

# Impact of Colonialism in Half of a Yellow Sun

## by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

R. Rajeswari (Ph.D Scholar),  
PG & Research Dept. Of English,  
Thiruvalluvar Govt. Arts College,  
Rasipuram.  
blackieraji01@gmail.com

Dr.P. Mythily,  
Associate Professor & Head of English,  
PG & Research Dept. Of English,  
Thiruvalluvar Govt. Arts College,  
Rasipuram.

### Abstract

African fiction and narratives commence with the African encounters with colonial powers. The impact and the consequences of colonialism in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is revealed through the social events that occur during the civil war. A couple of years prior to the beginning of the civil war due to the division amongst tribes and oppression of Igbo people, many Igbos were murdered and had to flee. It is clearly evident that every generation of writers confront the burning issues in its society and wrestles with them. These writers mainly attempt to raise African awareness about the biased and stereotypical imaging of Africa by the imperial powers. *Half of a Yellow Sun* of Adichie has focused on overlooked moments in international legal history, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). This novel explores the rhetorical strategies that the Biafran government used when struggling to justify its sovereignty. This article focuses on the impact of colonialism on the African community with reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

**Keywords: Colonialism, Civil war, Biafran, Politics, Country.**

### Full Paper

#### Author

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist born on 15 September ,1977. She grew up as the fifth of six children in an Igbo family in the town of Nsukka in Enugu state. Adichie studied medicine and pharmacy at the University of Nigeria for a year and a half. There she started with the editing work for 'The Compass', a magazine run by the university's Catholic medical students. She migrated to United States to seek her education in communications and political science at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

In 2003, she completed her master's degree in creative writing at John Hopkins University. In 2008, she received a Master of Arts degree in African studies from Yale University. She is also a Hodder fellow at Princeton University during 2005 -2006. In the year 2008 she was awarded a Mac Arthur Fellowship.

Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* receives a wide critical acclaim and shortlisted for the Orange prize for fiction. It was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' prize for best first book 2005. Her second novel, *Half of the Yellow Sun*, named after the flag of the short-lived nation of Biafra, is set before and during the Nigerian civil war. It receives the 2007 Orange Prize for fiction and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. Her third novel, *Americanah* is an exploration of a young Nigerian who encounters racial discrimination in America. It was selected by The New York Times as one of "The 10 Best Books of 2013".

Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people by another. The term colony comes from the **Latin** word **Colonus**, meaning farmer. This root reminds us that the practice of colonialism usually involved the transfer of population to a new territory, where the arrivals lived as permanent settlers while maintaining political allegiance to their country of origin.

Colonialism is not restricted to a specific time or place. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Colonialism changed decisively because of technological developments in navigation that began to connect more remote parts of the world. Fast sailing ships made it possible to reach distant ports and to sustain close ties between the centre and the colonies. Thus, the modern European colonial project emerged when it became possible to move large numbers of people across the ocean and to maintain political sovereignty in spite of geographical dispersion. This entry uses the term colonialism to describe the process of European settlement and political control over the rest of the world, including the Americans, Australia and Parts of Africa and Asia.

Western colonialism is a political economic phenomenon whereby various European nations explored, conquered, settled and exploited large areas of the world. The age of modern colonialism began about 1500, following the European discoveries of a sea route around Africa's southern coast (1488) and of America (1492). With these events sea power shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and to the emerging nation – states of Portugal, Spain, The Dutch Republic, France and England.

Between the 1870s and 1900, Africa faced European imperialist aggression, diplomatic pressure, military invasion and eventual conquest and colonization. At the same time, African societies put up various forms of resistance against the attempt to colonize their countries and

impose foreign domination. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century much of African countries, except Ethiopia and Liberia, had been colonized by European powers.

The European imperialism grounded firmly in Africa and it was motivated by three main factors, economic, Political and social. The imposition of colonialism in Africa altered its history forever. African modes of thought, patterns of cultural development, and ways of life were forever impacted by the change in political structure brought about by colonialism.

The African economy was significantly changed by the Atlantic slave trade through the process of imperialism and the economic policies that accompanied colonization. In the course of period African economics were advancing in every area, particularly in the area of trade. The aim of colonialism is to exploit the physical, human and economic resources of an area to benefit the colonizing nation.

There are three main variations visible in Adichie's texts. First, there is the manifestation of psychic or psychological dispossession because of unconscious process in the mind of the characters and the inhibition of the Oedipus complex at any stage of their psychosexual development. Second, there is economic and political dispossession when the characters' means of livelihood and leadership or initiative are taken from them. Third, cultural dispossession occurs when there is destruction of cultural symbols and values, which have permeated a character's or group's consciousness.

Critics have divided the literary tradition of Nigeria into three generations. Writer who have published works before and directly after independence (1960), like Chinua Achebe are in the first generation. The second generation is those writers whose work was published after the Nigerian Civil War (1966 -1967) like Niyi Osundare. The third generation includes the writers who published their first work in the middle of the 1980s. The third-generation writing involves Historiography and preliminary Theoretical Considerations. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie belongs to this third-generation writer who writes the novel to create a revolutionary change in the life of African people. While Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and Elechi Amadi may be described as the 20<sup>th</sup> century sons of Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is seen as his 21<sup>st</sup> century daughter. She subscribes to her literary predecessor's vision to reconfigure the African Root into a meaningful cultural environment in order to rescue the modern generation from the wholesale discarding of the past with the consequent sense of inferiority complex.

She recreates African history in the fictional worlds of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* as she revisits, like Chinua Achebe, inheritance of colonization in the lives of her fictional character in the novel. Feminist theory and discourse is not confined to Africa. In fact, black women's literatures and criticism in a variety of post -colonial locations focus on motherhood as

a “privileged site of authority and strength for black women in Africa and in Diaspora” (Lopez 83).

In her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* Adichie portrays the symbolic role of the mother is the reason why the diminutive and self-effacing Beatrice Achike poisons her husband she sees as being tyrannical, in order to free her family from his brutal attacks. It is also the reason why the beautiful but fragile Olanna Ozobia has to work hard to ensure that her family survives the brutish war in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* of Adichie’s work focused on overlooked moment in international legal history, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). This novel explores the rhetorical strategies that the Biafran government used when struggling to justify its sovereignty. While Nigeria insisted that Biafra was a rough state without international legitimacy, Biafra claimed that Nigeria gave up its control over the region because it had violated their human rights during the 1966 pogroms. There were no clear rules to follow by the Biafrans when the sovereignty is to be recognized.

Through her literary works Adichie gives the voice to Nigeria and clarifies the misinterpretation about Africa. She portrays the misinterpretation about Africa especially Nigeria, in all of her works including in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. *Half of a Yellow Sun* presents three different voices which enables readers to experience not only one perspective but three different perspectives about the conflict which is presented in this novel clearly.

Although *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set in a context six years after the colonization, this novel echoes the impact of colonization towards economic and social aspect in Nigeria, including the challenges in developing a new identity as a nation. This novel depicts the effect of Nigerian civil war from the eyes of Ugwu, a houseboy, Olanna, an Igbo woman and Richard, a British journalist.

Adichie’s novel investigates the African country, Nigeria, in past, during the Biafran war, and highlights the issues inherent in the concept of a “post-colonial” society or a society after independence. The story is told through the lives of four characters: Odenigbo, Olanna, Ugwu and Richard against the back drop of a Nigerian society infiltrated, both literally and psychologically, by the British Empire.

Within the novel, three predominant ethnic groups are mentioned: Igbo (southeast), the Hausa – Fulani (of the North) and Yoruba (in the southwest) who have varying cultures, religions and languages. Their system of governance is also disparate, with the Igbos exercising more democratic systems, demonstrated by the general assembly one notes in *Half of a Yellow Sun* with the elders gathered under the Udala tree.

Colonialism became a major scholarly concern in the late 1970s, while post-colonialism came to prominence in the 1980s. The literary works have greatly enriched the ways in which culture itself is understood within and beyond anthropology, revealing the great breadth of its manifestations as experience and reference points in different political and social contexts.

*Half of the Yellow Sun* intriguingly portrays the subtle and occasionally bold identity politics. The British wanted to influence the politics in Nigeria, as well as have access to resources within the country. Nigeria was colonized by Britain until 1960. Nigeria freed itself in 1960, however Britain's involvement continued to be strong up until the end of the civil war. After they isolated themselves, the country was still unified by 300 ethnic tribes including the two main categories Igbo people in the south and Hausa from the north.

Many of the characters in these narratives must have been done in the aftermath of the British colonialism as they navigate the dynamics of their own identities and even develop a new identity, Biafran nationalism, Hausa, Igbo far from the previously imposed and negotiated Nigerian identity. At the beginning of the novel, before the war broke out, Ugwu, a young illiterate houseboy who works for Odenigbo, an Igbo professional who is clearly an elite is introduced. The interactions between Ugwu and his "Master" identify the class and identity politics present in post-colonial Nigeria (HYS 171). He seems to be most comfortable in English, speaking Igbo "Coloured by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English too often" (HYS 11).

Olannas' relatives were all slaughtered and it forced Odenigbo, Olanna and Ugwu to flee Odenigbo's house and move to the Biafra area which was made by the Igbo leader in response to the oppression. Adichie investigates the volatile period in Nigerian history through the poly vocal, interwoven discourses of characters and the third person omniscient, re-cognizing the Euro-based, essentialist, dichotomous concept of the post-colonial.

The disproportion dominates the ensuing "western dressed" African 'infidels' but inspires the coup d'état which later provokes a counter-coup (HYS 36). Prior to this event, the 1960 independence marked an increase in Christian households and the much sought after western education; many Igbos sent their children to British universities which is the case for the majority of the professionals and professors in the novel along with Olanna and Kainene other regions are also said to be "Competing so fiercely" for "white salaries" and a white way of life (HYS 51).

However, the Muslim Hausas do not wholly absorb European cultural imperialism in the same way the Igbo's and the Yoruba's do. The Northerners, therefore, become the less literate and socio- economically thriving group in the Nigerian Population. This fuels the resentment

between ethnicities which is exemplified when a man on the plane, next to Olanna, expresses how the bothersome Igbos “own all the shops; they control the civil service, even the police” (HYS 273). Similarly, many Nigerians inadvertently adopt the scepticism and stereotypes that the Europeans cast on the ethnic groups.

The north is therefore regarded as a site for the authoritarian, self- righteous posse of Hausas, the Igbos are considered to be the “money-loving” clan and the Yoruba are seen as fawning subordinates to their long time British contacts (HYS 184). Thus, the desire for all things Eurocentric along with the colonial seeds of mistrust, intolerance and political inequality matured in the free state.

Adichie, counters the misguided presentation in the text and reveals how Eurocentric powers remain in the New Nigerian economic and social space. While expatriates remain behind in Nsukka for instance, present at major social events; they rub shoulders with black Nigerians who maintain a mutual relationship with them of give and gain, get and gain. They exert influence and maintain the hegemonic bonds of imperial Britain.

Black men and women can take the role of the dominant or oppressor as well. To illustrate, the white female, Susan expresses stereotypical racist views, however she dulls in comparison to Olanna’s parents. Chief Ozobia and his wife are certainly haughty and exhibit their material possessions to give the population something to “covet” as Kainene mockingly puts it. They do not “acknowledge the humanity” of their servants and chastises a worker for simply stealing some rice to feed his family (HYS 220).

Olanna realizes how her father’s activities in politics make them feel inferior:

“father and his politician friends steal money with their contracts, but nobody makes them kneel to beg for forgiveness... they build houses with their stolen money and rent them out to people like man and charge inflated rents that make it impossible to buy food” (HYS 226).

Their actions indicate that it is not enough to blame the white man in a binary of the blacks versus whites. Although Odenigbo and Olanna are kind to Ugwu, his position as the master and hers as madam reflects how black faces can imperceptibly reinforce the failed colonial logic of inferior versus superior life style or tastes.

When Ugwu and his guardian Odenigbo are forced to flee Nsukka and end up in Umuaha, Ugwu notes how the “Ugly” “unpainted” compound is unworthy of master” (HYS 365). Adichie deconstructs these assumptions of forwardness and backwardness through a specific

spatialization of narrative action ... swinging between the village and the city” (Akpome,10) revealing what each location lacks along with the symbiotic relevance of both spheres.

### Conclusion

African written fiction narratives commence with the African encounters with colonial powers. The result of colonialism in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is revealed through the social events that occur during the civil war. A couple of years prior to the start of the civil war due to the division amongst tribes and oppression of Igbo people, many Igbos were murdered and had to flee. It is clearly evident that every generation of writers confront the burning issues in its society and wrestles with them. These writers mainly attempt to raise African awareness about the biased and stereotypical imaging of Africa by the imperial powers.

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