

Representation of History and Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun*

Gowhar Ahmad Dar

Research Scholar

PhD English

APSU, Rewa (M.P.)

Email: gowher345@gmail.com

Abstract

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. It portrays the events that took place during the 1960's in Nigeria and the Southern region that were heavily affected by civil war. The novel delves deep into the historical happenings of that time and the politics that was played around it both at national and international level. The paper aims at showing how author recounts the historical events like civil war that was fought between Nigerian army and Igbo separatists. In addition to this it shows the dirty politics was played by the both local and international countries in order to please the Nigerian government. They even assisted them in carrying out the massacres of Igbo people and kept dreadful silence while Igbo people were dying. Thus, the paper will try to show how the novel qualifies to be a historical novel and the "divide and rule" politics used by world powers to create fissure among tribes of Nigeria that ultimately resulted in civil war.

Keywords - Historical Novel, Politics, Civil War, Igbo Separatists, Divide and Rule,

Introduction

Half of a Yellow Sun is Adichie's second novel that was published in 2006. It is set in Nigeria and deals with two periods, the early 60s and the late 60s, which are of great importance in the postcolonial history of Nigeria. In the late 60s the country was involved in a bloody and violent conflict, the Nigeria-Biafra War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970. It

judiciously explores the disjunction between history as it is experienced personally and its result. The novel vividly brings to life the political and cultural crises that beset post-independence Nigeria. The story revolves around the civil war and politics that was involved during the war. The author did not witness the war herself but grew up in the aftermath of the war that she expressed in one of her interviews with Michael Enright she said, “The need to write about [Biafra War] came from growing up in its shadows. This thing that I didn’t quite understand was my legacy it hovered over everything”. Adichie writes about the impact of politics and war on the psyche of ordinary people. The novel affirms a different kind of historical truth not the facile truth of facts, figures, and dates, but the deeper truth of throbbing, lived experience” [Fatin Abbas, *The Nation* Oct 2, 2006]. It takes us inside ordinary lives laid waste by the all too ordinary unravelling of nation states.

1. *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a historical Novel.

The novel can be termed as a historical novel as it alludes to historical event of Biafra war. Patrick Brady comments on the historical novel in his book *Memory and History as Fiction*. He addresses the relationship between historiography and the historical novel by first pointing out the difference between them:

History ...refers to a ‘real’ past, a belief or set of beliefs about that past, and purports to report the ‘truth’ about that ‘real’ past....The historical novel, on the other hand, like the autobiographical novel, refers to a ‘real’ past but neither aims nor claims to reproduce it with scrupulous accuracy. (qtd in 12 Mey)

Christina Patterson while writing a review of the book for *The Independent* calls the novel as, “A magisterial novel about one of the most painful episodes in Nigerian’s history...packed with memorable characters and their different worlds”. Adichie shifts between these two periods in the novel. She realistically depicts the horrors of civil war, the starvation and massacres like a woman carrying her daughter’s severed head in a basket. In one of her interviews she was asked what lead her to write a book about the Nigerian-Biafran war she said:

I wrote this novel because I wanted to write about love and war, because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra...I lost both grandfathers in the Nigeria-Biafra war, [and] 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.

The novel explains the horrors of war like as, “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-gray skin and the braided hair and rolled-skin and the braided hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth” (Adichie 149). Adichie trespasses the boundary of the historical recount of events by interweaving human aspects turning on multiple microphones for each of these voices to be heard. The thematic of war opens up into the bigger theme of humanity where we see characters struggling with issues of love, class, race, profession and family, among others. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is an example of one of the many forms where “fiction can coexist with history” (Segovia). One could argue that it is a literary approach to Hayden Whites’s concept of “history as narrative”. The novel, unrestrained by the margins of truth and untruth which historians are bound to, produces a sincere version of the Nigerian Civil War which is not just a fascinating read but an expression of knowledge about human kind. The novel is described, “as a parable, then, as it works as a historical novel;... enduring and damning... about human failure, the flaws of men and the wars they demand, the addictive and corrosive influence of power and the frailty of the weak in the path of that power” (Plthomasedd). The novel truthfully depicts the historical events of the Nigerian Civil War that spanned from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. It spans the decade of the Biafran war, in which more than a million people died and provides a historical record at the same time as giving an insight into the experience of living through the bloody civil war.

2: Role of politics in Biafra war

Adichie lambasts both national and international countries for messing up the situation and adding fuel to the fire during the civil war. The social gatherings at Odenigbo’s house are mostly related to the British colonialism and the impact it has on the post-colonial Nigeria and the political future of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Odenigbo blames Britain for creating mess in country by ignoring the real identity of the tribes; to him they created Nigeria to manipulate its resources and gave no option to other tribes to have their own countries based on their own will and wish. He says while defending his stand on tribe, “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 is *white*. But I was Igbo before the white man came” (Adichie 20).

The negative politics that was played both by international and domestic countries in worsening the situation is summed up by Richard, according to him, despite many disagreements and discords between Northern and Southern tribes, they succeeded in living with harmony with each other in past. There is a clear accusation of western influence on Biafran war, particularly of Britain. So the politics played by different nations was considered the reason behind the large scale killings that took place during the civil war. The countries that had their interest in resources of the Nigeria played a deadly politics without even paying heed to human rights violations. The fact of the matter is that they assisted the Nigerian government in carrying out the massacre of Igbo people. Most of the people in the world came to know it a war between two tribes but the way international politics manipulated the strife between these two tribes shows that, they too are to be blamed for it. The role of politics in deteriorating the situation can be understood from the lines of Richard who writes about the refugee crisis and the causes behind the Civil war. His comments run opposite to those views that believe civil war was the outcome of distrust between the two major tribes. His views clearly suggest that external politics too is to be blamed for such scary situation:

The notion of the recent killings being the product of “age-old” hatred is therefore misleading. The tribes of the North and the South have long had contact, at least as far back as the ninth century, as some of the magnificent beads discovered at the historic Igbo- Ukwu site attest. No doubt these groups also fought wars and slave-raided each other, but they did not massacre in this manner” (Adichie 166).

Despite, being a British he launches a scathing attack at his own country for creating a mess in the Nigeria. British media labelled Africans as savages for creating such horrific acts when in reality; Britain is the root cause of the violence. This is exposed by their own countryman Richard who writes about the role of Britain in instigating the tribes against each other in order to manipulate them:

If this is hatred, then it is very young. It has been caused, simply, by the informal divide and rule policies of the British colonial exercise. These policies manipulated the differences between the tribes and ensured that unity

would not exist, thereby making the easy government of such a large country practicable (166-1667).

The misrepresentation of Nigeria including Africa by Euro-American media in spreading the negative and dismal opinion has been talked about. Such misrepresentation has been termed by Brenda Cooper, “the figurative arsenal of Western misrepresentations of Africa” (qtd in Rushton) such misrepresentation helped and even continues to help the outside world to meddle in the affairs of Nigeria. Outsider governments often take opportunity of such misrepresentation and manipulate the situation. Through the novel the author makes, “a powerful statement about international responsibility for the humanitarian crisis in Biafra, as well as the ways postcolonial people struggle and can reclaim their power” (Course Hero). The novel exposes the hypocrisy of Western press whose insensitiveness towards the black people and notion of whites being superior to blacks can be seen from the episode of Richard who was asked by one of the foreign journalists to report him something new in war. Despite witnessing thousands of dead bodies every day. Richard attacks such callous approach and says, “Thousands of Biafrans were dead, and this man wanted to know if there was anything new about one dead white man...the rule of western journalism: one hundred dead black people equal one dead white person” (Adichie)

Conclusion

It is not surprising that the events of the first decade of Nigeria’s independence, particularly the Nigerian- Biafra war would generate such unprecedented literary output. The event has become a popular choice among the writers to write about. Most of the postcolonial writings in Nigeria write about this event. According to Lucien Goldman’s assertion that: “ periods of crises are particularly favourable to the birth of great works of art and of literature, because of the multiplicity of problems and experiences that they bring to men and of the widening of affective and intellectual horizons that they provide” (qtd in C 82). Thus, the novel quite beautifully portrays the seminal events of Nigerian history and the role of politics in post independent Nigeria.

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