered from a certain point of view by discourse (different versions of the same story).” And since readers are part of the meaning-making process of any narrative, they are able to identify the story of a text which they see as a “particular representation of that story” (Culler, 1997: 86).

Half of a Yellow Sun is a story of the Nigeria Civil War, and its impact on the Igbos, an ethnic group located in Nigeria, east of the Niger. The story of the Civil War is not new, but why the story? To answer the question, one must not ignore the primordial role of storytelling among the Igbos. For as Chinua Achebe (1988:124) puts it:

So why do I say that the story is chief among his fellows? The same reason I think that our people sometimes will give the name Nkolika to their daughters – Recalling- Is- Greatest. Why? Because it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story (...) that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence... it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the fence that sets one people apart from their neighbours.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born seven years after the end of hostilities between Nigeria and Biafra. She was told the story; she has read the story and she is retelling the story. Her story is structured at different levels of North/East dichotomy. This dichotomy is easily perceptible in her characterization, setting, and language. She tells her story from the point of view of the oppressed and marginalized. It is therefore out of solidarity for the oppressed Igbo people that she tells her story. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, all the characters killed during the war were Igbo, the theatre of war was the Igbo heartland, the refugee crisis affected the Igbo only, the Igbo suffered the Abandoned Property issue, and the pogroms took place only in the Northern parts of Nigeria.

At the discursive level, salient questions can be asked: were there no reprisal killings in the East in response to the pogroms in the North? Were there no Northerners killed, even in the North, by Igbos who resisted the pogroms? Were the Igbo themselves not part of the failed political leadership of the First Republic which led to the crisis? These and many other questions constitute 'silence' in Adichie's work. It is important to add here that the real or perceived fear of marginalization by other ethnic minorities in the Eastern Region (especially, the Ikwerre of the oil-rich South-South Nigeria) led to the hostility towards the Igbos. And the author is silent on this particular issue. This brings us to the conclusion that really, there is no innocent way of looking at reality. Reality is thus relative, and the author tries to reconstruct it in her quest for a new wholesomeness. Yet her position does not in any way vitiate the reality of marginalization of the Igbo in the post-Civil War years, especially when we know that the Igbos were never the aggressors.

It is at this point that discourse as context-dependent, and a creator/creature of ideology becomes significant. Given that literature is a product of society, the writer (novelist, poet, playwright, etc.) writes 'in situation', and is compelled to express the collective aspirations of a section of the population. It is therefore in/through discourse that issues bordering on social relations as regards "dominance and oppression or solidarity" are foregrounded (Johnstone, 2008: 7).

Clearly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a committed writer whose Igbo background has helped to shape her vision. And so, beyond the story of the Civil War, and the pervading theme of violence, the author makes a strong case for the Igbo nation. Writing is therefore a medium of preserving the collective memory of the marginalized and traumatized people of 'Biafra'. We find in her narrative therefore, strands of Igbo aphorism, which helps to foreground the Igbo *weltanshaaung*. During Richard's visit to Nnaemeka's father at Obosi, the old man, while blessing the kola said: "You and yours will live, and I and mine will live. Let the eagle perch and let the dove perch and, if either decrees that the other not perch, it will not be well for him..." (203).

This parabolic text is a transliteration of the Igbo saying: "Egbe bere, ugo bere, nkesi ibeya ebekwala nku kwaya" This is clearly an embedded narrative coming at a very critical stage in the story of the novel. It tells of the Igbo concept of freedom and equality. The universality of this aphorism derives from the fact that it is said here to a white foreigner. But this parable also has some underlying discursive *implicature*. The novelist exalts the republican spirit of the Igbo, and condemns the imperialistic/feudalistic disposition of the Hausa/Fulani with whom they are locked in a war of survival.

In effect, the Igbo have always resisted the internal cultural imperialism of the Hausa/Fulani which started with the 1804 jihadist movement in Nigeria, and which Othman Dan Fodio, the leader of the "holy war" claimed at the time "was aimed at establishing a purer form of Islam." (Uwechue, 1991:1448).

The republican inclination is part of the Igbo cultural infrastructure which guides the people in their quest for social power and recognition. This is to say that the Igbo does not rely blindly on his *chi* (personal god or destiny), but depends largely on the *Ikenga* (force of the right arm). This accounts for why this ethnic group is considered the most independent and industrious group in Nigeria. This situation has earned them, and deservedly so, the envy or the admiration of other groups in the country.

Half of a Yellow Sun derives its universal appeal from the treatment of the sensitive issues of race and identity. Adichie's work is thus a rewriting of history as distinct from that which has been created for the African by western logocentrism. Thus, the binary opposition black/white is a western construct which, at the discursive level, seeks to give the European an imaginary ascendancy over the African. For underlying the notions of 'black' and 'white' are the implied twin notions of 'inferiority' and 'superiority'. The reassertion of the African identity is exemplified in the reassessment of imposed colonial identity. According to Odenigbo:

(...) the only authentic identity for the African is tribe... I am Nigerian because a white man gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed *black* to be as different as possible from his *white*. But I was Igbo before the white man came. (33)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's pan Africanism crystallises in her commitment, not only to her people, but to all Africans, in their quest for freedom and justice.

Conclusion

The events of the period between 1966 and 1970 provide the historical background for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel. After fifty years the circumstances that led to the bitter civil war are still with us. This is largely due to the fact that successive civilian and military regimes have failed to address the yearnings of various peoples of southern Nigeria, especially the South – East. No compensations have been paid to Igbos who lost their property and lives of their loved ones. And this calls to question the mantra of *No victor, no vanquished* which was bandied by the General Yakubu Gowon administration at the end of the war. The reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation which General Gowon promised ended up as a hoax. The Igbos were never resettled. Their property was confiscated and distributed among the indigenes of the communities where they once lived.

Today, the country is witnessing an upsurge in secessionist agitations, especially by members of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB). These protests are given impetus by the failure of leadership, and the insincerity on the part of the ruling elite to address the continued marginalization of the Igbo nation.

Though Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel treats the issue of marginalization, it also throws up issues whose currency cannot be overemphasized: the auto determination of the woman, race, and identity in an ever evolving world order.

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