

# From War to Survival: A Study of chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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## Abstract:

This paper concentrate on the postcolonial discourse that seeks to dismantle the essentialism of oppressed people. This paper focuses the three main characters, despite their multitude of differences, is placed in a subordinate position within a colonizer/colonized binary opposition. These characters identify themselves being with Biafra and that single identification places them in a subaltern position when Nigeria declares war on Biafra.

### Two-fold Identity

Post-colonialism is a term used for an era when colonies achieved freedom from European colonization. The term post colonialism concerns the effects of colonialism on cultural and communities which are originally historians used it after World War II referring to the post-Independence time.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie continues her examination of the colonizer/colonized binary by retelling the history of Nigeria's split with itself after being liberated from British rule and the resulting Biafra War. The novel illuminates the role that Biafra played in Nigeria's arbitrary conception as well as its role in the frequent confusion and massacres that occurred during post-independence.

Using three narrators, Adichie is able to capture different perspectives of postcolonial Nigeria. Ugwu's perspective as a young Igbo teenager from the small village most directly reflects the experiences of the oppressed. Meanwhile, Olanna's experiences as a wealthy, educated, Anglicized Igbo reflects the point of view of one, who mimics the colonizer means little when the war starts. Finally, Richard's viewpoint as an Igbo sympathizer of British origin problematizes the colonizer/colonized binary.

All three perspectives embody a spectrum of realities that were experienced by Biafra's during the 1960s. Even though the experiences are varied, the commonality that is shared by all is the subordinating position that each character occupies in relation to the dominant imperialistic influence of Britain that is manifested through the puppet government of Nigeria. A close reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun* using a postcolonial theoretical framework will reveal the ongoing binary opposition that Adichie uses to highlight the power imbalances between the colonizer and the colonized. Therefore, the deconstruction of Adichie's

works copycats the postcolonial identity in that the postcolonial identity occupies a paradoxical space in which colonizer and colonized identities are interdependent.

In order to examine the paradox in *Half of the Yellow Sun* it is again necessary to begin by interpreting the text in a straightforward way that reveals the privileging of the colonizer over the colonized. Following the close reading, it will reexamine the characters for evidence of linguistic and conceptual unraveling's that are suggestive of the text deconstructing itself, and thus dismantling any single interpretation of the postcolonial identity.

Adichie gives solution to the colonizer/colonized binary by attending to it from multiple angles, a houseboy (Ugwu), a wealthy and educated Igbo woman (Olanna), and a British man infatuated with Igbo culture and in love with an Igbo woman (Richard). Each of these perspectives offers different realities based on each character's position. Through the characters of Ugwu, Olanna and Richard, Adichie demonstrates the suffering and oppression of the Igbo people during the year of Post-Independence. In effect, what, Adichie appears to have done is to show the slow effects of colonization even after independence.

Ugwu, for example, begins the novel as a subordinate on many levels. He appears to have no say in whether or not he becomes Odenigbo's houseboy. From the beginning, his agency is compromised in that the decision to work under Odenigbo likely is not his own. Ugwu's aunty recounts to him that "While she was sweeping the corridor in the mathematics department a week ago, she heard Master say that he needed a houseboy to do his cleaning, and she immediately said she could help" (4). The depth of subordination in this passage is far-reaching in that both Ugwu and his aunty seem to occupy a lower rung in society than does Master. Beginning with aunt's physical act of sweeping indicative of cleaning what others have left behind we already see a possible class division between her and Master, who we later learn is Odenigbo.

As is characteristic of Adichie's work, Odenigbo is a strong character whose role as Master is complicated. Odenigbo exemplifies the far-reaching impact of British colonialism. His British education arguably is what has resulted in his Master status. The paradox is that Odenigbo likely would not have achieved this level of social standing without his British education.

Yet, on the other hand, it is the British whom Odenigbo blames for the oppressive state of Nigeria. Adichie speaks to this challenge when she has Odenigbo explain the features of British education to Ugwu. Adichie writes, "There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass. You must read books and learn both answers. I will give you books, excellent books"(11).

Odenigbo proves to be a gracious employer to Ugwu, providing him with an education and providing support when Ugwu's mother falls ill. Ugwu ruminates about how well he is treated in comparison to other houseboys. He notes that "The houseboy at the end of the street did not decide what would be cooked; he cooked whatever he was ordered to. And they did not have masters or madams who gave them books" (17).

Ugwu is more comfortable position than other houseboys. At every major turn in the novel, Ugwu occupies a position of altered as houseboy, proprietor of unrequited lust, conscripted soldier. It is not until the end of Adichie's narrative that the readers see Ugwu's redemption, which will be argued as still a subordinating part of the binary opposition that is created between colonizers and colonized.

Throughout the novel, Ugwu matures from a lustful boy with juvenile impulses to an educated, intellectually gifted young man to a hardened soldier commits as one of the most perverse acts in the novel. The arch of Ugwu's transformation ultimately ends with his apparent attempt to atone for his sins. His apology comes in the form of a novel that he uses to capture his experiences from the war: 'The World Was Silent When We Died' is embedded within the larger storyline. Ugwu writes in Chapter 6 of his book, "He writes about the world that remained silent while Biafrans died" (258). Adichie appears to use Ugwu as a symbol of the many states of the Igbo people during the war years.

Adichie begins the novel with something of a free spirited innocence that is indicative of the hope of the Igbo people when Biafra is established. The innocence appears as juvenile and lustful obsessions with Nnesinachi and Olanna. Ugwu's infatuation early in the novel with both characters is indicative of juvenile, yet optimistic, behavior. When Olanna first moves in with Odenigbo, Ugwu engages in bizarre covetous behaviors. After clearing the dishes from a dinner party, "Ugwu sat down and selected one of Olanna's discarded chicken bones and closed his eyes as he sucked it, imagining Olanna's mouth enclosing the same bone" (83). Though unusual by most readers' standards, Ugwu's actions can be seen as a sort of hope against hope that he can possess what Odenigbo possesses, which is Olanna.

Adichie emphasizes Ugwu's innate intelligence and ultimate break with humanity as a way of further establishing a link between him and the fate of Biafra. Ugwu's teacher informs Odenigbo that "The boy will surely skip a class at some point, he has such an innate intelligence" (84). Ugwu feeds his intellectual curiosity with books, and they become an escape for him. When Ugwu's burgeoning intellectual talent rises to the surface, it becomes a version of freedom for him. His thoughts are his own, and reading strengthens those thoughts and by extension, his version of freedom.

Adichie's integration of Olanna and Richard into the narrative supports the differing states of being that can be characteristic of the colonized. Together Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard create an assemblage of personal ties, cultural attitudes and positional ties that seem to be arbitrarily interconnected. Adichie seems

to skillfully connect three very different characters whose relationships, are it not for the Biafran War, cannot be as deeply intimate. This point is reiterated throughout the novel and serves as a connection to the ongoing colonizer/colonized binary opposition.

Olanna is described as a beautiful young lady from a wealthy family that enjoys ample social capital. Olanna has a dynamic effect on people including both Ugwu and Richard who are enamored with her from afar. For all intents and purposes, Olanna enjoys a privileged existence prior to the war. She is a sharp contrast to Ugwu in many wayspositionalitybeing chief among them. Where Olanna is wealthy, Ugwu is poor. Where Ugwu is a servant, Olanna is served. Despite the differences, however, Olanna identifies as Igbo and therefore, occupies the same subordinate position as Ugwu within the colonizer/colonized binary opposition. In this way, Adichie creates Hall's differing state of being between two characters that both occupy a subordinate position.

Olanna capitalizes on her higher placement when it is advantageous for her to do so. During the war, Baby fall ill and Olanna takes her to a hospital for treatment. Knowing that the doctor at the hospital is an old friend, Olanna uses her breeding and social status to avoid waiting in the overcrowded hospital waiting room. As she enters the hospital, "She told the nurse that she was an old colleague of his. 'It's terribly urgent,' she said, and kept her English accent crisp and her head held high. A nurse showed her into his office promptly"( 263).

Adichie creates a clear distinction between social classes. After Olanna uses her influence to skip ahead in line, "One of the women sitting in the corridor cursed. 'Tufiakwa! We have been waiting since dawn! Is it because we don't talk through our nose like white people?" (263).Olanna's privilege is contrasted with the plight of the waiting-room mothers who do not share the same social standing as she. Again, Adichie nuances the subordinate position of the colonizer/colonized binary by establishing the differing states of being among Biafrans.

However, despite the nuances, she makes it clear that all Biafrans occupy a subordinate position within the larger scope of the binary, regardless of social position. The reader sees this later in the hospital scene when Olanna's privilege and social status are not enough to secure the medicine she needs for Baby. Although she is able to use her influence to bypass the waiting room, she still ends up no better off than the other less privileged women in the waiting room.

Olanna's conflicting status as a subordinate on one hand and empowered on the other is exemplified in the scene where she and Richard become intimate. Adichie's description of the scene is laden with symbolism that supports ambivalence between Olanna's privilege and her subjugation. According to the text,

Everything changed when he was inside her. She raised her hips moving with him, matching his thrusts, and it was as if she was throwing shackles off her wrists, extracting pins from her skin, freeing herself with the loud, loud cries that burst out of her mouth. Afterward, she felt filled with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace. (234)

A close reading of this scene seems to reveal that Richard is responsible for saving Olanna from her despair over Odenigbo's infidelity. Digging deeper, one can interpret Richard as being a symbol of Britain's imperial power. Adichie sets up Richard's character as an embodiment of both British superiority and white guilt. Furthermore, the British superiority endemic to Richard's character is synonymous with the colonizer exercising power over the colonized. If viewing Richard from the perspective of British superiority then, this interpretation suggests that Olanna represents the colonized, who is only able to be saved from Richard who represents the colonizer. Solidifying this point is the imagery of slavery--depicted as the metaphorical shackles and pins that are released from Olanna's body during the scene. Up until this point, Olanna has been humiliated and betrayed by Odenigbo, another representative of the colonized. The injury that she has sustained is repaired by her encounter with Richard, who is acting as a proxy of the colonizer in this interpretation.

Despite this interpretation, though, Adichie creates contradiction in Olanna's position by giving her a sense of empowerment after her encounter with Richard. Instead of depicting the encounter as oppressive as is characteristic of the colonizer/colonized binary, Adichie gives Olanna strength from the encounter. Perhaps, this way of creating inter-connectedness between Olanna and Richard connects both under the overarching colonizer/colonized binary opposition. In other words, the ambivalence of the scene essentially places Richard and Olanna on an even playing field. He "saves" her, but instead of being oppressed by the colonizer's salvation, she regains her strength of mind and is empowered. This leveling of societal positions supports the notion that nuances and position aside, Olanna and Richard are equal in their subordinate positions as Biafrans.

Richard's role as a British national and Biafran is a complex one. By nature of his race and country of origin, he occupies the highest societal position out of all three narrators. Still, though, Richard does not completely assimilate into the British expatriate way of life in Nigeria. At the beginning of the narrative, The reader learn that he wanders around parties aimlessly trying to conjure witticisms that will impress his British girlfriend, Susan and her expatriate friends. Even after trading in his superficial relationship with Susan for a genuine, committed relationship to Olanna's twin sister, Kainene, he continues to fumble in his words and actions.

Ultimately, Richard struggles to reconcile his privilege with his desire to immerse himself in Igbo culture. There are numerous points in the novel in which Richard cleaves to the privilege that is associated with his social status. Often, he becomes annoyed or insulted when members of the Igbo tradition fail to recognize his privileged status. By contrast, he loathes the racist attitudes of the British and makes whole-hearted attempts to embrace Igbo culture.

Throughout the novel, Richard exhibits anti-colonizer sentiments--claiming Biafra as his own country--while also acting on impulses reserved for the colonizer. One such scene occurs at the end of the novel when Richard searches for Eberechi as a favor to Ugwu. When he arrives at the address that is given to him, he encounters an elderly woman who does not seem impressed that Richard, a white British man, is speaking in Igbo. This perplexes Richard. According to the text, "It surprised Richard; he was used to his Igbo-speaking whiteness being noticed, being marveled at" (428).

Taking a close look at Richard's reaction, it appears that Richard cannot completely shed the feelings of superiority that have been ingrained in him. Likewise, in scenes where Richard and Madu have linguistic sparring matches, it also appears that Richard's embracing of Igbo culture has more to do with him wanting to be recognized for going out of his way to embrace the culture rather than for his genuine interest and respect for the culture.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* masterfully constructs a complex portrait of the aftershocks of British imperialism in Nigeria. By embedding Ugwu's book into the larger narrative, the reader learns the Britain's influence in the Biafran war, and how ultimately, Britain still controlled Nigeria through political power. Chapter 2 of "The World Was Silent When we died" establishes the history behind Nigerian's construction. Essentially, the reader learns that through this embedded book that Britain preferred the Hausa people of the North to the Igbo and Yoruba tribes to the south.

The same theory can be applied to both Olanna and Richard. As stated earlier in this paper, Adichie goes to great lengths to give nuance to her characters that occupy subordinate positions within the colonizer/colonized binary. The characters of Olanna and Richard are fraught with ambivalence.

The scene in which Richard speaks with the old woman in Umuahia in an attempt to locate Breech stands out as a small, yet pivotal moment in Richard's character development. The text states that "It surprised Richard; he was used to his Igbo-speaking whiteness being noticed, being marveled at" (428). His initial interpretation of this scene has suggested that Richard's reaction is shown a sense of entitlement. Richard believes he is special because he is white and speaks Igbo. He expects that he will stand out as important due to "his Igbo-speaking whiteness." Richard's shock at the old woman's nonchalance is indicative of a superiority complex that can most likely be attributed to Richard's position at the top of the societal hierarchy.

But of course, the irony of Richard's situation is based on an assumption that a fixed meaning exists, which predetermines the colonizer/colonized binary opposition. Looking again at the scene between Olanna and Richard, there is no longer a definite interpretation that suggests the symbolism in the scene is governed by the colonizer/colonized binary. Richard's inherent superiority as a white Englishman no longer carries as much weight for freeing Olanna from her metaphorical shackles and pins because multiple interpretations can be applied to the scene. In effect, the initial interpretation of the scene is subverted by the decentering of the binary opposition that acted as an anchor for a close reading of the text.

The difference that operates within Adichie's text allows for a complete subversion of the colonizer/colonized binary that frames the narrative. A close reading interpretation of the novel illuminates the role of the British in 1) arbitrarily constructing Nigeria and 2) being indirectly responsible for the Biafran War and the suffering of the Biafran people. Intersecting with that is the dissent of the Igbo/Biafra people that Adichie constructs through Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard. All of these big ideas rely on a stable center that assumes a definitive universal meaning that involves power imbalance. Difference operating in a manner of infinite deferral of meaning subverts this idea of definitive meaning, which in turn, deconstructs the text. What are left are infinite interpretations that paradoxically can also be deconstructed.

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