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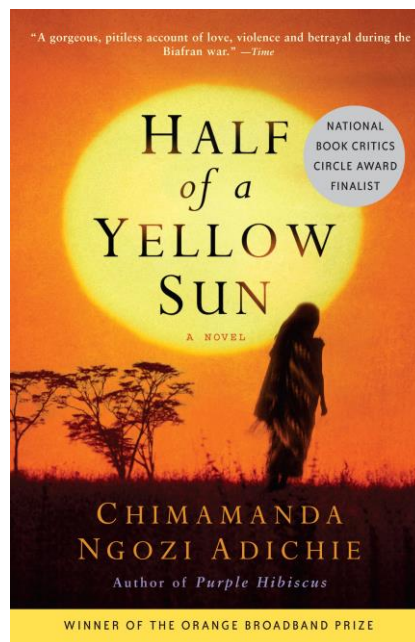
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Biafra – The War, Its Civilians and Their Relationships A Study on Chimmananda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* effectively portrays the crude realities of the Biafra war during 1967 to 1970. The war lasted for three full years among the tribes of Igbo from South East, Hausa – Fulani from North and Yoruba from South West, with different cultural and political structures.

Key Words: Biafra war, Relationships, Education, Igbo culture and language

Biafra War

The Republic of Biafra was born in May 1967 after the Nigerian Biafra war. Nigeria got independence from British in 1960 but it did not get Nigerian recognition which led to the cold civil war of ethnic tension. The tribe's identity is spoken thus by Odenigbo:

'... my point is that the only authentic identity for the African is tribe. I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black...I was Igbo before the white man came.' (20)



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
Courtesy: www.lectures.princeton.edu

Focus on the Bloody War and Its Effect on Personal Relations

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The major group affected is the middle class from Biafra. The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, brings out the bloodiness of war through five major characters. Their loyalties among their relationships are also severely tested during the war. Both the physical and mental trauma get narrated aesthetically through multiple narrations which in turn aid to the authenticity of experience, as the characters narrate the events though from third person's view, audience get the feel of plot and move along with it.

The Narration and Relationships

The narration swings between late 60's and early 60's, which is between the pre-war and the war period. It explicates the relationships among characters: Master – servant: the loyalty of Ugwu to Odenigbo and his family, Parent – children: the selfish parents of Olanna and Keinene and on contradictory, Olanna's love towards Odenigbo's child and Man – women and neighbours with finery. It also concentrates on tribal culture and the author uses Igbo language in between so as to give the tinge of their culture and to make the readers feel the cultural presence.

The mouth pieces being Ugwu, Richard and Olanna, other major characters – Odenigbo, Keinene, Madu and others evolve from the main narrator's view. Richard being an outsider, a British in Biafra, still helps the people and shows keen interest on *Igbo-Ukwu* tribal art. He is a failed writer who couldn't complete his book. Later Ugwu finishes his book *The World Was Silent When We Died*. He is not much of a promising character, other than being an Igbo speaking English man with a native eye.

Olanna

Olanna is prominent character from the mainstream and most part of the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* is narrated through her. She can be considered as the protagonist as all the major turns in the plot revolves around her. Olanna and Keinene are perfect poles. Though they are twins, they clearly demarcate the line between the elite and the middle class. Keinene is a part of politics and Olanna is a common civilian. Only in the end and that too for a short period of time, they come together to help the refugees. Otherwise they are detached yet intimate.

Keinene

Olanna and Keinene play the major role pushing aside Richard and Odenigbo. Richard is characterized as a shy English man always dependent on one or other women. For instance, Susan in the beginning, Keinene and also in the short encounters with Olanna. Olanna on the other hand takes the authoritative stand. Though submissive at instances, she is independent. It is shown as education helps her to be more practical and self-reliant than her cousin Arzie who is uneducated.

Contrast between the Uneducated and the Educated Tribes

The sharp contrast between the uneducated tribes and the educated intellectuals is shown foiling Arzie to Olanna and Keinene. The following excerpt focuses on the difference of opinion between Olanna and Arzie on marriage:

‘I don’t know about marriage yet. I just wanted to be closer to him, and I wanted to teach..... ‘It is only women that know too much Book like you who can say that, sister. If people like me who don’t know Book wait too long, we will expire.’(41)

Strength of Olanna

Olanna is a strong character who never waves during hardships. She maintains a steadiness through all happenings and she supports Odenigbo in his low spirits. She is also helpful to people in the refugee camp. She witnesses the cruel death of Arzie and Aunt Ikfa and the rudeness and the senselessness of war. She is moulded by these incidents. She creates hopes when they return to Biafra in the end.

Odenigbo, Richard and Ugwu

During war Odenigbo is focused as a man incapable to succumb to the circumstances and to look after the family. Richard too did not achieve anything by his writings. He is unable even to complete a book besides being an English man. Later Ugwu completes it. This can be counted as a defeat to colonial authority by an African author.

Influential Female Voice

The influential female voice is evident from Keinene setting up a refugee camp during the war and enlarging the female role in the camp. Though they have sexual licence as a part

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of their tribal culture, it is only Olanna and Keinene who move voluntarily with men. Even Odenigbo impregnating Amala is without his knowledge and he resents for it till the end. Same is the case of relationship between Olanna and Richard. Though Olanna is totally upset with Odenigbo in Amala's instance, she has been patient with his poor spirits during the war.

Ugwu and the Role of Education

Education is given prior importance and is taken as an effective tool that civilizes people and makes them aware of the situation in the country. The best example can be taken from Ugwu. He shows keen interest in learning and he learns fast too. He reads and understands almost everything Odenigbo and his friends say about war. He teaches the children in the refugee camp.

Though an uneducated tribal village boy in the beginning of the novel, he is a heavily evolved character who completes Richard's book in English in the end of the novel. His characterization also highlights the importance of education. Though a servant, he becomes one among the intellectuals of Nsukka, a promising town in Biafra.

Ugwu is characterized in such a way to portray the promising younger generation of the educated tribes of Biafra. During war, Olanna teaches children wherever possible and makes them aware of their patriotism. 'Education is the priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have tools to understand exploitation?' (11) The university at Nsukka is seen as an intellectual hub of future Biafra.

The Notion of the Other

The British and American journalist, while reporting the war, are just discoursing about the situation and are not expressing the reality. They are unable to feel the effect of war as an outsider. "...I can't believe people are driving cars and walking around. It's not like there is war going on" (369). Even at the refugee camp they speak only about what the Niger eats and how dirty they are, unmindful of the reality that they are just starving to 'stay alive'.

The Nigerians too have the notion of treating a white man only as a devil. This is shown in all possible circumstances right from the beginning till the end. Richard is never fully accepted by the tribes. When Richard started to write a book on the Igbo culture, he is

told by the English family that the Nigers are "...bloody beggars, be prepared for their body odours..." (53)

The War

The war and its effect on the common man is majorly discussed in the novel through the prime characters. The consequence of the Biafra war is unimaginable which arouses pity and fear among the audience. It shows inhuman murders, rapes and abduction of property. The major effect was poverty and starvation which is followed by deadly kwashiorkor. People are pushed to theft and illegal activities. Their fidelity is severely tested, mainly among the major characters and with their friends. Mohammad, Arzie, aunty Ikfa and her husband, Ugwu, his cousin Nenchinachi along with the Olanna's parents all find it hard maintaining their relationships in the course of war.

Hard Times for the Characters

Olanna is an exception in her family. Her parents left her for their own safety. Keinene's priority is to save herself and this is also the prime reason for her starting a refugee camp. Though Odenigbo speaks much about war in the beginning of the novel, he failed to act at the time of the war. He becomes emotionally weak. On the contrary, Ugwu acted sensibly, strong enough to support Olanna with her hard times.

Forced Lessons from the War

The war taught people, how to be self sufficient and to be able to prepare all the basic necessities locally. They were taught making things in the refugee camps, so that they need not beg others or starve. War made people bolder.

Olanna witnessed her aunt's death. This had a striking impact on her notions about nationality and humanity as such. Women were victimized and ill treated by the militants. They become refugees in their *own* land. They have lost everything to war. At last when they returned to their normal life, it seemed altogether new, still alive with hope. It changed people and their attitudes towards life to large extent. Olanna felt the loss of Mamma and Ugwu. War made her strong enough to understand and approach the realities of life.

Adichie succeeds in showcasing the life of human community during tough times. She also effectively conveys the values of life and the importance of relationships with war as

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background. Her lucid and straight language enhances the attention and effective understanding of the novel.

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