

No Humanity in War: Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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The evocative tale, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and the captured impact and immediacy of the Nigeria-Biafra war through the lives of the characters attest to Adichie's imaginative ability, creativity and remarkable research skills. Born in 1977, seven years after the Nigeria-Biafra war ended, her fictionalized but masterful tale of events preceding the war, evokes powerful memories of Nigeria's cloyed past that still beclouds and haunts the present. The plot line and the realised characterization evidenced in the sketching of Olanna, Odenigbo and Ugwu within the framework of a compelling historicity, demonstrate a proficiency which even the master storyteller, Chinua Achebe acknowledges: "we do not usually associate wisdom with beginners, but here is a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers...Adichie came almost fully made"(cover of *Half of a Yellow Sun*).

Endorsing *Half of a Yellow Sun*, both Chinua Achebe and Binyavanga Wainaina have also recognized Adichie's fearlessness, asserting that it takes guts to take on the "intimidating horror of Nigeria's civil war" without looking away (cover). Toni Duruaku (2006) has identified courage as one of the attributes of a good creative writer stating that, the creative writer "needs to be courageous in order to be true to his art and play the role of the guardian of the society's conscience" (24). Wainaina remarks that in this novel we "find out that nobility of purpose has no currency in this contest." Continuing, she says that in it we also see "how powerfully we can love; how easily we can kill; how human we can be when a war dedicates itself to stripping our humanity from us" (blurb).

Many participants and bystanders have written about the Nigerian civil war. Critics such as Kolawole Ogunbesan have stated that the emotiveness evident in the writings about the civil war by Chinua Achebe is occasioned by his direct involvement in the war. In his critique, "Politics and the African

Writer,” Ogunbesan states that although Achebe has “minutely recapitulated the ugly facts of life in Biafra during and immediately after the war,” he however shows “a closeness of observation and intense emotional involvement in the situation” (51). With all that has been written about the Nigerian civil war, many will wonder why Adichie would want to remind people of that dark patch in Nigeria’s chequered history. In positing that this book was written precisely to make people not forget, one is reminded of Achebe’s comment in the preface to *Morning Yet on Creation Day* in which, reacting to the prevailing sentiment of the time that the events of the Nigerian civil war were best forgotten, he said:

I do not agree. I believe that in our situation the greater danger lies not in remembering but in forgetting, in pretending that slogans are the same as truth; and that Nigeria, always prone to self-deception, stands in great need of reminders.... I believe that if we are to survive as a nation we need to grasp the meaning of our tragedy. One way to do it is to remind ourselves constantly of the things that happened and how we felt when they were happening. (xiii)

Achebe’s often quoted statement that one who does not know “where [he] went wrong, where the rain began to beat [him]” will not know “where to begin to dry [himself]” (44) becomes significant because the resolution of both the causalities (such as ethnicity, tribalism, religious bigotry and economic imperialism) of that war and the lingering effects of alienation and other complexes can only begin with dispassionate dialectics of the war and the period. This is probably the only way that the mistakes and lessons of that event can guide the actions of the future to ensure that those mistakes are not repeated. However, if the ongoing turbulence in the Niger Delta is indicative of anything, it is that Nigeria has still not learnt from her past mistakes on how to accommodate and make her disparate ethnic nationalities coexist. Emphasizing this point, Steve Ayorinde (2007) quotes Chimamanda as saying (on the occasion of *Half of a Yellow Sun* winning the Orange Broadband Prize for fiction) that: “This book is my refusal to forget.” Adichie’s success in part, likely stems from her distance from the event in time, having been born seven years after the end of the war.

Adichie’s “refusal to forget” underscores one of the fundamental functions of the writer, like those of story tellers, in traditional African society. Writers such as René Wellek (238-9), Wole Soyinka (21), Chinua Achebe (7-8) and Chukwudi Maduka (11) have at various times agreed that the writer in African society is the conscience of the society and functions as its: historian, rescuing its past; critic, analyzing

its present; and mentor, helping to guide it towards its future. Adichie in chronicling so that society does not forget, is fulfilling these functions. Achebe states in *Anthills of the Savannah* that “to some of us the Owner of the World has apportioned the gift to tell their fellows that the time to get up has finally come....And then there are those others whose part is to wait and when the struggle is ended, to take over and recount its story. (Anthills, 113) And it is in the recounting that history is preserved and passed on from one generation to the other, for according to him “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, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.” (Anthills, 114)

Adichie explores the horror of war that civilian populations often experience by correlating the story of a woman caressing a calabash containing her daughter’s head with similar instances in other wars:

The woman with the calabash nudged her, then motioned to some other people close by. ‘*Bianu*, come,’ she said. ‘Come and take a look.’ She opened the calabash. ‘Take a look,’ she said again. Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl’s head with the ashy-grey skin and plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed. The woman closed the calabash. ‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair,’ (149)

Adichie raises the point of the universal inhumanity of all wars through drawing parallels of repulsion from other wars. She mentioned: “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.” (82) Her comment that we should not draw parallels only heightens these comparisons. Richard’s witnessing of the mindless ‘butchery’ of Nnaemeka and other Igbo people at Kano airport further amplifies the bestiality of man in situations of wars:

Nnaemeka turned to go back to his desk. Richard picked up his briefcase. The side entrance burst open and three men ran in holding up long rifles. They were wearing green army uniforms, and Richard wondered why soldiers would make such a spectacle of themselves, dashing in like that, until he saw how red and wildly glassy their eyes were. The first soldier waved his gun around, ‘*Ina nyamiri!*’ Where are the Igbo people? Who is Igbo here? Where are the infidels? ‘You are Igbo,’ the second soldier said to Nnaemeka.... The soldier walked over to him, ‘Say Allahu Akbar!’....

He would not say Allahu Akbar because his accent would give him away. Richard willed him to say the words, anyway, to try; he willed something, anything, to happen in the stifling silence and as if in answer to his thoughts, the rifle went off and Nnaemeka's chest blew open, a splattering red mass, and Richard dropped the note in his hand.... The soldiers ran out to the tarmac and into the aeroplane and pulled out Igbo people who had already boarded and lined them up and shot them and left them lying there, their bright clothes splashes of colour on the dusty black stretch." (152-153)

Adichie's personality sketches bring her characters to life. All the main characters, Odenigbo, Ugwu, Olanna, Kainene, and Richard, develop as the story progresses. Ugwu, in particular, develops from the clumsy little village boy, unsure of himself and who sleeps with pieces of chicken in his pocket, to a resourceful "teacher" and "child soldier" able to distinguish himself in battle situations.

Half of a Yellow Sun, is not just a story of the horrors of Nigeria's civil war; Adichie refreshingly explores some thematic concerns through which the harrowing experiences of the war are highlighted. Majorly, she explores the themes of war; human brutality and bestiality; betrayal of love, trust, friendship and country; and child soldiering, amongst others. When one considers the preponderance of works on the subject of Nigerian civil war, it is surprising to see a novel that probes this over trodden path with deft freshness, and that is a compelling read. It is a mark of Adichie's remarkable adroitness that she is able to handle the historical truths of the brutalities and effects of the war without squeamishness or overt melodrama. The issues of causes and effects are surveyed within the ambits of their impacts on the day-to-day existence of the characters. As gory as the killing and eviscerating of pregnant women, rape of young girls, and other atrocious acts were, Adichie's skill humanizes and transposes these, showing the ravaging influence of the war on the psyche of the various actors, as Wainaina says; it is the war that is "stripping our humanity from us." The friendship that existed between Abdulmalik, an Hausa, and the Mbaezi family who are Igbos is evidenced by the fact that:

... when Uncle Mbaezi came home. He called out Olanna to come and greet his friend Abdulmalik. Olanna had met the Hausa man once before, he sold leather slippers close to Uncle Mbaezi's stall in the market.... 'Well done,' Abdulmalik said. He opened his bag and brought out a pair of slippers and held them out to her, his narrow face creased in a smile....She took the slippers with both hands. 'Thank you, Abdulmalik. Thank you.' Abdulmalik pointed at the ripe gourdlike pods on the *kuka* tree and said, 'You come my house. My wife cook very sweet *kuka* soup.' 'Oh, I will come, next time,' Olanna said.... he sat with Uncle Mbaezi on the veranda, with a bucket of sugar cane in front of them. They gnawed off the hard, green peels and chewed the juicy, white pulp, speaking Hausa and laughing. (40)

The brutality and bestiality shown by Abdulmalik in massacring the Mbaezi family despite this relationship that exists between him and the family could only be rationalized within the context of "war":

Uncle Mbaezi lay facedown in an ungainly twist, legs splayed. Something creamy-white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head. Aunty Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts on her body were smaller, dotting her arms like parted red lips.... We finished the whole family. It was Allah's will! The man was familiar. It was Abdulmalik. (147-8)

Half of a Yellow Sun is also a story of love and betrayal; of dreams and shattered dreams as opposed to realities; of power plays and the manipulation of human suffering; of neglects and unabashed 'fiddling while Rome burned' that has become the routine of governance in Nigeria from imperial times till date. It is a story of high-handed responses to legitimate demands of "a standing space" in a country to which one ostensibly belongs; and a commentary on the constant changes of government without any discernible change or benefit to the lives of the people being governed.

Critics have observed that using multiple narrative voices in the hands of an amateur writer could lead to clumsy writing as the disparate narrators may lead a reader into a maze of incomprehension. But that is not so in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The technique, in this book, assumes a firmness of competence only associated with masters, little wonder that Achebe comments that "Adichie came almost fully made."

Using the characters of Ugwu, Olanna, Odenigbo, Richard, Kainene and even Mohammed, Adichie weaves a compelling story, synthesizing the many-sided views of the war in an attempt to make sense of those ‘moments of madness’ in Nigeria’s history.

Adichie displays a mastery of language and the art of story telling by her utilitarian disposition of the three types of language style – grand/formal, middle/informal, and low/colloquial, and which she stretches and expands to accommodate the multi-faceted messages. She uses the appropriate language suitable for each character as occasion demands. From Major Nzeogwu’s formalistic broadcast: “The constitution is suspended and the regional government and elected assemblies are hereby dissolved. My dear countrymen, the aim of the revolutionary Council is to establish a nation free from corruption and internal strife...”(123-4); through Ugwu’s informal expressions: “his people would say that Master had spit this child out” (124), “his stomach tightened; memories of those days of Amala left a difficult-to-swallow lump in his throat” (353); to the use of code switching and mixing, from vernacular to pidgin, and liberal use of proverbs: “*Kedu afa gi?* What is your name?” (5). Examples of informal/low/colloquial expressions are: “The white men will poke and poke and poke the women in the dark but they will never marry them” (80) and “he who brings kola nut brings life. 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.”(164) The work is rich in imagery, and such other figurative languages as personification: “The fridge breathed heavily in his ears” (6), “even the grass will fight...”(171) “Port Harcourt is going crazy” (171); simile, “shouting like madman” (256), “...she felt like a thief” (270), metaphors “so you will be spreading your legs for that elephant”(35); and alliteration, “fine fighting form” (110), among others.

Using the exposition of the love and betrayals represented by Olanna /Odenigbo/Amala; Olanna/Odenigbo/Richard;Olanna/Kainene/Richard; Adichie probes the anatomy of human relations under stress. The superficiality of filial connections typifying the times. Similarly, Olanna finds it difficult to get along with her parents, particularly her mother: “Having conversations with her mother tired her...She was used to her mother’s disapproval; it had coloured most of her major decisions...” (34-35) Her parents are willing and even eager to mortgage her on the altar of their avarice for government contracts:

So will you be spreading your legs for that elephant in exchange for Daddy’s contract? Kainene asked. ‘Daddy literally pulled me away from the veranda, so we could leave you alone with the good cabinet minister,’ ... ‘Will he give Daddy the contract then?’....’ The ten percent is standard, so extras always help. The other bidders probably don’t have a *beautiful* daughter....The benefit of being the ugly daughter is that nobody uses you as sex bait.’(35)

Olanna “wondered, too, how her parents had promised Chief Okonji an affair with her in exchange for the contract. Had they stated it verbally, plainly, or had it been implied? (32)

Through the Olanna/Odenigbo vs Kainene/Richard tangle, and Olanna/Kainene exposition, Adichie seems to posit the triumph and indomitable spirit of filial bonding that helps Olanna and Kainene surmount the external stresses imposed on their relationship by their various liaisons and conducts with the men in their lives and in each other’s lives. But more importantly, it is probably the message of the place of hope in the life of any individual, no matter the misfortune. Survival becomes the ultimate goal for each individual in the face of adversity.

Adichie through Chief Okonji explores the immorality that has become the routine of those in positions of authority and governance in Nigeria:

Chief Okonji moved closer. ‘I can’t keep you out of my mind,’ he said, and a mist of alcohol settled on her face....’I just can’t keep you out of my mind,’ Chief Okonji said again. ‘Look, you don’t have to work at the ministry, I can appoint you to a board, any board you want, and I will furnish a flat for you wherever you want.’ He pulled her to

him, and for a while Olanna did nothing, her body limp against his. She was used to this, being grabbed by men who walked around in a cloud of cologne-drenched entitlement, with the presumption that, because they were powerful and found her beautiful, they belonged together. She pushed him back, finally, and felt vaguely sickened at how her hands sank into his soft chest. ‘Stop it, Chief.’(33)

Adichie’s narrative style is fluid and simple. Through such characters as Odenigbo, Olanna, Kainene, Ugwu, Richard and others, she explores the vicissitudinous nature of war on the lives of the ordinary citizens. From the early days when Odenigbo, Olanna and their friends engaged in the academic exercise of the dialectics of the North/South dichotomy over bowls of pepper-soup and beer, through the “the first shot” that heralded the actual war, to the debilitating effects of the war, one sees the disintegrating lives of the various characters as they attempt to hold their humanity together. Through even such a mundane thing as food, Adichie traces the regression of the characters. From the abundance which thrilled Ugwu when he first came to live with Odenigbo and found that he actually “ate meat *every day*”(3),and made him put pieces of chicken “into his shorts’ pockets before going to the bedroom”(8), to the point when “soaking some dried cassava in water”(343) became luxury. As the idealism and optimism of the dream of a great new nation began to fade away, and was replaced by disillusionment and despair Adichie begins to explore the strings that hold tattered dreams. Not love, patriotism, or any of the dialectics of the early days, but just the will and need to survive.

The plot of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is intriguingly unique and would have been successful but for some chronological, character placement, and narrative flaws which could have been detected and corrected on the editorial table. While the overall sequence of the war, from what Chinua Achebe refers to as the “pointing of fingers” which led to the war, through the harrowing experiences of the war itself, to the cessation of hostilities, is maintained; the unconventional structuring of the narrative leads to some fundamental flaws. This 433 paged novel is deliberately structured into four parts of thirty-seven

chapters. Parts One and Three, which are titled “The early Sixties”, are six chapters of varying lengths each. Part Two which is titled “The Late Sixties” is twelve chapters while Part Four also titled “The Late Sixties” is made up of thirteen chapters, if one adds the concluding chapter.

This contrived symmetry is not carried through because the sequences of events are muddled. Although there are no hard and fast rules in prose fiction on chapter lengths and the structural use of flashbacks, Adichie’s experiment of splitting the novel into four sections with the interposing of the “Early Sixties” and “Late sixties” dichotomy, poses a challenge of maintaining the story line and keeping tabs on the characters and also ensuring consistency of character interplay and movements. The disrupted time – character flow and illogical cohesion of certain ideas that pertain to the interplay of character movements make the novel falter. This flaw is most manifest in Olanna’s trip to Kano. Adichie writes that Olanna travelled to Kano with Baby, for she states that:

“Everyone was talking about it, even the taxi driver in the white hat and kaftan who drove her and baby from the airport to Arize’s compound I better take baby to greet Auntie Ifeka, ‘she hurried out to fetch Baby before Arize could say anything else. (128-9).

Yet later, on page 142, Ugwu is seen worrying about Baby being woken up from her siesta by the noise; and on the very next page, Ugwu is “thinking about two days ago, when Olanna left for Kano to fetch Auntie Arize ... Baby came into the kitchen” (143) implying that Olanna left baby behind when she travelled to Kano. Adichie also writes that:

Olanna’s Dark Swoops began the day she came back from Kano....Baby discovered her. Baby had walked to the front door to look out, asking Ugwu when Mummy Ola would come back, and then cried out at the crumpled form on the stairs. Odenigbo carried her in, bathed her, and held baby back from hugging her too tightly.(156)

Similarly, we are informed that Olanna, Arize and Baby left Kano for Lagos to shop and this is evidenced on page 131 where it states that “In the airport taxi, Arize taught Baby a song while Olanna watched Lagos careen by...Olanna pretended not to have heard and instead said to Baby, ‘Now, look

what you did to your dress! Hurry inside so we can wash it off!” and on pages 132-133 where both women while shopping at Yaba market experience the harassment being meted to Igbos in Lagos. At both shopping scenes, at Kingsway (131) and Yaba market (132), Baby was with them. At Kingsway “Baby pulled down a doll from a low shelf and turned it upside down, and it let out a crying sound”; and at Yaba market, “she took Baby’s hand and led the way past the roadside hawkers who sat under umbrellas.... baby began to cry. ‘Mummy Ola! Mummy Ola!’” (132)

There was no indication that the two women and Baby flew back to Kano from Lagos, and no explanation on how Baby came not to be with Olanna for in Chapter 10, after Ugwu is seen worrying about not waking baby from her siesta “He hoped the loud noise would not wake Baby up from her Siesta.... But Baby would wake up soon and he would have to make her dinner. He brought out a bag of potatoes from the storeroom and sat staring at it, thinking about two days ago, when Olanna left for Kano to fetch Auntie Arize” (142-3), a few pages later, on page 146, Olanna, while responding to Mohammed’s comment that they should take a short cut to the train station, says “Train station? Arize and I are not leaving until tomorrow ... I’m going back to my uncle’s house in Sabon Gari” and Olanna is then seen experiencing the horrors of the killings in Kano, including the massacre of her relations including Arize; and thereafter she is helped by Mohammed to board a train bound for Enugu (148-9).

It is however in the exposition of the embedded narrative The World Was Silent When We Died (Book 1 p.82; Book 2 p.115; Book 3 p.155; Book 4 p.205; Book 5 p.237; Book 6 p.258; Book 7 p.375; Book 8 p.433) within the book, *Half of a Yellow Sun* that Adichie’s real voice emerges. I contend that this is Adichie’s real book and real voice and opinion. Considering that Adichie acknowledges the prodigious research and reading that went into the writing of this book by listing the books on page 436, one is intrigued by Adichie’s craftsmanship and the profound commentaries about the war embedded in these few pages where her voice and opinion are poignant especially as she marshals the catalogue of conspiracies that ensured the death of Biafra:

He writes about the world that remained silent while Biafrans died. He argues that Britain inspired this silence. The arms and advice that Britain gave Nigeria shaped other countries. In the United states, Biafra was 'under Britain's sphere of interest'. In Canada, the prime minister quipped. 'Where is Biafra?' The Soviet Union sent technicians and planes to Nigeria, thrilled at the chance to influence Africa without offending America and Britain.... Communist China denounced the Anglo-American-Soviet imperialism but did little else to support Biafra. (258)

The epilogue poem on p.375 sums up the author's disquiet at what transpired at that point in history.

There is however an ambiguity on whether this narrative within a story is written by Ugwu or Richard.

On page 374, Adichie writes that "the title came to Richard; 'The World Was Silent When We Died,'"

and on page 433 she states that "Ugwu writes his dedication last: For Master, my good man." These

lapses notwithstanding, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a very brave and entertaining narrative and Adichie

deserves all the accolades.

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