



ETHNIC CONFLICTS AND THE BIAFRAN WAR: A CASE STUDY OF
CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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ABSTRACT



Article information

Received: 22/4/2021
Accepted: 30/5/2021
Published online: 05/06/2021
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.2.168](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.2.168)

Located on the west coast of Africa, Nigeria was colonized by the Britishers until it gained independence in 1960. One of Nigeria's often overlooked features is its diversity in terms of geographical features, ethnic tribes, and languages. It is an anthropological fact that where there are differences, there are conflicts, whether it be the repeated riots in India, linguistic conflict in Quebec and Sri Lanka, the examples are endless. The colonial powers completely ignored the religious, linguistic, ethnic differences existing in the various parts of Nigeria. The Igbos were fed up with endless discrimination, demeaning remarks, ruthless rapes, and murders. And in a place as diverse as Nigeria, conflict was long overdue. Trouble started brewing as soon as Nigeria gained independence. In the hopes of getting a share of the Nigerian oil and petroleum deposits, the European countries actively participated in the war.

The present paper deals with the gruesome Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) as depicted in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Orange Prize for Fiction-winning novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It details the events that lead to the war, the horrors of the long-lasting war, its ramifications, and also highlights the need to maintain unity and harmony in the face of conflict created by mutual differences among the various sections of the society.

Keywords: Colonialism, Biafran War, Nigerian Independence

Circumstances Leading up to the War

As mentioned above, ethnicity forms a major part of an individual's identity, especially in Nigeria, which has a range of ethnic groups. The North was populated by the Hausa, who were predominantly Muslims, and were controlled by feudal governments. The Yoruba lived in the west. The east was dominated by the much-despised Igbos. The Igbos were educated and more open to the modern way of life. The feeling of belongingness to a tribe is extremely profound, so much so that the people from other tribes are perceived as foreigners and are often alienated. Even the characters are Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba first, and only then they may identify as Nigerians, if at all. "The only authentic identity for the African is the tribe," Master said. "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 his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came" (Adichie 32). It seems that the main reason why Ugwu despises Miss Adebayo is that she is Yoruba. When the characters meet anyone from a different tribe, the first thing they consider is the tribe the next person belongs to. When Olanna meets Uncle Mbaezi's friend Abdulmalik, the first thing she thinks about is the fact that he belongs to the Hausa tribe. The language a person knows and how well they can speak that particular language is a strong indicator of their belongingness to a particular area or tribe. Olanna wishes that "she were fluent in Hausa and Yoruba, like her uncle and aunt and cousin were, something she would gladly exchange her French and Latin for" (Adichie 52).

But this cultural diversity doesn't always mean unity. "In fact, through all the years of the pre-colonial period Nigeria never was united, and during the sixty years of colonialism and the sixty-three months of the First Republic only a thin veneer hid the basic disunity" (Forsythe, *The Biafra Story* 19). If there is one thing that all tribes proudly share is resentment for the Igbos. Achebe discusses this 'Igbo problem' at length (*The Trouble with Nigeria* 76). This is exactly what caused the Biafran war after Nigeria gained independence from British rule in 1960. The Igbos, who were often marginalized, decided to stand up for themselves and created their own republic named Biafra under the leadership of Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.

'Modern Nigerian history has been marked by sporadic eruptions of anti-Igbo feeling of more or less serious import; but it was not until 1966-7 when it swept through Northern Nigeria like "a flood of deadly hate" that the Igbo first questioned the concept of Nigeria which they had embraced with much greater fervour than the Yoruba or the Hausa/Fulani" (Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* 76-77). To this day, Igbos struggle with an identity crisis. The increasing anti-Igbo sentiments added fuel to the fire, and the European powers supported both sides in the hopes of gaining access to and controlling the natural resources of Nigeria. This turned the war from an ethnically inspired conflict" into an international commercial war..." (Gould 19). Britain supported the Nigerian government and France provided assistance to the self-proclaimed republic of Biafra. The war meant different things for different people. "The seceded state of Biafra regarded the war as a war of survival in order to gain permanent sovereignty, whereas the rest of Nigeria was solely intent on getting the renegade state to return to the federation..." (Gould 27-28)

Adichie revealed her personal connection with the Biafran war, in an interview (*The Story Behind the Book*). Both of the author's grandfathers, who were refugees, died in the Biafran war in an attempt to leave their hometown that was invaded by the federal army. She spent her childhood listening to the anecdotes of the Nigerian civil war and witnessed the pain their family had to go through even after the war was over. Ever since she was a teenager, she has been writing literary pieces expressing her views on war, including *For Love of Biafra*, *That Harmattan Morning*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Ghosts*. In *The Half of a Yellow Sun*, she depicts the far-reaching impact of violence on the lives of individuals. In the words of Adichie; "I wanted this to be a book about human beings, not a book about faceless political events" (*The Story Behind the Book*).

Half of a Yellow Sun discusses the circumstances before the war and the war itself at length. Narrated by a poor houseboy Ugwu, the novel follows the main character Odenigbo, a university professor, and Ugwu's master, his wife Olanna, who is also a university professor. The other prominent characters are Olanna's sister Kainene and her white boyfriend, Richard. In a sense, the novel can be considered a bildungsroman, as it traces Ugwu's transformation from a naive houseboy to a self-loathing veteran who is haunted by his sinful past. The character of Ugwu is based on a houseboy from Adichie's house. "Adichie's return to the ordinary, through the narrative voice and vision of Ugwu is a unique perspective of historiography and memory in relation to the Biafran war" (Ouma 17). The novel is set in the early and late 60s. "These periods are juxtaposed through a meta-fictional narrative structure in an attempt by Adichie to portray the evolving and competing realities of daily life in the context of war" (Ouma 16).

The novel is a harrowing account of wartime and the large-scale destruction it caused. "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" (Ojinmah 2). Adichie's main goal was to remind people of the

ramifications of war and conflict. "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" (Ojinmah 2). Achebe sums up the importance of remembering and learning from your past; "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 I believe that Nigeria, always prone to self-deception, stands in great need of reminders" (Morning yet on Creation Day xii) "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" (Ojinmah 4). The war changed people. It didn't just take away their loved ones, their belongings, their livelihood; it took away their hope, their empathy. And replaced it with hopelessness, anger, and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). The survivors of war and bloodshed, just like Olanna, flinched at the slightest sound, even the sound of a door shutting or rustling of leaves made them run for shelter, being under the impression that the enemy planes were coming.

The war made people do the very things they condemned. Ugwu was enraged when he heard that Eberечи was forced by an army officer to offer sexual favors in exchange for help. Later on, he rapes a helpless bartender. Priests, who are often entrusted with the task of leading people away from sins, rape powerless, starving young girls in exchange for the food donated by the benevolent. It's our responsibility that we don't become monsters forced by dire circumstances. As Kainene aptly puts it "We are all in this war, and it is up to us to decide to become somebody else or not"(Adichie 399). Apart from the depiction of war, the novel also deals with the "human brutality and bestiality; betrayal of love, trust, friendship and country; and child soldiering, amongst others" (Ojinmah 4).

Ethnic Conflict

The fact that each ethnic group was ready to do the same thing to the other calls attention to the shocking fact that a violent side is present in all of us. Olanna's statement sums it up; "...we are all capable of doing the same things to one another, really" (Adichie 189). Intolerance of other tribes was at peak; "A man was hanging out of the door, a loudspeaker pressed to his mouth, his slow Hausa words resonating. "The Igbo must go. The infidels must go. The Igbo must go" (Adichie 159). Mob frenzy and ethnic discrimination are aptly depicted in the novel. Abdulmalik, a close friend of Uncle Mbaezi's and a misguided Hausa, murders Uncle Mbaezi and his entire family, burns their house with his accomplices. The victimizers justify it with religion, "We finished the whole family. It was Allah's will!" (Adichie 160). Even the soldiers, instead of attempting to establish peace and harmony, were misusing their power by looking for and publicly shooting innocent Igbos such as Nnaemeka. The narrow-mindedness and dogmatic views of the people are reflected in Olanna's encounter with a man on the plan, who, under the impression that she was a Fulani, badmouths Igbos; "Why should an Igbo man be the vice-chancellor in Lagos?. . . The problem with Igbo people is that they want to control everything in this country. Everything. Why can't they stay in their East? They own all the shops; they control the civil service, even the police" (Adichie 238). The minute the man comes to know that she is an Igbo, he completely ignores her and is reluctant to take back his newspaper from her. The stereotypical anti-Igbo sentiment was common not only among Nigerians but even among foreigners, this is evident from Susan's statement, "There are lots and lots of Igbo people here—well, they are everywhere really, aren't they? Not that they didn't have it coming to them, when you think about it, with their being so clannish and uppity and controlling the markets. Very Jewish, really. And to think they are relatively uncivilized..." (Adichie 166)

The novel also discusses the violent riots and coups and narrates the blood-curdling tales of the events that led up to the war. After Nigeria's independence from British rule, there was a lot of unrest among citizens. With each tribe struggling to gain power, they turned on each other. The war was preceded by bloody riots and coups. Every tribe appears to be full of hatred for the other one. The anti-Igbo sentiment raging through Africa is evident from the incident in Lagos. On a trip to Lagos, a Yoruba town, Olanna and Arize witnessed horrible cruelty on Igbos. The Igbos are being identified and beaten. Arize and Olanna escape unharmed by speaking Yoruba. "Another man in a safari suit was being slapped on the back of the head. "You are Igbo man! Don't deny it! Simply identify yourself!" (Adichie 231) Later on, Arize, who was pregnant, dies in an anti-Igbo revolt. The

second coup was even more horrifying, people were mercilessly massacred. Madu's friend is brutally tortured and murdered. "Northern soldiers put him in a cell in the barracks and fed him his own shit. He ate his own shit....Then they beat him senseless and tied him to an iron cross and threw him back in his cell. He died tied to an iron cross. He died on a cross" (Adichie 150). The war created the need to evacuate suddenly, and often under the threat of nearing enemy troops and planes. More often than not, the residents couldn't take anything more than a handful of belongings. This mass evacuation resulted in widespread chaos, as Achebe states; "The Nigeria-Biafra conflict created a humanitarian emergency of epic proportions. Millions of civilians—grandparents, mothers, fathers, children, and soldiers alike—flooded the main highway arteries between towns and villages fleeing the chaos and conflict" (There was a Country 289).

Biafran Determination and Patriotism

Hearing about his mother's death, Odenigbo, aptly sums up the Biafran war, its motto, and the miseries caused by it; "Certainly one must expect casualties. Death is the price of our liberty" (Adichie 313). The residents of Biafra were struggling to get things back to normal, just like Olanna and Odenigbo, holding down newly assigned jobs, exchanging Nigerian currency for the Biafran one, sending their children to schools, bearing every raid patiently, trembling in fear hiding in bunkers, and despite all the hardships, singing in the hopes of a better future;

"Biafra win the war.

Armoured car, shelling machine,

Fighter and bomber,

Ha enweghi ike imeri Biafra!" (Adichie 288-289)

Nothing mattered. Not even "the varying numbers of the dead: three thousand, ten thousand, fifty thousand. What mattered was that the massacres frightened and united the Igbo. What mattered was that the massacres made fervent Biafrans of former Nigerians" (Adichie 217). The recognition of Biafra by Tanzania was a ray of hope in the dark tunnel of civil war, death, and starvation. Biafrans lacked resources and support from foreign nations, but the one thing they had in abundance was passion and a profound desire for freedom and sovereignty. As Madu puts it; "I was told that Biafrans fought like heroes, but now I know that heroes fight like Biafrans! (Adichie 327). The Biafrans were just trying to belong and fit in somewhere without being alienated. Perhaps that's why they were willing to give up everything. "Nobody talked about the things left behind. Instead, they talked about the win-the-war effort. A teacher had donated his bicycle to the soldiers, cobblers were making soldiers' boots for free, and farmers were giving away yams" (Adichie 197). The half of a yellow sun on the Biafran flag symbolizes the glorious future of Biafra. "Red was the blood of the siblings massacred in the North, black was for mourning them, green was for the prosperity Biafra would have, and, finally, the half of a yellow sun stood for the glorious future" (Adichie 294). Non-Igbo minorities were betraying Biafra by joining hands with Nigeria because they feared that the Igbos would torture them if Biafra was established. Richard attempts to convince them otherwise by saying; "that a country born from the ashes of injustice would limit its practice of injustice. When they looked at him doubtfully, he mentioned the army general who was Efik, the director who was Ijaw, the minority soldiers who were fighting so brilliantly for the cause" (Adichie 327). But they were still not convinced. The Biafrans might have succeeded, if only everyone, Igbo or non-Igbo, felt the way Kainene felt; "We are all Biafrans! Anyincha bu Biafra!" (Adichie 332)

The description of the depleting condition of the refugee camps is heart-breaking. People, who made it to the refugee camps despite all the hardships, long journeys, and bombings, were severely ill. They were crammed into unhygienic, suffocating camps; there was not even potable water or food, let alone medical attention. A refugee woman died lying "facedown on the floor, with a thin baby clutching her back" (Adichie 361) and her baby was handed over to "another woman, a relative of the dead woman's whose bony body was quivering; because her eyes were dry, it took Olanna a moment to realize that she was crying" (Adichie 362). In a situation where the living didn't matter at all, there was no one to tend to the dead. In the refugee camp, "the

thick, ugly odours of unwashed bodies and rotting flesh from the shallow graves behind the buildings grew stronger. Flies flew over the sores on children's bodies. Bedbugs and kwalikwata crawled; women would untie their wrappers to reveal an ugly rash of reddened bites around their waists, like hives steeped in blood" (Adichie 401).

The novel also portrays the meaninglessness of endless bloodshed caused by war. The account of Ikejide's death in front of Richard, Kainene, and Harrison as he was trying to run away from an enemy air raid is harrowing:

Then came the cold whistle of a mortar in the air and the crash as it landed and the boom as it exploded... A piece of shrapnel, the size of a fist, wheezed past. Ikejide was still running and, in the moment that Richard glanced away and back, Ikejide's head was gone. The body was running, arched slightly forwards, arms flying around, but there was no head. There was only a bloodied neck. The body crashed down near her long American car...(Adichie 329)

Even a joyful and memorable event such as a wedding was ruined by air raids. A day which is supposed to be the best day of a person's life was spent lying down on the ground, tearing off the wedding dress to avoid being spotted by the bombing planes; "Okeoma yanked off his uniform shirt, buttons flying off, and wrapped it around Olanna"(Adichie 352). A woman who was just going about her day was bombed and died in an instant. The silence was penetrated by the heart-rending cries of a baby buried under the rubble.

War is truly the degeneration of a nation, as it brings out the worst in people. Innocent children were coerced into doing taxing manual labor; they were; forced into a truck by soldiers and returned at night with their palms chafed and bleeding from grinding cassava" (Adichie 276). Regardless of their age, every male child, teenager, and adult was conscripted and forced to serve in the war, without proper training or weapons. Anyone who tried to run away was beaten up or worse; shot. An elderly man, who was being forced to join the army, aptly states; "If it has come to this, that you are conscripting somebody my age, then Biafra has died" (Adichie 621). The teenage boy who was conscripted along with Ugwu "was sobbing. .. Ugwu felt sorry for him and yet angry, too, because the teenager's crying made the hopelessness of their situation stark and final. They really had been conscripted. They really would be sent to the war front with no training" (Adichie 369-370). Ugwu's statement sums up the plight of everyone forced into a war; "Everything was moving so fast. He was not living his life; life was living him" (Adichie 377). Inexperienced and overworked soldiers, such as High-Tech, turn towards drinking and raping helpless women in an attempt to overcome the pain and frustration. The soldiers didn't have armor, arms, or even adequate food, but the one thing they had in abundance was passion and courage. Adichie describes them as; "The skinny soldiers—with no boots, no uniforms, no half of a yellow sun on their sleeves...The wraps of garri he stood in a queue to receive, the thin soup scooped from a metal basin once a day, left him (Ugwu) hungry" (Adichie 372). On the other hand, the Nigerian forces were comparatively well stocked and had plenty of resources. To sum up, Biafra wasn't prepared for a war at all. The war had a long-lasting impact on the psyche of impressionable young children who grew up in the shadow of the war. Children got used to the war and started including it in their games as well. They pretended to shoot each other and hid, taking cover from imaginary bombing planes.

Wide-spread Starvation: International Recognition and Relief Measures for Biafra

The world was filled with heart-rending pictures of pot-bellied children, reduced to bones, too weak to even stand up, dying like houseflies, buried in mass graves. People were and still are moved to tears as; "They just had not seen anything like it before... The images shocked, horrified, and angered. There were demonstrations; politicians were hounded; donations collected; relief aid flooded in. The world looked, gagged, and tried to help" (Forsyth 16-17). "The Biafran war dramatically enhanced humanitarian concern for Africa and generated liberal hostility to neocolonial interventions that brought about mass starvation. American President Lyndon Johnson deliberately provoked an immediate response to Biafra." (Birmingham 25). Times were so desperate, that people were watching the goats to "To see what they are eating, and after seeing they are boiling the same leaves and giving their children to drink. It is stopping kwashiorkor" (Adichie 316). Kwashiorkor became quite common, Forsyth explains it as; "The land called Eastern Nigeria was rich and prosperous. It grew food and

exported much. But due to its intensive population in a small landmass it had to import protein: fish, meat, eggs, milk. It was the Nigerian blockade that caused the slaughter. Children need protein every day" (The Biafran War 16).

Nigeria used the pictures of starving kids to point out what was wrong with Biafra, and why it would never work. "Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war. Starvation broke Biafra and brought Biafra fame and made Biafra last as long as it did. Starvation made the people of the world take notice and sparked protests and demonstrations in London and Moscow and Czechoslovakia" (Adichie 248). Adanna died of Kwashiorkor, due to the lack of protein-rich food or protein supplements. Parents such as Adanna's were helpless, feeding their children neem leaves and any doing remedy they could think of. "Ojukwu made good use of pictorial press releases to convince the world of his cause. He was able to persuade most countries in the West that they should support Biafra, at least with humanitarian aid, if not recognition" (Gould 35). The condition at refugee camps was even worse; children "were naked; the taut globes that were their bellies would not fit in a shirt anyway. Their buttocks and chests were collapsed into folds of rumpled skin. On their head, spurts of reddish hair" (361).

In wartime, the situation was so bad that even the essentials seemed like a luxury. "Olanna went inside to count the cans of dried milk, tea, biscuits, Ovaltine, sardines, the cartons of sugar, the bags of salt—and she could not help the gasp when she saw the toilet tissue" (Adichie 346). Even a basic thing such as salt in our food, which most take for granted, was no less than a treasure. "Alice was clutching the bag of salt to her chest. Her eyes were darkly shadowed, traces of green veins crawled just underneath her pale skin, and Olanna wondered if she was sick." (Adichie 347). Clean water was extremely hard to find; Adichie depicts this in the novel; "Another woman with a baby tied to her back was washing peeled cassava tubers in a pan of filthy water. ... Ugwu nearly choked when he came close and realized that the rotten smell came from her water: it had previously been used to soak cassava, perhaps for days, and was being reused. The smell was awful, nose-filling, the smell of a dirty toilet ..." (Adichie 302)

One of the most troubling parts of the war was the indifference of most of the foreigners. Unlike Richard, most of the foreign reporters were busy criticizing the indigenous people and feasting on the government budget. This is evident from the statement of one of the foreign reporters; "People are dying in Sudan and Palestine and Vietnam. People are dying everywhere" (386). The privileged American reporters had the audacity to judge and criticize starving poor Biafran children who were roasting a rat; "Oh, my God.... Niggers are never choosy about what they eat,... "they are eating everything," the plump one said, shaking his head. "Every fucking green leaf has become a vegetable" (382-383). The biased American reporters were more concerned with the death of one white Italian worker who was shot by Biafrans than the thousands of Biafrans who were dying. Although the murder of the Italian worker had already been covered in a report, they wanted to write a longer piece. The bitter truth is that nothing matters in war, everyone is inconsequential, people are just mere numbers participating willingly or unwillingly in war, dying like houseflies. Olanna realized; "If she had died, if Odenigbo and Baby and Ugwu had died, the bunker would still smell like a freshly tilled farm and the sun would still rise, and the crickets would still hop around. The war would continue without them" (Adichie 293).

The novel also deals with the widespread anarchy caused by the war. The powerful were exploiting the powerless. The soldiers were harassing the civilians. Ugwu's platoon forcefully hijacked a family's car that was going to look for their son. But the violence didn't stop there. After overtaking Biafra, the Nigerian soldiers kept harassing innocent people, beating men, forcing them to do manual labor, searching houses for Biafran currency, and, torturing intellectuals; "Ugwu had heard that the Nigerian soldiers had promised to kill five per cent of Nsukka academics, and nobody had heard of Professor Ezeka since he was arrested in Enugu, but it was suddenly real to him, seeing the professor next door dragged off" (Adichie 432). The commander exploited soldiers. The soldiers were starving and were excited at the thought of getting a good meal when a civilian donated a goat. As soon as they roasted it, the commander ordered all the meat to be brought to his quarters along with two women from the local village. In a crucial war situation, the commander; "spent long minutes checking through the basin to make sure the goat was complete: the legs, the head, the balls" (378).

The Aftermath of the Biafran War

Apart from causing long-lasting political stability in Nigeria, this “war was widely regarded as a watershed in the postcolonial global order” (Herteen and Moses, 169). Despite their high morale, the Igbos couldn't maintain Biafra in the dire lack of food and basic amenities, thousands of migrant workers starved to death, pictures of malnourished and fatally sick children began to float around the newspapers of the world, gaining sympathy from the four corners of the globe.

Finally, the Nigerian federal government overtook Biafra, but the demand for a separate nation for the Igbos continues to this day. Even though a lot of people might consider this significant historical event outdated and the demand for Biafra a lost cause, it's very much alive, so much so that many people are still fighting for an independent Igbo land. Adichie attempts to explain this continuing demand and protest for the revival of Biafra as; "I think this is because they give a voice to many issues that have been officially swept aside by the country but which continue to resonate for many Igbo people" (The Story Behind the Book). To deal with the turbulence in Nigeria, we should learn from our past mistakes. The need of the hour is to avoid parochial mentality and the elements that cause war, namely; “ethnicity, tribalism, religious bigotry and economic imperialism” (Ojinmah 2). As Adichie concludes her novel, advocating remembrance of the past; "May we always remember" (445). We cannot let the death of more than one million people go in vain. However, if the ongoing turbulence in the Niger Delta is indicative of anything, it is that Nigeria has still not learned from her past mistakes on how to accommodate and make her disparate ethnic nationalities coexist” (Ojinmah 2).

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