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## The reversal of gender power equations in *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Harshita Chhikara

### Abstract

A history of colonisation is alluded to, not least in the tragicomic figure of Richard's anglophile servant Harrison, who prides himself on serving roast beef and rhubarb crumble, but adapts in wartime to roasting lizards and bush rats "as though they were rack of lamb". While Richard identifies with Biafra and intends to write the history of the war, it is Ugwu who takes up the pen and the mantle. As Richard concedes, "The war isn't my story to tell really," and Ugwu nods. "He had never thought that it was."

There are other quiet revolutions in the novel. Odenigbo, the "revolutionary freedom fighter" with endless certainty and self-belief, succumbs to drink and despair, while the seemingly compliant Olanna draws on profound strengths.

### Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's luminous and formidable talent was first seen in *Purple Hibiscus*, her 2004 novel about a childhood devastated by a religious patriarch, which won a Commonwealth writers' prize and was shortlisted for the Orange prize. Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, takes its title from the emblem for Biafra, the breakaway state in eastern Nigeria that survived for only three years, and whose name became a global byword for war by starvation. Adichie's powerful focus on war's impact on civilian life, and the trauma beyond the trenches, earns this novel a place alongside such works as Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy and Helen Dunmore's depiction of the Leningrad blockade, *The Siege*.

Adichie takes her time in reaching the privations of war. Covering the decade to the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-70, the novel first develops its characters in a period of peace and - for some - plenty after Nigerian independence in 1960. Among the protagonists are Odenigbo, or "the Master", a radical maths lecturer at the University of Nsukka - in what became the secessionist Igbo land - and Ugwu, the village teenager who becomes his houseboy, but whom

he enrolls at the university staff school. A novel that descends into dire hunger begins with Ugwu's devoted creativity in the kitchen, confecting pepper soup, spicy jollof rice and chicken boiled in herbs. Beer and brandy flow as he serves the Master's friends while absorbing snippets of intellectual debate in the era of Sharpeville, de Gaulle in Algeria and the struggle for US civil rights.

Ugwu's domain is encroached upon by Odenigbo's lover, Olanna, the London-educated daughter of a "nouveau riche" businessman in Lagos, and the household is later disrupted by its links with Olanna's periodically estranged twin sister Kainene and her English boyfriend, Richard.

Ethnic differences are signalled between the mainly Igbo protagonists - whose persistent switching between English and Igbo languages is wonderfully conveyed - and those such as Odenigbo's Yoruba colleague, Miss Adebayo, and Olanna's ex-boyfriend from the north, the Hausa prince Mohammed. These differences assume lethal significance after the ostensibly Igbo-led 1966 military coup, which becomes a pretext for anti-Igbo pogroms after the counter-coup six months later. As Olanna and others become caught up in the violence, the novel captures horror in the details of "vaguely familiar clothes on headless bodies", or corpses' "odd skin tone - a flat, sallow grey, like a poorly wiped blackboard".

As Biafran secession "for security" brings a refugee crisis, a retaliatory Nigerian blockade and all-out war, and the world (bar Tanzania) refuses to recognise the fledgling state, the focus is on the characters' grief, resilience and fragmenting relationships. Tending her adopted daughter, Olanna endures the descent into one-room squalor, food-aid queues and air raids without self-pity. But there is anger at the "bleakness of bombing hungry people", and the deadly kwashiorkor, malnutrition that afflicts children, dubbed "Harold Wilson syndrome" for the former colonial power's complicity. While Ugwu's forced conscription involves him in an atrocity whose legacy is lasting shame, the issue of forgiveness between the twin sisters subtly echoes that of warring political groups.

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and the mantle. As Richard concedes, "The war isn't my story to tell really," and Ugwu nods. "He had never thought that it was."

There are other quiet revolutions in the novel. Odenigbo, the "revolutionary freedom fighter" with endless certainty and self-belief, succumbs to drink and despair, while the seemingly compliant Olanna draws on profound strengths. The master-servant relationship is upended, as the "houseboy" returns with fondness and irony the Master's way of addressing him as "my good man".

The novel's structure, moving in chunks between the late and early 60s, is not without blips. At times I wondered how far Ugwu's omnivorous reading was reflected in his development. But these are quibbles in a landmark novel, whose clear, undemonstrative prose can so precisely delineate nuance. There is a rare emotional truth in the sexual scenes, from Ugwu's adolescent forays and the mature couples' passions, to the ugliness of rape.

Literary reflections on the Biafra war have a long and distinguished history, from the most famous poet to have died in the war, Christopher Okigbo, to Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Flora Nwapa. Born in 1977, Adichie is part of a new generation revisiting the history that her parents survived. She brings to it a lucid intelligence and compassion, and a heartfelt plea for memory.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* illuminates the reality and disintegration of Nigerian life in wartime during the 1960s. The Biafran war waged between 1967-70 was Nigeria's politically and ethnically charged battle between North and the South, specifically the south-eastern region, where the unsuccessful fight for secession left one million civilians dead. England started all the trouble by colonizing and oppressing Nigeria, stirring up ethnic tensions, and supplying arms to Nigeria during the war. Nigeria used starvation and genocide as weapons of war, and the Biafran soldiers committed their own atrocities against the Nigerians and even their own people. The novel shows human faces of different aspects of this conflict, and portrays individual tragedies and victories that bring to life events most Westerners are not even aware of. Half of a yellow sun describes the Biafran flag. It symbolized the struggle of its people for independence and a brighter tomorrow. The novel features the daily lives of Igbo people of different social levels from the well-educated and bourgeois to illiterate country peasants.

Adichie's characters are strongly defined individuals whose personal lives and interrelationships go through fragmentation and change, their rise and fall in violent tandem with the country's horrific civil war. "...my point is that the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe...I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and 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." (20) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a powerful novel that addresses the emotional and personal consequences of the Nigerian Civil War, along with the historical atrocities that accompanied it. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, takes its title from the emblem for Biafra, the breakaway state in eastern Nigeria that survived for only three years, and whose name became a global byword for war by starvation. The novel is prefaced by an epigraph from a rare Achebe poem "Mango Seedling" (1973). Adichie's powerful focus on war's impact on civilian life, and the trauma beyond the trenches, gives this novel a place alongside such works as Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* and Flora Nwapa's *Wives at War*. In the epilogue of the novel, Adichie's response to the purpose of writing about Nigeria-Biafran war is thus: 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, many of the issues that led to the war remain unresolved in Nigeria today, because my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father, because my mother still cannot speak at length about losing her father in a refugee camp, because the brutal bequests of colonialism make me angry, because the thought of the egos and indifference of men leading to the unnecessary deaths of men and women and children enrages me, because I don't ever want to forget. I have always known that I would write a novel about Biafra. (2) *Half of a Yellow Sun* concerns the events of the Nigerian Civil War, called the Biafran War, and the years preceding it. Nigeria gained independence from the British Empire in 1960, but its existence as a country was an arbitrary structure set up by Britain, and contained many different cultural groups. Ethnic tensions led to the massacre of Igbo people in 1966, which then led to the secession of south-eastern Nigeria and the creation of Biafra. Aided by Britain and Russia, the Nigerian government then declared war to annex Biafra. The war lasted for three years, from 1967 to 1970, with the Nigerians using starvation and genocide to ultimately defeat the Biafrans. More than a million civilians died from famine and fighting during the war. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is told through the intertwining perspectives of three characters Ugwu, Olanna and

Richard. Ugwu is a fifteen-year-old poor village boy who gets a job as a houseboy for Odenigbo, a university professor. He sends Ugwu to school and his living room is a stage for voices full of revolutionary zeal. Olanna is a privileged woman from Lagos who is educated in London. She leaves her lush life behind and runs away from her parents' world of wealth and excess, to live with Odenigbo. The next notable character is Richard, an English journalist who receives a Grant to write a novel about Nigeria. He is in a relationship with Olanna's twin sister, Kaneine. The three main characters move into Nsukka, in the south, which turns out to be the heart of the Nigerian Civil War. Adichie excavates into this political conflict caused by the attempted breakaway of the south-eastern provinces of Nigeria, as the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra. In the novel, the realities of war become a major factor. This is not strictly a north/south revolt but rather the conflict is based mostly on tribal disputes. Living mostly in the south, the Igbo people do not trust the more northern tribe people called the Hausa. The main characters of this story are Igbo. Although their hearts are in favour of the revolution and ultimate independence, the Igbo people are not as well prepared, equipped, or financed as the Hausa. In the end, the Igbo people suffer tremendous losses. The novel uses the economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions among the various people of Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

Moreover, it draws out the emotional and psychological consequences of the conflict and succeeds in constructing a multidimensional version of this war. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie's second novel, was published in 2006. It is set in Nigeria, and deals with the events which are of pivotal importance in the postcolonial history of Nigeria. In the earlier stage, the intellectual community of Nsukka express their ideas throughout a string of dinner parties at Odenigbo's. Odenigbo is a pseudo-revolutionary, always railing against colonial oppression, but he still calls Ugwu "my good man" like an English gentleman. In one instance, he passionately exclaims: 'This defence pact is worse than apartheid and segregation, but we don't realize it. They are controlling us from behind drawn curtains. It is very dangerous!' The ideas of the educated elite of a newly independent country reaffirm through the pages alongside friendly arguments between colleagues, discussions among artists, the rhythm of local music, flowing alcohol and Ugwu's delicious cuisine. The incidents create a vivid and serene backdrop to the upcoming events.

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