

History and Truth: Revisiting the Past in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Veronica Yumnam & Sangeeta Laishram

Abstract

History refers to the things that happened in the past. But history is also a text that is constructed by the writer of it. It is often written from the welfare of the author's perspective and is seen as biased by other people who are against the author's idea. *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is such a novel where we can see the reconstruction of history to bring out the hidden meanings behind the so-called history of the Biafran War. The real events and horrors of the war had been left unheard and untold in the mainstream media and documents. Adichie speculates the causes and the consequences of the war through the creation of her varied characters. The novel provides its readers with plurality of voices and perceptions. The paper will therefore examine the different narratives of different characters to highlight the multiplicity of voices in the novel. The paper will further analyse the issue of authorship regarding the history of Nigeria. Nigerian histories have often been written from western viewpoints and have been misleading in many ways. By changing the mainstream mode of writing history Adichie manages to capture the attention of its readers in knowing the reality of the events.

Keywords: Authorship; Biafran War; History; Truth.

The word 'history' generally refers to the study of the past. The problem with history is that nobody knows how much of it is accurate and how much of it can be believed. History is not fixed but rather fluid and this means that history is also created by the writer of it. This takes us to the work, *What is History?* by E.H. Carr where he describes the relationship between the historian to the facts of history as caught "between the Scylla of an untenable theory of history as an objective compilation of facts...

and the Charybdis of an equally untenable theory of history as the subjective product of the mind of the historian." (Carr 29) Therefore, Carr sees history as a result of the interaction between the historian and his facts. This comes to the fact that history can be totally biased according to the historian. The coming of the New Historicism, which was a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980s, challenges many approaches to perceiving a text. According to the New Historicists, a literary work should be considered a product of the time, place, and historical circumstances of its composition rather than as an isolated work of art or text. The proper way to understand a literary text is through the culture and society that produced it.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* shows that the orient is an invention by Europe. Orient is a representation, a construct where the West represents the East. By controlling the history of the colonised, the colonisers display their history as socially, culturally, and politically superior. The west needs the east to show its superiority. This leads to the idea that reality can be constructed and there is a sense of power in creating knowledge. Thus, the truth can be distorted by the powerful. The French philosopher Michel Foucault describes the relationship between truth and power as: "Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and go to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth." (Foucault 113) He further explains that:

"...truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits,...Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regimes of truth, its 'general polities' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true." (131)

Therefore, the past of the colonised has been constructed as barbaric or tyrannical; and instead consisted of uncivilised people with an unorganised society devoid of religion or culture of their own. This is not really knowledge but just a discourse. The fact that knowledge production is done through books, epistemological ways of thinking, anthropology, painting, travelogues, and literature are used to produce the orient. Hence, history becomes the problematic truth, and it becomes necessary for history to be re-written or re-visited.

European imperialism came to Africa in 1880. Major European powers

like England, France, and Portugal began to slowly establish their colony in Africa. The legitimization of colonialism was defined on the grounds of racial superiority and thus finding its validity in the notion of the 'white man's burden'. Religion was used to capture the souls of the people and rifles to capture the land. Thus, the Africans started losing their culture and traditions and started following the ways of the missionaries. But later, people came to realise that they also had a history of their own and started to retaliate. Various colonised regions of Africa began obtaining their independence by the second half of the twentieth century. But this doesn't mean that the people there have gained their full freedom. Colonialism had left immeasurable damage to the people that their psyches were affected to the point that it was almost irreparable. It led to losing their self-identity and even resulted in hating themselves.

Even though the land had gained its independence, the minds of the people were still yet to be freed. They were still under the influence of imperialism. The psychological impact of colonialism was too strong that some were not able to let go of the imperial hegemony and continue to follow in their footsteps. Therefore, it becomes necessary to let the people aware of such misfortunes befalling in their society. In earlier decades, before the coming of the colonisers, the Africans also had a culture of their own. The most significant was the culture of oral tradition where stories were being narrated by a person and the whole community would listen to them. The narrator of the story acted as an educator as well as an entertainer for the audience. Storytelling, for the African society, becomes something more than just telling stories but rather a medium to teach people about its culture and traditions such as to preserve their histories and origins. And so in the contemporary world, writers become someone who can educate their people through their stories. In "The Novelist as Teacher", Chinua Achebe highlights the role of a writer in African society. According to him, the social function of a writer is to teach his people about their past. He states: "I would be happy if my novels, (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf delivered them." (Achebe 45) All African writers have a great social responsibility for validating their lost culture and trying to regain their lost pride which they had lost during the colonization.

The retelling of a story is usually done to challenge a canonical text by trying to give an alternative story to bring out the gaps and blanks in the original story. Similarly, the retelling of histories creates a sense of plural-

ity to the history since there can be adjustments and addition of things or events that were missing in the original text. Since there cannot be only one interpretation of history, many writers started rewriting the past to show how truth needs many contradictory voices. Likewise, in the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Adichie uses multiple voices while narrating the history of the Biafran War to prove that there cannot be only one story of the war and that many contradictory voices are necessary to be considered. She endeavors to bring out the hurt and damaged psyche that the war had brought to thousands of lives and which had been remained unexplored.

The Biafran War was a civil war fought between the government of Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra, a secessionist state which had declared its independence from Nigeria in 1967. For most Nigerians, the war is generally regarded as a hapless period that was better left to be forgotten, but for the Igbo people who fought for secession, it remains a life-defining event. Biafra represented the nationalist aspirations of the Igbo ethnic group, whose leadership felt they could no longer coexist with the federal government dominated by the Muslim Hausa-Fulanis of Northern Nigeria. The war left many people homeless and stricken with poverty, killing millions of Nigerians. What the world knows about Biafra and the war was limited as it was confined to the BBC news, Radio Kaduna, reports by western journalists, and disturbing photographs of starvation that became synonymous with the war. But it remains an unforgettable episode for those who witnessed it before their own eyes and remains the same in the contemporary world for those who lost their forefathers in the war. Adichie also lost her grandparents in the war and her parents had experienced it while they were young, which prompted her to write about the horrors someday.

The then ruling power of Nigeria in 1914, i.e. the British colonials, separated the territory of Nigeria into the areas of north, east, and west. The major groups like Igbo were in the southeast, the Hausa-Fulani were in the north, and the Yoruba were in the southwest while the other smaller ethnic groups were being ignored. These divided areas did not have any common centers and the British's action of merging led to these areas having a difference in their interests as well as leading to competing with one another. The colonials brought in Western education and this was not encouraged by the people in the North, while it was being developed in the South. The regions populated by the Igbo and other Easterners were less fertile as compared to the other regions and also with the increase in population, they decided to migrate to the northern part of the country.

Therefore, this led to differences in opinion and a lack of unity among the different ethnic groups and further led to the first military coup in 1966. From June to October 1966, riots that happened in the north of Nigeria targeted the Igbos and led to the death and displacement of many people. This led to Chukwuemeka Ojukwu declaring the independence of the Republic of Biafra in May 1967. This new republic was not accepted by the government and thus began the civil war in July 1967 which lasted up to January 1970. In May 1968, Nigeria captured the oil-rich area of Port Harcourt, and also with the support of many other countries, Biafra's connection with the other parts of the world was blocked leading to a shortage of many necessary supplies which even cause the death of millions of people from starvation. Lost in hope and also realizing their failure, Ojukwu fled from the war leaving Biafra to surrender to the government in the year 1970. This war becomes the subject of Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* where the title suggests the symbol of the Republic of Biafra which appears on the national flag and also in the uniforms worn by the Biafran soldiers.

Often in Nigerian books and histories, the period between 1967-1970 is referred to as the Nigerian Civil War or the Biafran War. But it was more than that for those whose families lived through it as Ilo referred to it as genocide. Chizaram Ilo, in his article, "Remembering my father's Biafra: The politics of erasing history" presents the gruesome history of Biafra through his father's story. He described how bodies with sunken eyes, blistered skin, and some with even missing limbs were thrown in the streets of Enugu. People took cover from bombs, shelling, *bazookas*, and other weapons. Most of the boys volunteered to join the Biafra army. Families were made to watch in horror as their women were being passed around in military camps in the towns, in open markets, on the street, or in their own homes.

After the end of the war, the stories, and horrors were erased by the Nigerian government. In school books, only the celebration of Nigeria's unity with its national heroes who fought in the war was mentioned, but the exact details of what happened in Biafra were nowhere to be seen or heard. Therefore, many people including the new generation of Nigerians are unaware of this incident and this is what Ilo had mentioned: "The result is a new generation of Nigerians who are either unaware of the country's true past or have normalised it as a small price to pay to maintain the nation's unity." (Ilo 10) It becomes necessary to confront the past in order to let others as well as the Nigerians themselves know in detail about their history and past. Therefore, to make its people aware and for some to re-

member their past, Adichie, in her novel, revisits the horrors of the war – the gruesome killings, the starvation, poverty, and so on. This revisiting of the past would make the Biafran history meaningful instead of forgetting it easily as a mere fight for the unity of the nation.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the third-person narrator narrates the history through the lives of the fictional characters who manage to witness the horrors of the war. It focuses on the lives of five characters: Olanna, a young Igbo woman who is just back from the UK; Odenigbo, a professor working at the University of Nsukka and is in a relationship with Olanna; Richard, a British writer who is interested in Nigerian culture and has come to the nation to write a book about its ancient art is in a relationship with Kainene; Kainene is Olanna's twin sister and lastly is the character of Ugwu, who is a houseboy for Odenigbo's family. The novel is divided into four parts, of which, the story of the early sixties was narrated in the first and third parts and the late sixties were narrated in the second and fourth parts of the novel. This division of the parts in the novel allows readers to compare the lives of the characters before and after the war.

By making use of the third-person narrator, Adichie provides the readers with multiple views of the historical events. Adichie narrates the war through the perspectives of the three characters Olanna, Richard, and Ugwu. In the novel, the anonymous narrator narrates the story through the experiences of the three characters and narrates their story in parts, and presents it as they had experienced it. Olanna saw the horrors of the war where people were brutally killed in front of her eyes which made her unable to walk for some time due to the trauma. She saw the bodies of people she was closed to:

“She stopped when she saw the bodies. Uncle Mbaize lay face-down in an ungainly twist, legs splayed. Something creamy-white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head. Aunty Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts on her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips.” (147)

While riding a train, Olanna saw a woman who was holding the head of her dead daughter: “She saw the little girl's head with the ashy-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth.” (149) All these incidents have a mental impact on her as she seemed fine when she got out of the train and while standing on the bus but as soon as she reached her house her legs have given up on her as she fell in front of her door, “There was the melting of her legs, and there was also the wetness of hot

liquid running between her thighs” (156) She tries to tell Odenigbo about what she saw as letting out emotions could also liberate her of the trauma somehow. But she still suffers from flashbacks and panic attacks and is constantly reminded of the deaths that she wasn’t able to live in the moment entirely. This traumatic experience only marks the beginning of her suffering as the real war of three years would start to begin from then on. The poverty and starvation in the refugee camps, and the unhygienic environment all were unimaginable for someone who came from a wealthy background. But Olanna and Odenigbo didn’t care much about it as they still got a place to stay. This shows the dire condition of the people during the war where people weren’t able to be in their right minds as they were both emotionally and physically drained.

Ugwu can be regarded as a significant character in the novel even though there are fewer pages about him than Olanna. His position is situated in between all the other main characters which allow him to look into the lives of other characters, especially Olanna and Odenigbo. By speaking of Odenigbo as ‘master’, Adichie shows the class difference between Ugwu and Odenigbo and also shows the superior position of Odenigbo as the employer. This shows how Adichie while narrating the war, also brings in the issue of class difference and the superior position of the rich towards the poor which was a common issue during that time in Nigeria. This shows how the rich and the western-educated were more of a higher status than the uneducated. Adichie manages to let her readers know the various issues prevailing in her country. Ugwu also saw people moving from one place to another and also his experiences of moving and being captured by the soldiers. He got injured during one of his operations while being a soldier and was admitted to a hospital. He saw the condition of the hospital where many bodies littered around him on the floor. Adichie recalls the conflict, news of the Igbo massacre, and panic stories through worn eyewitnesses. Ugwu recounts how life had been changed in the war where they had to live in a house with cracks and unpainted walls which were very different from the standard home of Odenigbo and Olanna.

The incident that impacted Ugwu most during the war was his journey as a soldier. It is during those times that Ugwu witnesses the most brutal form of the war where he had to see people dying right in front of him. Ugwu also gets to know the soldiers were not only busy in their duties but were also harassing the civilians. They were snatching things they needed from the common people. The rape of the bar girl where Ugwu also took part in doing so is the most embarrassing moment of Ugwu’s life as a human. He could not forget the girl’s face and the way she looked at

him with hatred. He could not help but feel guilty about it whenever he remembers the incident. It shows the extreme inhumanity of the war that mainstream narratives frequently fail to showcase about the war.

Richard also narrates his story where he saw people being slaughtered in the airport. It was traumatizing for him that he found it hard to tell others about what he saw in detail. Even though he seemed to be sincerely interested in Igbo art and came to Nigeria to write a book on it, Richard's narration of the killings didn't feel the same way as Olanna's maybe because his background is different from the other characters. He also shows how he wasn't as distressed as Kainene when they heard the news of the second coup and the killing of the Igbo armies. This again shows an outsider's point of view regarding the war.

By using the idea of multiple narratives, Adichie raises the voice of those people who have been kept silent for most of the history of Nigeria. The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin in his book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* uses the word polyphony to describe Dostoevsky's works. Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky's work as containing many different voices and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has its perspective and validity in the novel. Bakhtin argues that the heroes of Dostoevsky's novels are subjects of their discourse rather than being an object of authorial discourse. This means that each of them has a unique consciousness and a unique way of interpreting the world around them. He, therefore, categorizes Dostoevsky's novels as not just polyphonic but also dialogic in nature. Dialogic voice always involves a multiplicity of speakers and a variety of perspectives. It can be seen in the novel that the voices of other minor characters other than the five major characters, also have their own opinions regarding the war and the various incidents happening during that time.

A very minor character like the taxi driver, who was shown only for a very brief moment in the novel, has his own opinion regarding the killing of one of the leaders of his country. He expresses his love and sadness on the death news of the Saruduana. On the other hand, Aunt Ifeka was very happy about this incident as she believes that the Saruduana was not a good man and was of the view that he did not like the Igbo people and mistreated them: "The Saruduana was an evil man, *ajommadu*, Aunt Ifeka said. He hated us. He hated everybody who did not allow our children to go to school?" (130) But Olanna, who believed in humanity, was of the view that the killing did not give justice to the dead since he was also a human and thought that he could have been punished instead of being killed.

Since the war happened as a result of the Igbo and Hausa conflict, it did not mean that all the people belonging to the Igbo tribes hated the people belonging to the Hausa tribes and vice versa. There were also people on both sides who did not support the killings of the war and had different opinions. There were people from both sides who were helping each other. The novel shows the character of Olanna's ex-lover Mohammad, who belonged to the Hausa tribe, helping an Igbo girl. He is also seen contemplating the killing of many Igbo people. While another man, Abdul Malik is seen to be very happy about the killing of the Igbo people. So, this shows how people have different opinions about the war and not all of them were of the same views irrespective of their ethnic origins. Also, regarding the leader of the Biafran Republic, Ojukwu, many people have different opinions about him. Olanna believed that Ojukwu is a great man while Kainene thought that Ojukwu was the one who started all these and was the destroyer of the country. Richard also had a different opinion as he viewed that Kainene was criticizing Ojukwu maybe because he did not promote Madu as a commanding officer and that if Madu had been promoted, she would have had a different opinion regarding Ojukwu.

This brings the idea of the multiplicity of narratives according to different perspectives. It makes the readers reconsider which tale to believe in and further question the notion of the truth. It becomes problematic to consider that there is only one notion of the truth since each individual has their own opinions regarding a single situation. By narrating the war stories through multiple narratives, Adichie fulfills her role as a writer in making the world know the real history of Biafra and that the story of Biafra was not to be concluded in a single story as just a fight between people for the unity of a nation. The novel also shows the Eurocentric and biased views regarding the war and its people. The idea of the discourse is not just a narrative but to legitimize it. The west teaches the facts created by them and institutionalized them politically and culturally, claiming the east to be inferior.

This can be seen in the interaction between Richard and the representatives of the international press. They said that the Biafrans were mixing food and alcohol on their plane to which Richard clarifies that Biafran's planes were carrying only food supplies. They then asked Richard about something new and it seemed that the death of thousands of people was not a great matter for them. They also reacted negatively to a woman who spat on the floor when they asked her about the war. The woman might be suffering because of the war and such a question may be unanswerable for her. But they said that the woman showed this attitude due to Biafra pro-

paganda. But Richard said the reaction of the woman was not due to the propaganda and that there might be other reasons behind it. This shows the indifferent attitude of the white press towards the Nigerians and also towards the war. They did not care much about the people suffering and instead tried to criticise their way of living and find faults in every way of their lives.

Also, most of the works on the Biafran war were written by male authors and female perspectives were usually hard to find. Here, Adichie challenges the discourse of patriarchy and shows her feminist stand through the character of Olanna giving a female voice to the male-centric war. It shows how men were not the only humans fighting against one another, going through starvation and poverty, or suffering from mental and physical traumas. Women were also a part of it and played their own roles during the war. Olanna, along with her sister Kainene both rebel against their parents and became accomplished women who seemed to know what they want to be in their lives.

Adichie challenges the western discourse of history by giving the right of authorship to the Igbo native, Ugwu. The reader is initially made to believe Richard to be the author but at the end of the novel it is revealed to be none other than Ugwu. It was Richard who suggested the title of the Book and told Ugwu about it. Ugwu is just a village boy and is not someone who is properly educated like the other Western-educated characters in the novel. But after moving into Odenigbo's house, he began to study and learn how to read and write. It was Odenigbo who taught Ugwu about pan-Africanism. Adichie's postcolonial ideas can be seen through the character of Odenigbo. In one of his meetings with his friends, Odenigbo argues: "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." (20)

Odenigbo also showed Ugwu the world map and explained that even though Europe was depicted on top of their nation it did not signify any order: "This is our world, although the people who drew this map decided to put their land on top of ours. There is no top or bottom, you see." (10) This shows how Odenigbo was trying to make Ugwu more aware of their selves and not feel inferior in any way. It was also through Odenigbo that Adichie expressed her views on the importance of education for the future of Nigeria. Odenigbo told Ugwu that education was a priority and that education was a tool to understand exploitation in order to resist it.

He also expressed his views when reading the newspaper: "It is now that we have to begin to decolonize our education! Not tomorrow, now! Teach them our history!" (75). Thus, Ugwu was awakened to the philosophy of postcolonial and the importance of embracing one's own identity. Africans had the tradition of storytelling and thus by writing *The Book*, Ugwu manages to take back what belongs to him and his nation, thereby, preserving their tradition and culture. It showcases that they also had a voice and have recovered their history through the voice of a native. Richard tries to write something to get close to Africa and its culture and this can be seen throughout the novel.

He even expresses his genuine love for Africa and its culture but eventually gives up upon realizing that as an outsider he doesn't have the right to tell someone else's story. Ugwu keeps the same title for *The Book* and it doesn't mean that he stole the title from Richard since the words didn't initially come from Richard but something Colonel Madu, the Igbo army major, said to him and he recalled: "The world has to know the truth of what is happening because they simply cannot remain silent while we die" (305) The final title, therefore reveals to have come from a true Biafran and not from Richard. His only contributions are the articles he writes for the Propaganda upon Colonel Madu's request. He was asked to write about it because he was a white and people would have taken it more seriously if a white had written about it compared to the one written by a Nigerian. Colonel Madu says "Of course I asked you because you are white. They will take what you write more seriously because you are white...They will believe a white man who lives in Biafra and who is not a professional journalist" (305)

Adichie, in one of her interviews, revealed how she thought it was necessary to let readers who might not know the basics of Nigerian history be informed about it. She also made her point about who should be writing the stories of Africa. Therefore, by making Ugwu the author of *The Book*, Adichie is showing that Nigerian history should be written by none other than a Nigerian, thus claiming the real authorship of Nigerian history. The histories that were written in the past by outsiders were not able to give the feeling of real-life experience to the readers of it. Adichie's novel utilizes the events of history in a fictional narrative to tell the story of the humans who suffered through the war. This helps the readers to also reject the notion of the single story and instead provides multiple meanings toward a story. Since history is also a story written by a person it can be biased as the author of the story holds the power of telling it to the readers. Adichie, by revisiting the moments of history while still constructing

it as a fictional novel, skilfully portrays the importance of going back to the past and rejecting the notion of the presence of the 'single truth'. She also shows that one can realise how truth can be very complex if they have more perspectives. The whole idea of 'truth' becomes incomplete and problematic. Thus, revisiting of the 'past/history' also becomes a kind of construction. As the present can be constructed or changed the past can also be reconstructed and rewritten thus allowing its readers to have multiple perspectives and a plurality of voices.

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