

Fact versus Fiction: A Historical Reading of Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Fiction does not develop in a vacuum, the writer may have been influenced by historical, sociological events in the past or present. The literary artist is therefore a conduit through which old things or issues (the past) are recovered or reconfigured. Many critics and researchers focus their attention on the effects of the Biafran war without paying attention to Adichie's skilful interpretation of a war she didn't witness. A great literary artist is a product of books he had read in time past. The writer being an epitome of creativity does not repeat the same document, he skilfully manipulates, re-creates, distorts and interprets these historical documents in such a way that there is a thin line between fiction and non-fiction. This is what distinguishes the creative writer from the historian. This paper therefore critically examines Chimamanda Adichie's approach to history in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It critically examines how Adichie re-created and interpreted the historical Biafran war. The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is New Historicism.

Keywords: History, Conduit, Literature, Creativity, New Historicism.

Introduction

When history is embedded in literature it gives a reader a clear picture of the past. The great literary artist who must have delved into history before attempting the task ahead must be able to paint the life of the plain people, the ordinary men and women, of the time which he writes. The writer does not do these things by just quoting figures which only gives a picture of the past, it can only be done well only if he possesses the highest kind of imagination. The creative writer brings the past before our eyes as if it were the present. It is his job to make one see the hard-faced archers of Agincourt, and the war-sworn spearmen who followed Alexander down beyond the rim of the known world.

Therefore these kinds of works can be classified as Historical fiction; A made up story that is based on a real time and place in history, so fact is mixed with fiction. Ben Okri stated that there is "a lot about the past that we can't know except by stories" (70). A story is a modest attempt by the writer to make sense of experience and the past. It represents an illumination of society's reality. It is also in this sense that we can begin to perceive literature as a national biography depicting social conditions of certain periods in our history. The artist is a conduit through which old things or issues (the past) are recovered or reconfigured.

The world that the writer has created is what we want to savour and enjoy, but we cannot deeply appreciate it unless we comprehend its relevance to the other two worlds, the writer's world and our world. Literature becomes a series of historical documents because the vital elements of inspiration are manipulated in such a manner that gives maximum effect to the reader. There is always a delicate and subtle connection between literature and history. Literature and history can never be far apart. It is in this intricate relationship between literature and life (history) that one sees Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow*

Conclusion

This study has been able to show that literatures of Arab origin also explore themes of women concerns. The two novels – Evelyne Accad's *Wounding Words* and Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* are characterised by oppression and subjugation. Most of the female characters live under the oppression and suppression of their husbands. Most of the male characters are portrayed as oppressors who deprive the female characters of value-defined lives. In *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, Kauna suffers victimhood in the hands of Shange, her abusive husband. When Shange eventually dies, Kauna refuses to mourn him because she has not recovered from the gory memory of her late husband's abusive actions. Unsuspecting persons who do not really know what she has passed through in the hands of her late husband see her actions as wicked, vindictive, and unreasonable. Hayate in *Wounding Words* assumes the responsibility of an activist going about preaching in conjunction with other like-minded women the need for women to be free from every form of oppression. Abusive patriarchy is portrayed as a dangerous societal ill which must be discarded for the freedom of women and the society, to the end that the fundamental human rights of women must be respected. The authors, therefore, have successfully exploited the instrumentality of literature to protest against as well as seek amelioration for the difficult circumstances women suffer within their societies.

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Sun. It is the happening in ones' environment that influences one to pick up a pen. No wonder it is said that "literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. (*Homecoming* xv). A lot of events may attract the attention of a writer; Even a mere documentation of history may inspire a writer. Literature may not be hinged only on imagination but history can be recreated and interpreted in literature. Factual dates can be interlaced with fictitious characters; this will even aid proper understanding of history. For E.H Carr in his book first published in 1961 with the title "*What is History*", he wrote that history consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. These facts are available to a historian in documents, inscriptions and so on. The historian collects them, takes them home, and returns them in whatever style that appeals to him. According to Carr, following Collingwood, history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his or her facts in an unending dialogue between the present and the past. What this translates to is that the essence of history is to understand the society of the past, with a view to increasing the mastery of the society of the present. History as Okonta Ike has written "may be the study of past events, but it is also very much a tool to name and shape the present" (250). The present can be understood in its comprehensiveness when serious attention is paid to the past.

Writers especially in neo-colonial societies act as historians in special ways by distilling from the experiences of the past and narrating them in the shape of stories. The history of neo-colonial society shows that colonialism undermined their development. Africans as a result of their experience try as much as possible in their narration, to address issues that affect African development and how it can be sustained for the benefit of people in Africa. Asked why he wrote, Amos Tutola (1997), one of the

pioneers of Nigerian literature written in English provided an explanation for his craft and artistry defending himself as a preservationist of his own culture "I don't want the past to die, I don't want our culture to vanish. It's not good; we are losing customs and traditions but I am still trying to bring them into memory" (410). Chinua Achebe has also provided an explanation to why he wrote *Things Fall Apart*. According to him his culture was changing rapidly after the Second World War so much so that the background material for his story was included in order that his people would have a good record of life as it once was, before it disappeared and forgotten in his most quoted and celebrated essay *The novelist as a teacher* he submits: "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past with all imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure" (45).

This accords with what Kolawole Mary as "a new way of historifying reality in African fiction"(21). To this extent this paper critically examines Chimamanda Adichie's skilful manipulation, repetition, recreation, and interpretation of History in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Fact Versus Fiction: A Historical Interpretation of Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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. This is a story about the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. It is told through the intertwining perspectives of three characters: Ugwu, a poor village boy who gets a job as a house boy for Odenigbo, a university professor, Olanna, a privileged woman from Lagos (educated in London) who leaves

her lush life behind and moves in with Odenigbo; and Richard, an English journalist (in a relationship with Olanna's twin sister, Kainene) who receives a grant to write a novel about Nigeria.

Life takes these three main characters into Nsukka, into what will become the heart of the Nigerian civil war. Adichie digs into the political conflict, caused by the attempted secession of the south eastern provinces of Nigeria (populated by the Igbo ethnic group) as the self-proclaimed republic of Biafra. The novel uses the economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tension among the various people of Nigeria and draws out the emotional and psychological consequences of the conflict to construct a multi-dimensional version of this war.

Half of a Yellow Sun swings back and forth before even the pre-war early 1960s and the conflict stricken southern region in the late 1960s. In the earlier stage, the reader can observe the intellectual community of Nsukka express their ideas throughout a string of dinner parties at Odenigbo's. After Biafra's declaration of secession, the lives of the main characters drastically changed and were torn apart by the brutality of the civil war and decisions in their personal lives.

The book jumps between events that took place during the early 1960s and late 1960s, when the war took place, and extends until the end of the war. In the early 1960s, the main characters are introduced Ugwu, a 13-year old village boy who moves in with Odenigbo, to work as his houseboy. Odenigbo frequently entertains intellectuals to discuss the political turmoil in Nigeria. Life changes for Ugwu when Odenigbo's girlfriend, Olanna, moves in with them. Ugwu forms a strong bond with both of them and is very loyal. Olanna has a twin sister, Kainene, a woman with a dry sense of humour, tired by the pompous company she runs for her father. Her lover Richard is an English man who has come to

explore Igbo-ukwu art.

Jumping four years ahead, trouble is brewing between the Hausa and the Igbo people and hundreds of people die in the massacres, including Olanna's beloved auntie and uncle. A new republic called Biafra, is created by the Igbo. As a result of the conflict, Olanna, Odenigbo, their daughter baby are forced to flee Nsukka, which is the university town and the major intellectual hub of the new nation. They finally end up in the refugee town of Umuahia, where they suffer as a result of food shortage and constant air raids and paranoid atmosphere. These are also allusion to a conflict between Olanna and Kainene, Richard and Kainene and Olanna and Odenigbo.

When novel moves back to the 1960s, we learn that Odenigbo slept with a village girl, who then had his baby. Olanna is furious at his betrayal, and sleeps with Richard in a moment of liberation. She gets back to Odenigbo and when they later learn that Amala refused to keep her new born daughter, Olanna decides they would keep her.

Back during the war Olanna, Odenigbo, Baby and Ugwu were living with Kainene and Richard where Kainene was running a refugee camp. The situation is hopeless as they have no food or medicine. Kainene decides to trade across enemy lines, but does not return, even after the end of the war a few weeks later. The book ends ambiguously, the reader not knowing if Kainene lives.

The first critical element in Adichie's novel is the *Use of date*. This is an element that is critical to a historian's text; this is a fundamental fact that gives a back bone of veracity, truth and stability to a story. A historian will link precise dates to certain events. Biafra became an independent republic on 30 May 1967, and one would assume that this date would appear in a novel that

revolves around Biafra but the master creative writer tactfully avoids the use of this. Also most of these important events are usually heard on the radio television and from characters thus:

Nkem! Master called out 'Omego! It has happened!' Olanna hurried to the living room, Ugwu close behind. Master was standing by the radio. The television was on but the volume was off so the dancing people they were swaying drunkenly. 'There's been a coup; Master said and gestured to the radio. 'Major Kaduna Nzeogwu is speaking from Kaduna' the voice on the radio was youthful, eager and confident: The constitution is suspended and the regional government and elected assemblies are hereby dissolved, my dear country men. The aim of the political council is to establish a nation free from corruption and internal strife... (156).

From the above one would gather that there is no date for this coup. Adichie creatively recreates history; this can also be seen;

He was serving Baby's porridge when the deputy president spoke briefly on the radio the voice understated, as if he were exhausted from the effort of saying, "the government is handing over to the military". There were announcements later – The prime minister was missing, Nigeria was now a federal military government, the premiers of the North and West were missing but Ugwu was not sure who spoke and on what station because master sat next to the radio, turning the knob quickly, stopping, listening, turning stopping (157).

This tells one how important the radio is for Adichie instead of dragging one into these events, she prefers to use the radio; thereby creating a thin line between fiction and non-fiction. Again information about the second coup which we all know the date thus:

Ikejide came up to him. 'Mr Richard, sah, Madam say make you come. There is another coup', Ikejide said. He looked excited. Richard hurried indoors. He was right; Madu was wrong. The moist July heat had plastered his hair limply to his head, and he ran his hand through it as he went. Kainene was on a sofa in the living room, her arms wrapped around herself, rocking back and forth. The British voice on the radio was so loud that she raised her voice when she said northern officers have taken over. The BBC says they are killing Igbo officers in Kaduna. Nigerian radio isn't saying anything (172).

Adichie intentionally avoids using precise dates for important event to make the work more fictitious. She doesn't want to be called a historian. Below is the declaration of the republic of Biafra with no date and also on the radio:

He sat on the bed with the radio placed on the bedside cabinet. The reception had little static, as if the radio waves understood the importance of the speech. Ojukwu's voice was unmistakable; It was vibrantly male, charismatic, smooth: Fellow countrymen and women, you the people of eastern Nigeria; conscious of the supreme authority of the almighty God over all mankind; of your duty over posterity; aware that you can no longer be protected in your lives and in your property by any Government based outside Nigeria... I do hereby solemnly proclaim that the territory and region known as and called Eastern Nigeria, together with her continental shelf and territorial waters, shall henceforth be an independent and sovereign state of the name and title of the republic of Biafra (200).

This event took place in history on 30th May 1967; the master crafter intentionally omits this date. She went on to deliver the information via the radio. The peak was that there was even no

date for the end of the war, January 14th 1970. It was not even mentioned. The writer only took note of the season: “the harmattan winds were calmer today, they did not make the cashew trees swirl, but they blew sand everywhere and the air was thick with grit and with rumours his Excellency had not gone in search of peace but had run away” (492). Again from the radio one gets that the war has ended:

Odenigbo quickly turned the radio on, as though he has been expecting the woman with this news. The male voice was unfamiliar: throughout history, injured people have had to resolve to arms in self-defence where peaceful negotiations fail. We are no exception... I urge General Gowon, in the name of humanity, to order his troops to pause while an armistice is negotiated (495).

This is how the reader was informed that the war had ended in the novel. It is important to note that the only markers of time the reader is given in the novel are the two major time periods in which the events take place: The early sixties and the late sixties. For Nwahunanya this demarcation of time makes sure that “the events are not made to occur in vacuo but are located in known historical time” (5). The novel starts off in the early sixties; the characters are introduced, the scene is set, and their lives intersect. Never is an exact date given, arguably because real people do not think or remember in terms of precise dates. But the attentive reader can deduce some precise date from the historical events that are mentioned. Such as “they toasted Kenya's independence” (233), Kenya became independent from Britain on 12 December 1963. Another instance is the death of Winston Churchill: “Richard was also relieved to learn of Sir Winston Churchill's death” (235). Churchill died on 24th January 1965, and again an important historical event is coupled with the character's own personal life. Richard is not relieved because Churchill has died, but because of its consequences: he does not have to face his lover Kainene yet.

Adichie made it a primary objective; to capture her character's reaction to every important event in the novel. It seems that the way in which they experience the events is of more relevance than the event itself. The event is announced on the radio and then the characters react one by one. The novel is indeed character driven story in which the emotions and the felt history are the focal points. For example after the announcement of the coup, the elites in Odenigbo's sitting room gave their views:

'This is the end of corruption! This is what we have needed to happen since that general strike' one guest said. Ugwu did not know his name, but he tended to eat up all the chin-chin right after it was served... Those majors are true heroes! Okeoma said, and raised an arm ... 'The BBC is calling it an Igbo coup' the chin-chin eating guest said. 'And they have a point. It was mostly northerners who were killed'. It was mostly northerners who were in government; Professor Ezeka whispered, his eyebrows arched, as if he could not believe he had to say what was so obvious. 'The BBC should be asking their people who put the northerners to dominate everybody!' Master said (158).

From the above discussion the reader grabs the happening in the novel, most of it are realistic. This for example is how the secession is announced:

But Odenigbo didn't need to deliver the letter because the secession was announced that evening he sat on the bed with radio placed on the bedside cabinet. The reception had little static, as if the radio waves understood the importance of the speech, Ojukwu's voice was unmistakable; it was vibrantly male, charismatic, smooth: fellow countrymen and women, you the people of Eastern Nigeria... (200).

This is Ojukwu's speech on the radio, the speech is transcribed; and then the reactions follow, each character has his or her own distinctly personal reaction to the news:

This is our beginning; Odenigbo said, that false softness had left his voice and he sounded normal again, bracing and sonorous. He took his glasses off and grabbed Baby's little hands and began to dance around in circle with her. Olanna laughed and then felt as if she were following a script, as if Odenigbo's excitement would abide nothing but more excitement. She sat up and shivered. She had wanted the secession to happen, but now it seems too big to conceive. (201)

Richard and Kainene conceived the secession this way:

The day the secession was announced, he stood with Kainene on the veranda and listened to Ojukwu's voice on the radio and afterwards took her in his arms. At first he thought they were both trembling, until he moved back to look at her face and realized that she was perfectly still. Only he was trembling. 'Happy independent' he told her 'Independence' she said before she added 'Happy independence'. He wanted to ask her to marry him. This was a new start, a new Country. It was not only because secession was just, considering all that the Igbo had endured, but because of the possibility Biafra held for him (208).

Also for Richard “the Nigerians would let Biafrans be; they would never fight a people already battered by the massacres. They would be pleased to be rid of the Igbo anyway”. Richard was certain about this”(208).

Where the novel resembles a historian's account is in the use of place and personal names. Most of the places that are

mentioned are real, and are plausible when they are considered in the historical context. The places and names mentioned in the story are places that were important in the course of events that took place during the Nigeria-Biafra war, but in the novel they are important because of the presence of the character in them.

Nsukka is a very important city in the novel, Odenigbo lives in the university campus and teaches there, Olanna joins him, Richard moves to Nsukka too. Hear Olanna tell Chief Okonji her plans to go to Nsukka “Nsukka? Is that right? You've decided to move to Nsukka? Chief Okonji asked. 'Yes I have applied for a job as instructor in the Department of sociology and I just got it', Olanna said” (46). Also Kainene tells Olanna of Richard's plan to move to Nsukka too: “Richard is going to Nsukka too. He's received the grant, and he is going to write his book there” (51). Nsukka was significant in the Biafran war because Nsukka was one of the first towns overtaken by the federal troops. For Odenigbo and Olanna it was only a matter of a week or two and the Biafran soldiers will take over but the reverse was the case. “Evacuate now! The Federals have entered Nsukka! We are evacuating now! Right now!” (219). From Ugwu's narrative point we see people trooping out of Nsukka:

Dust swirled all around, like a see-through brown blanket. The main road was crowded; women with boxes on their heads and babies tied to their backs, barefoot children carrying bundles of clothes, yam or boxes, men dragging bicycles. Ugwu wondered why they were holding lit kerosene lanterns although it was not yet dark (220).

It was also in the university campus at Nsukka that Ojukwu came and addressed the students:

They joined the cluster of lecturers standing by the statue of the lion... a few reporters scrambled after him, holding out tape recorders like offerings. Students, so many that

Richard wondered how they had congregated so quickly, began to chant 'Power! Power!'... 'I came to ask you a question', he said. His oxford accented voice was surprisingly soft... 'what shall we do? Shall we keep silent and let them force us back into Nigeria'... 'if they declare war; he said 'I want to tell you now it may become a long drawn out war. Are you prepared? Are we prepared?' 'Yes! Yes! Ojukwu, onye anyi egbe! Give Us Guns! Iwe di anyi n'obi! There is anger in our hearts!' (211).

Street names are also mentioned in the novel. The street Odenigbo and Olanna lived in is called Odim Street which is a street that exists near the university in Nsukka. In this way it would have been possible for this couple to have lived there. "They went past a sign, Odim Street, and Ugwu mouthed street, as he did whenever he saw an English word that was not too long" (13).

Adichie invented fictive places, some of the places mentioned were not real. For example she invented a train station in Nsukka, invented a beach in Port Harcourt, changed the distance between towns but Adichie never invented the major events. This train station is seen in pages 179 and 180:

"Some of our people are coming back now. The lucky ones are coming back. The railway stations are full of our people. If you have tea and bread to spare, please take it to the stations. Help a brother in need'. Master leapt up the sofa. 'Go Ugwu', he said 'take tea and bread and go to the railway station" (180).

Adichie explains how she handled the geography of Nigeria in her novel: "I invented a train station in Nsukka, invented a beach in Port Harcourt changed the distance between towns... but I did not invent any of the major events". Adichie treats the geographic reality differently than a historian would; this enables her to frame

the character's experiences in the real world while maintaining her freedom as a literary author to use the surroundings for the development of her characters. Abba is another real town mentioned in the novel. It is Odenigbo's home town. After the fall of Nsukka they all moved to Abba: "When they finally arrived at Abba, it was dusk, the wind screen was coated in ochre dust and Baby was asleep" (221). The next town was Umuahia and finally to Orlu. Port Harcourt was an important city and its fall was very significant in the war. The loss of Port Harcourt meant the loss of oil and sea ports. It is significant in the story because Richard and Kainene lived there. The worst happened to Kainene when Port Harcourt fell. There was shelling she had to pack all things to the car but when the shelling was getting closer they ran out of the house to the orchard but unfortunately for Ikejide he kept running instead of taking cover. His head was ripped off his neck and his lifeless body was still running: "Ikejide's head was gone. The body was running arched slightly forward, arms flying around but there was no head. There was only a bodied neck. Kainene screamed. The body washed down near her long American car" (386). Kainene couldn't bear this gory sight, she cried all night when she got to Orlu. Like history always has it that people of the south-south were saboteurs during the war chimamanda was able to reflect this:

Richard said again 'Port Harcourt is safe, isn't it?' There was a pause on Madu's end. 'Some saboteurs have been arrested and all of them are non-Igbo minorities. I don't know why this people insist on aiding the enemy, we will overcome. Is Kainene there? Richard handed Kainene the phone. The sacrilege of it, that some people could betray Biafra. He remembered the Ijaw and the Efik men he saw spoken to at a bank in Owerri, who said the Igbo would dominate them when Biafra was established (383).

Other real places that were mentioned include Lagos, Orlu, Owerri etc. The names of important historical figures are maintained in the narrative, Gown and Ojukwu are frequently mentioned, Churchill, Tafawa Belewa, Harold Wilson, who was the British prime minister at the time. Ojukwu and Gowon's voice are always heard on the radio, except when Ojukwu came to the university campus:

'I came to ask you a question,' he said. His Oxford-accented voice was surprisingly soft; it did not have the timbre that it did over the radio and it was a little theatrical, a little too measured. 'What shall we do?' Shall we keep silence and let them force us back into Nigeria? Shall we ignore the thousands of our brothers and sisters killed in the North? (211).

According to White, the historian and the fiction writer come together when the historian must transform his study into a written form. The historian has to “employ the same strategies of linguistic figuration used by imaginative writers to endow. Their discourse with the kind of latent, secondary, or connotative meanings that will require their works not only received as message but read as symbolic structures” (8). This is an idea which he derives from Roland Barthes. This latent meaning is “It's interpretation of the event that makes up its manifest content” (8). This interpretation is what separates the historical discourse from a list of chronological ordered events, and what approximates it to a narrative fiction. This also refers to what White calls 'emplotment' the events are integrated into a plot structure. This relates back to the way in which the personal events punctuate and parallel the political ones in the novel. Adichie uses the personal to make the political felt. Olanna and Odenigbo's wedding, for example is also the moment of the first bombing of the town of Umuahia:

Ugwu heard the sound just before they cut their cake in the living room, the swift wah-wah-wah roar in the sky. At first it was thunderous and then it receded for a moment and came back again louder and swifter. From somewhere close by, chickens began to squawk wildly. Somebody said, 'enemy plane! Air raid! 'outside!' master shouted, but some guests were running into the bedroom, screaming, 'Jesus! Jesus!' The sound were louder now, overheard, they ran ...they spurted hundreds of scattered bullets before dark balls rolled out from underneath, as if the planes were laying large eggs. The first explosion was so loud that Ugwu's ear popped and his body shivered alongside the vibrating ground. A woman from the opposite house tugged at Olanna's dress. 'Remove it! Remove that white dress! They will see it and target us!' (248).

Just as she seemed to let the emotional response to the announcement of the secession take preference over the event itself, here the running of the wedding is more important to the characters than the occurrence of the bombing. These two events will always be remembered together by them, just because the bombing occurred at a moment of pivotal importance in their lives. By combining the personal and the political or historical in this way, Adichie makes the political developments of the characters felt personal history.

Conclusion

Conclusively, one must recognize that *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a historical novel. As Chinyere Nwahunanya points out “The historical novel combines the technique of the historian (documentation) and that of the novelist (imaginative recreation of events) in the fictional evocation of the past” (2). In the novel there is careful attention to fiction writing as an art. This can be recognised in the way in which the plot is built up, the way in

which the dialogue is constructed, and how each character is drawn with careful attention to each detail. Adichie documents the Nigerian Biafran war, but the story revolves around how this particular time in history was experienced by the characters. Adichie uses the different characters to demonstrate that there are as many versions of reality as there are people to interpret it; she uses her novel to show these different dimensions of one and the same period in time. Further, Adichie combines history and literature to keep the past in the present, to keep it alive, and also to make the historical and political history felt.

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