

## **Emerging Themes in Chimamanda N. Adichie's Fiction: Ethnic and National Identity Narratives in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and "A Private Experience"**

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**Abstract:** In "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reveals how people construct other people's image through the story they tell about them. She explains how power plays an important role in defining one group whose story is told over and over from the perspective of those in position of power. The end result, Adichie suggests, is that a single story reduces people to mere misrepresentations, what is even more dangerous about it, is that how people perceive the defined group is determined by the single story teller, that is, the more powerful. This study argues that Adichie herself comes close to misrepresenting Northern Nigerian identity in her fiction. Using postcolonial theory methods, this paper contends that Adichie's portrayal of the binary opposition Hausa/Igbo, Biafra/Nigeria, Islam/Christianity appears as dangerous as the single story that she claims she despises. The researcher, after acknowledging the many efforts so far made in exploring her *Half of a Yellow Sun* and "A Private Experience," supports that Adichie's characterization not only points at postcolonial identity dilemma but implicitly reflects her proclivity towards telling a single, unbalanced, story in her identity narrative and her underground Biafran activism.

**Key Words:** *postcolonial, identity, hybridity/hybrid, Biafra, Nigeria, Africa*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Though Adichie's novels have received booming scholarly attention, her short stories have witnessed little criticism which might stem from some kind of neglect from scholars. This state of affair is due, as Ferdinand Iorbee Asoo asserts, "largely to the prominence the novel has enjoyed over and above other genres" [1]. Therefore, Asoo observes, there is a need to rekindle critical attention towards the criticism of the short story. Another claim for the study of short stories as expedient subgenre in terms of understanding major contemporary African issues comes from P.O. Iheakaram who laments rather loudly that "There is, at the moment, dearth of criticism of the Nigerian short story by Nigerians. The situation is fundamentally attributable to the non- recognition of the short story as a form worthy of serious attention in our educational system" [2]. This paper through a critical exploration of Adichie's representation of postcolonial identity in her short story, "A Private Experience" in combination with her award winning novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* [11] attempts to respond to the need for more studies of African short stories. Any attempt to write about identity in contemporary Nigeria has to confront the cultural diversity and complexities presented by its peoples. It is self-evident that Obafemi Awolowo's claim of 1947 in which he opines, "Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression" appears obsolete today thanks to the many nation building efforts so far made by Nigerians [6]. This effort is a continuous one as Nigeria has to work out its unity by defying the lingering historical hangover from events like Biafra civil war and the underground Biafra nationalism and activism. In a similar vein, achieving national identity in Nigeria involves engaging with the cultural complexity of a country which houses some 248 ethnic groups and a striking religious diversity [7]. The issue of identity is central to postcolonial writings as expressed by postcolonial theorists. A major postcolonial aspect that is germane to this paper is Homi Bhabha's notion of "hybridity"<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, this concept of hybridity is restricted to the idea of achieving a postcolonial national identity through the mixture of many ethnic identities. That is achieving unity in diversity as it is the case with African countries which comprise a multitude of group identities. These identities are sometimes forcibly or willingly clustered and entangled within specific geographical spaces as the result of "The Scramble for Africa" [8] [9] [10]. The negotiation, within the contestations, of national identities has become ubiquitous in the writings of Adichie [16]. As one of the new generation Nigerian novelists, Adichie has incontestably received international recognition with her award winning novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Born and raised in Nigeria, she moves to the US to pursue her studies. She quickly becomes a

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<sup>1</sup>In his *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha refers to hybridity as a kind of cultural syncretism in which alterity trumps over homogeneity or a return to the authenticity when two or many cultures coalesce.

world acclaimed novelist and a voice to take into account when discussing contemporary African literature. She argues in "The Role of Literature in Modern Africa" that "African countries need to change and change occurs through ideas. Literature is an essential repository of ideas. Literature can lead to change, not by espousing crude propaganda but by creating a collective sense of who a people are" [3]. However, Adichie's representation of the issue of identity in her *Half of a Yellow Sun* and "A Private Experience" seems to contradict the above claim. In these fiction narratives, she rather turns to "espousing the crude propaganda" which she repudiates. The issues raised in these narratives mainly pertain to explicate the Nigerian past and present and how Nigerian national identity and African identity at large are negotiated in the contestations of ethnic and national identities. Indeed, Adichie's characters, as this paper demonstrates, reflect the postcolonial identity dilemma and portray the novelist's participation in the Nigerian identity conversation. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie's second novel, urges the reader to contemplate the Nigerian recent history right after its independence from Britain. The plot of the entire narrative circles round the late 60's Nigerian civil war or Biafra war. Imbedded in this plot is the complex and intricate identity politics. The setting of the novel is the British creation, Nigeria. Major events of the novel take place in Kano, Northern Nigeria, Lagos, and the Eastern part of Nigeria where the controversial and ephemeral Biafra republic was located. This dichotomous, North/East, geographical demarcation of the setting helps the writer better highpoint her ideological proclivity in her representation of Nigerian identity.

"A Private Experience" is one of the 12 short stories written by Adichie compiled and published under the title *The Thing around Your Neck* [12]. The setting of the stories in this collection stretches from the far eastern part of Nigeria to the northern Nigeria savannah, from Africa to the modern day America. In these stories the writer raises a panorama of issues. Her thematic concern in this collection, Asoo persuasively reveals, ranges from: "family relations, inheritance laws, racism, love, culture conflicts, youthful exuberance, religion, decaying moral values, military dictatorship, corruption, the Nigerian Civil war, to the uncontrollable desire to live in America among Nigerians and the disastrous experiences of corporate prostitution" [1]. However, in his ambitious but flawed exploration of Adichie's short stories, Asoo fails to point out the writer's ideological leaning within the Nigerian identity politics. Her representation of the postcolonial subject's dilemma over ethnic and national identity, this paper contends, appears biased and misleading. In "A Private Experience," Adichie chronicles among other things the ethno-religious conflict that Nigeria has faced for many decades. The reader is introduced to two Igbo girls and a Hausa woman who are caught up in a riot staged in Kano. The whole events within the plot weave around a mob of Muslim Hausa who violently protest against non-Hausa, non-Muslim Nigerians. The narrator recounts how the crisis begins in the following lines: "...it had all started at the Motor Park, when a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran that lay on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian. The men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market asking others to join in; the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book" [12] p.46. Though throughout the narrative, one learns how the Hausa woman and the Igbo medical school student, Chika, come together to find a shelter and safe place to protect themselves from the rioters, the woman's body description and utterances reveal her as an ignorant and illiterate character. This misrepresentation of the Hausa people as portrayed here through the woman shows the stereotypical penchant of the narrative. Tesi di Laurea in "The Danger of a Single Story" in Chimamanda N. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* argues that the novel offers multifaceted stories about Nigeria and the author counterattacks what she calls "a single story" which portrays only stereotypes, thus misleads people [18]. Laurea further opines that "While we cannot know every story, we are capable of recognizing that there is "a balance of stories", and it is what the writer brings forth in her novel" [18] p.3. Although Laurea puts it right in claiming that the novel presents many stories, this research finds it rather anecdotal to posit that "there is "a balance of stories" in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This paper, after acknowledging the many efforts so far made in exploring Adichie's novel and her short story mentioned above, supports that Adichie's characterization not only points at postcolonial identity dilemma but implicitly reflects her inclination towards telling a single, unbalanced story, in her identity narrative and her underground Biafran activism.

## II. POST-COLONIAL INTELLECTUALS AND IDENTITY NARRATIVES

African written fiction narratives start with the African encounter with colonial powers. African writers quickly turn their ink towards the salient issues of the moment. Indeed, Charles Nnolim cogently pinpoints that "every generation of writers confronts the burning issues in its society and wrestles with them" [4]. These writers mainly attempt to raise African awareness about the biased and stereotypical imaging of Africa by the imperial powers. They urge the world to contemplate the inhumane nature of colonialism. It was within this struggle, which centers round African history and identity recognition and African peoples' freedom from colonial yoke, that many African nations earn their independence in an almost appeasing atmosphere. Soon afterwards, Africans will have to turn towards the task of nation building. African writers are not left behind in this endeavor. Indeed, as Laurea supports, "the African novel, having emerged from the newly formed nations during the period of Africa's independence is synonymous with the project of constructing national identity"

[18] p.13. This project of “constructing national identity” equals the whole nation building effort. Meanwhile, any task of nation building has to confront diverse forces emanating from the feeling of ethnic belonging and people’s effort to contest the national colonial heritage as portrayed in postcolonial writings [13]. Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* and “A Private Experience” depict this postcolonial identity struggle.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* intriguingly portrays the subtle – and occasionally bold – identity politics. While reading this novel, the following questions of identity quickly come to mind: Did colonialism create new identities? Did colonialism create conflict between groups based on pre-existing identities? What does one do when one’s own identity is inextricably tied up with a colonial past? What does Adichie’s identity representation point at within the Nigerian identity politics? These questions undergird much of *Half of a Yellow Sun* and “A Private Experience.” They are suggestive of the significance and the reason why Adichie’s writing is “post-colonial.” Many of the characters in these narratives question what must be done in the aftermath of British colonialism as they navigate the dynamics of their own identities and even develop a new identity, Biafran nationalism, Hausa, Igbo, far from the previously imposed and the now negotiated Nigerian identity. At the beginning of the novel, before the war breaks out, we are introduced to Ugwu, a young illiterate houseboy who works for Odenigbo, an Igbo professional who is clearly an elite. The interactions between Ugwu and his “Master” identify the class and identity politics present in post-colonial Nigeria. He seems to be most comfortable in English, speaking Igbo “coloured by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English too often” [11] p.4. By mastering English, Odenigbo has lost touch with his native tongue and he has become alienated from his own self [14]. Or the way he speaks Igbo reveals his linguistic hybridity and him as a hybridized subject to borrow from Bhabha. Ugwu understands this hybrid state of his boss and calls him Master which signals his detachment from who he really is. The Master lives in a Western-style house, uses British terms of speech – he is known for saying “my good man” throughout the book – has tea and bread for breakfast, and plays tennis. It is when Ugwu comes to live with Odenigbo that he first becomes familiar with colonial establishments, despite that they are both Igbo. Ugwu contrasts this new environment with his familiar, traditional home life. When he hides some chicken in his pockets, Master reprimands him, saying “Do your people eat while they sleep?...Food will stay in the dining room and the kitchen” ([11] p.9, emphasis is mine). This strongly suggests that the Master is of a different class or group of people than Ugwu, or at least sees himself that way.

The Master is fiercely anti-colonial, despite his love of the colonial institutions with which he is so familiar. He speaks negatively of Ugwu’s father for not being able to provide formal education to Ugwu, querying “How can we resist exploitation if we don’t have the tools to understand exploitation?” [11] p.11. These “tools” are presumably based in Western education; although Odenigbo values this form of education, he does realize that it is problematic: “They will teach you that a white man called Mungo Park discovered River Niger. That is rubbish. Our people fished in the Niger long before Mungo Park’s grandfather was born. But in your exam, write that it was Mungo Park” [11] p.11. Ugwu cannot care less about who “discovered” the Niger River and does not express the anger about colonialism that we find in the Nigerian intellectual class. Despite the Master’s hatred of colonialism, he is the one who “colonizes” Ugwu, if that is an appropriate term. Over time, Ugwu gradually becomes more like these post-colonizers and develops an elitist attitude toward those he finds simple and backwards. Calling Odenigbo “Master” brings to mind the idea of colonial masters, and the researcher does not think this is coincidental. Even in the beginning of the book, it is clear that living with Master has affected Ugwu, when he is disappointed that Olanna’s Igbo is smooth and not marked with an English accent, taken aback by her skill in both languages, as if one must choose between them [11] p.23.

There are frequent intellectual conversations which take place – in English – at Odenigbo’s house, with Nigerian professors discussing pan-Africanism – a European notion? – “tribe,” de-colonization, and black identity. Odenigbo says “I was Igbo before the white man came” [11] p.20 and later “Go and ask the elders in your village about your history” [11] p.21, though it seems clear that Odenigbo’s connection with village life is flimsy, at best. It appears that Odenigbo’s anger at colonial establishments may have arisen because he realizes that he is a product of colonialism – a hybrid person – and he does not like this, preferring to see himself as a traditional Igbo with no connection to his colonizers. Similar postcolonial intellectualism can be found with Chika and Nnedi in “A Private Experience.” Fanon would say that this postcolonial subject presents cultural alienation [14]. Their reaction to this alienation is harsh, rejecting the reality that their identity is inextricably linked with colonialism. These postcolonial intellectuals see that they have become like their colonizers and they try to root this out. Though the narrator seems to disagree with Odenigbo by portraying him as a zealous, yet alienated nationalist, this character represents the writer’s tendency to telling a single story.

Throughout the novel, there is a general disdain for the Hausa people, defining them primarily by their ethnicity and religion rather than other, more humanizing personal characteristics. Olanna was in a relationship with Mohammed when she first met Odenigbo. Her twin sister Kainene described Mohammed as “a pleasant, bland sort of fellow” [11] p.69. He prefers Olanna’s wigs, making fun of her new hairstyle by saying that she looks like a “bush woman” [11] p.45. When Olanna meets Abdulmalik, he is described primarily as Hausa, with

his most defining feature being his teeth, “stained with kola nut and tobacco and whatever else...stains of varying shades of yellow and brown” [11] p.40. Similarly, in “A Private Experience,” the reader finds it rather stereotypical the way the Hausa are depicted through the character the woman. The woman is known through her ethnicity and religion: “a Northerner, from the narrowness of her face, the unfamiliar rise of her cheekbones; her strong Hausa accent, [...] she is Muslim, because of the scarf” [12] pp.45-46. Another biased depiction in this short story appears when the narrator describes the woman’s scarf as “a long, flimsy pink and black scarf, with the garish prettiness of cheap things” [12] p.46. The woman is further portrayed as an uneducated person with no control of English grammar. She is the one who says “this place safe” as a question addressed to Chika [12] p.46; or “close window” as a request [12] p.47; or asks Chika “where you go school?” [12] p.49. These utterances and many others unquestionably suggest that the woman is uneducated like Abdulmalik, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The instances mentioned above undeniably casts doubt on Asoo’s claim in which he supports that Adichie “does not accuse anyone of illiteracy and ignorance but merely lays bare the insufficiency of the reasons for the unfortunate acts” [1] p.22, meaning the ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria. With regards to the unfortunate historical event about the Biafra secession from Nigeria, the Igbo were no longer one ethnic group in a multiethnic state. They suddenly became the dominant ethnic group in their new state and all others, primarily the Efik and Ibibio, became minorities. It seems that these identities were washed away in the binary discourse of “Igbo vs. Hausa.” Indeed, the novel and the short story irrefutably reveal that many of the characters have some disdain, if not intense hatred, for the Hausa people who are depicted as violent rioters. As an extension of that sentiment, they also abhor Muslims.

Islamophobia and the demonization of the Hausa seem to underlie much of Biafran nationalism present in Adichie’s fiction. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, we read that “Muslim students were always demonstrating about one thing or the other, after all, and harassing people who were Western-dressed...” [11] p.146. In both narratives, the narrator portrays Muslims as petty, violent, and backwards. In the novel, the reader learns that their kaftans are “bloodstained” and they carry axes and machetes [11] p.148. They claim – in Hausa, of course – that it is “Allah’s will” when they kill entire families. Abdulmalik touches dead bodies on the ground with his feet, including a beheaded woman. When the Hausa speak – which is rare – they say “Allah” rather than “God,” although “Allah” is simply the Arabic word for God. This helps to define Hausa Muslims as Other. Muslims are portrayed as brutal and even genocidal, calling the Igbo “infidels” and forcing them to say “Allahu Akbar” in a fairly bizarre and unrealistic scene [11] p.152. They use loudspeakers to proclaim that “The Igbo must go. The infidels must go” [11] p.147. Ugwu says “We are not like those Hausa people” and calls the attacks on Hausa “reprisal killings,” justifying the deaths of Hausa [11] p.177. In his mind, there is no room for grey, only black and white, Hausa and Igbo. The Igbo are simply responding to purely unjust attacks and cannot be faulted for their killings. Odenigbo calls Mohammed, who is portrayed as fairly gentle but ignorant, a “bloody Muslim Hausa man,” and scolds Olanna for any care she shows towards his situation [11] p.193. As time passes, Biafran disdain is no longer limited to the Hausa and extends to all those who are seen as too Nigerian, like Miss Adebayo, who is Yoruba. Although Ugwu is nostalgic for the old days, he wishes she would simply “leave them alone” [11] p.423.

Similar misrepresentations and stereotypes against the Hausa are found in “A Private Experience.” We learn that “every time when they are rioting, they break market [...] Hausa Muslim zealots attacking Igbo Christians” [12] pp.51-52. Also, one learns that the Hausa are not only bloodthirsty but indolent as this passage suggests: “the men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market, asking others to join in; the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book” [12] p.48. After reading these lines, one may be startled in trying to reflect on whether these characters are from the same place, same country called Nigeria. The passage irrefutably implies or points at the salience of the dichotomy Hausa/Igbo and it indubitably reflects their historical disagreement which is hitherto a topical issue in Nigerian identity conversation. Though the writer attempts to balance the story by presenting a less biased account as opposed to the one the Western media might present, her portrayal of the Hausa appears dubious and mirrors her Igboactivism and Biafra nationalism. In a similar vein, Carly Campbell’s assertion in which she claims that “Adichie challenges fixed ethnic, gender, and religious identities by presenting them as situational; her characters display agency by actively choosing a construction of identity” [17] p.3 appears simplistic and shaky. From her three main characters in “A Private Experience” only the Hausa woman is nameless and uneducated with Nnedi, a political science student, and Chika, a medical school student. Adichie’s characterization displays stereotypes and stigmatizes the Hausa people. They are depicted as a people who are reluctant to embrace modern education brought about by colonialism. Despite Campbell’s contention in which she sees identities “as situational” with the Muslim Hausa woman helping the Igbo girl, Chika, in the face of adversity, the narrative tends to vilify the Hausa. The researcher acknowledges the author’s effort to be politically correct in the Nigeria identity palaver; yet the story she presents in both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and “A Private Experience” bear features of an unbalanced and a single story which she critiques.

### III. CONCLUSION

Despite all of Adichie's talk of the problems with having a "single story," it seems that she presents a single, ideologically driven story in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and "A Private Experience." This tendency to negatively portray a people is disturbing and does not help the Nigerian nation building effort. Born and raised in Nsukka under the care of her Igbo father, a university professor, Adichie's bound to her ethnic belonging as reflected in her fiction is not surprising. Tanure Ojaide asserts, "the direction of any literature has more to do with the prevailing conditions of the writer's time and his or her individual response to them, brought about by the personal life of the writer" [15] p.73. The personal life of Adichie seems to be intensely influenced by Biafran nationalism and a dilemma of belonging to a nation that is Nigeria. It is no doubt that, as Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton opine, Adichie participates in the Nigerian identity conversation like other Igbo members of the new generation of Nigerian novelists. However, they fall short to realize the danger that her biased story represents in the Nigerian nation building effort. She surely, as Adesanmi and Dunton highpoint, attempts to "negotiate the affiliative processes of ethnic and national identity in the contested site of Nigerian nationhood" [5]. Why is there no room for humanity when representing the Hausa in her narratives? She is the one who proclaims that "the danger in a single story is that whomever is conveying the story are the ones in power, and these power-holders determine the way in which those with the single-story are perceived" (quoted in [19] p.1). With an international readership and recognition, Adichie has gained power in telling stories; and as a power-holder, she attempts to determine the way in which the Hausa are perceived.

Though the postcolonial identity and that of Nigeria in particular will remain hybrid, African states have a long way to go in their nation building effort. The major actors in this endeavor will have to realize, as Fanon and Edward Said insist, that there is the impossibility of returning back to pre-colonial divisions, to cultural purity or nativism. Adichie's narratives undoubtedly raise issues that are germane to African literary studies and contemporary Africa. Did colonialism help to create this division between Igbo and Hausa, Christian and Muslim? How have the postcolonial subjects' identities been created or shaped by European delineations? These are post-colonial questions: questions we are forced to ask ourselves in the wake of European imperialism and questions which react to the deeply personal effects of colonialism on the very way we see ourselves. The answers to these questions are not easy. The recent or current events in Cameroon urge us to probe on the longevity of the colonial political and linguistic heritage. Is devolution or Balkanization inevitable, or must we learn to live with each other in multiethnic states? Does creating one's own new identity, as the Biafrans did, somehow spit in the face of European actions, or is it indicative of how successful European divisions were? Finally, how does one go from being Nigerian to Biafran to Nigerian again?

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