

**THE SPECTRUM OF NEW HISTORICISM AND CULTURAL MATERIALISM: A  
STUDY IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S NOVEL *HALF OF A YELLOW  
SUN***

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**Abstract**

The history of men is the history of power game. From the very beginning of human existence they are lunatic for power. Therefore, whoever is more powerful he/she contextualizes the historical notion and textualizes the cultural aspects to dominate the others through their own ideological notion which sets up his or her own glory, fame and authoritative supremacy in one's own space. In this context power and the pastness of the past are the two most fantastic phenomena which contextualize the empirical notion and restructure the human psyche. So, the paradoxical game of power has made both men and women more animalistic than the animal itself and therefore, they keep on struggling both physically and psychologically to get it and leave it on the page of history. In this context, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie through her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* locates how power relations play a significant role in Nigerian history and different forms of power refer to the pastness of the past. This paper looks at select samples from the above mentioned novel of Adichie and correlates them with the notion of the New Historicism and cultural materialism.

**Keywords:** Sophisticated, Entities Contextualizes, Textualizes, Power, Authoritative, Pastness, Phenomenon, J. M. Coetzee, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism.

The novel, *Half of A Yellow Sun*, the second novel of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, won the prestigious international Orange prize for literature in 2007 and since then, like her first novel *Purple Hibiscus*, it has enjoyed excited reviews, home and abroad. Adichie's novel achieves uniqueness and popularity by the manner she retells the story of the

Nigerian civil war (1967) in a way that touches the depth of the inner soul. The strength of her novel is driven by the energy of creativity that revolves around her evocation of the psychological impact of horror and terror that the obnoxious war unleashed on its

victims. The novelist asserts that in war, physical ruins and death could be so devastating, but the moral wound is worse, and could take eternity to heal. According to Jegede: ...the physical wound of Nigeria Biafra of (1967-1970) may have been borne by a generation of people but the moral effects wrecked by the war still haunts the psyche(s) of several people who by extension have some connection with the war. This preoccupation, the psychological effect of the war, than any other theme(s) informs the thematic direction of the novel. The novel X-rays the effects of the war on the middle class of the late sixties as regards their relationship(s) career(s) ideologies, visions and vocation(s). Using the fictionalized world of the Nigerian University Nsukka's middle class community as a basis, the novelist journeys around the lives of characters like Odenigbo, Professor Ezeke, Professor Achera, Okeoma, Miss Adebayo, Ugwu, Olanna, Richard, and others in order to illuminate the emotional turmoil that engulfed (and still engulfing) most Nigerians as a result of the war (3).

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victims. The novelist asserts that in war, physical ruins and death could be so devastating, but the moral wound is worse, and could take eternity to heal. According to Jegede: Human history is full of conflict and crisis. Since the very beginning of human existence, there has been a conflict between one's nation versus other's nation, one's race versus other's race, one's community versus other's community one's culture and tradition versus other's culture and tradition, one's gender versus other's gender, one's caste versus other's caste, one's colour versus other's colour and so on and so forth. In order to present these things in the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Nigerian writer Ngozi Adichie digs up the pastness of the past and amalgamates it with the taste of present through her artistic

spectrum. Hence, her mentioned novel is the spectrum of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, a hallmark of post-colonial Nigeria which gives her an indirect intimate insight into her status as a writer whose generous words clearly unlock her inner thought provoking world.

Since the 1970s or 1980s the concept of text has been changed. Literary critics and theorists are greatly influenced by the notion of anthropology and history. They begin to stare the contexts and texts which reflect social struggle through the paradoxical role of power. According to the new theorists all writings such as history, poetry, autobiography, war memoir, cookbook, surgical book, and so on are the texts of the products of particular social condition which deal with the same ideologies, prejudices, themes and motifs. In this context, they intertextualize to each other and this intertextualization of texts marks out the hidden power inherent from the past which is everywhere in the text. Therefore, the texts and contexts have to be read as together to reveal the different form of power hidden in the text.

Adichie's novel deals with the Nigerian Biafran war history, which locates within conflictual war crisis that has seriously hampered. Conflict is primarily of two main kinds: internal and external conflict. Internal conflict is a struggle, which portrays through the characters as well as external conflict occurs the struggle between the character and outside the forces of the circumstances. It can also be struggle of a community. Adichie focuses more on internal conflict, which addresses questions of ethics or morality; the questions of ethics and morality are seen in the characters of Ugwu, Baby, Odenigbo, Richard, Olanna and Kenaine. All these characters have an internal and external conflict with dissatisfy, uncomfortable and unhappy living. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) writes:

For all the while, in African cultures, there are those who will not see themselves as Other. Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease and political instability, African cultural productivity grows space: popular literature, oral narrative, poetry, dance, drama, music and visual art all thrive. The contemporary cultural production of many African societies - and the many

traditions whose evidence so vigorously remain - is an antidote to the vision of the postcolonial novelist (Barber 1).

History as a tool is used by writers of all ages to reflect the paradoxical role of power through their past experiences. In this context, Adichie is a renowned name who portrays the Nigerian cultural, tradition, wounds and power pastness of the in her literary work. She depicts the history to accommodate the question of conflict and internal strife in Nigeria. The issues of identity woven around the war history that is central to Nigerian – Biafran historical living experiences in Adichie's second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). It fictionalises the early and the late 1960s period and represents the class, cultural (Hausa-Igbo), military, ethnic and war conflict. It establishes a connection between the two communities, two groups and two cultures, which have a discrepancy with each other. In addition, the novel also explores and clarifies the problems of the third world countries and the manner in which historical incidence shapes the ordinary man's life and culture.

At the outset of the book, we find, Ugwu, an Igbo boy, has to go to Nsukka as a houseboy for [Odenigbo](#). In this context, the story textualizes the dark notion of slavery and colonialism in which the colonizers in the name of culture, caste, gender, religion, colour and so no and so forth have done the most terrible thing in the history of humanity.

As a result, in order to study about colonialism ending, with Britain independence ethnic allegiances as well race and class, therefore this novel is selected for the essay. Therefore, according to Adichie, in the politically charged milieu of Nigeria, the essential role of the writer has been to bear witness of the historical notion, and to contextualize, the crimes of slavery and colonialism, and those who are not able to fulfill their social responsibility of bearing witness have often been accused of being politically and historically deaf. So, the notion of pre and post slavery deliberately emerges out through his pen power. In this context, the novel resembles Coetzee's booker prize winning novel *Life & Times of Michael K* textualizes the amid a fictitious civil war during the apartheid era, in the 1970-80s in which we find the journey of the protagonist Michael K from Cape Town to his mother's rural birthplace. K is an unskilled worker (gardener) and even he has no social status who tries to quest the purpose and meaning of his life in the meaningless world throughout this book.

*Half of the Yellow Sun* is a humanity as well social philosophy, cultural novel, which communicates about the individuals who are lead towards the war as well the war lead towards death, destruction, national bond as well personal friendship. *Rushton* (p.179) argues that “Writing about a violent civil conflict means that Half of Yellow Sun does inevitably risk supporting negative western perceptions about Africa”. In this context, this novel becomes a true master piece in which the novelist shows her sense of morality and social responsibility as a writer which resembles with the words of Nadine Gordimer when she utters in her essay entitled “Literary Witness in a World of Terror: The Inward Testimony”

...the essence of the writer's role lies in her social responsibility, and responsibility is treated primarily as a form of witness. Fiction will ultimately be tested by its accountability to the truth of its society. . . .(15)

However, the religious as well cultural background of education dropped once the Nigerian exploitative revolution begins as well violent political reform launches. Violent political reform in the way, introduces Igbo nationalism. On the other hand, along with Igbo nationalism, it is important to address the Half of Yellow sun with other characters like Kainene as well Olanna during the Igbo backdrop conflict. *Norridge* (2012, p.20) argues that “*Half of a Yellow Sun* builds on the descriptions of love and pain, family and desire”. Although there has been influence of agony, family, desire in the novel, still the conflict has been the lack of understanding between the twin sisters, which results in dehumanizing of their relations, advancing the novel to study about sexuality. Relations amongst the characters are dehumanizing because the novel itself covers political events, upheavals and massacres.

Besides the political notion, the novel further textualizes racial oppression and the various crimes such as theft or sabotage, while themselves performing corresponding acts of aggression with impunity in the contemporary time of Nigeria. Therefore, New Historicist Hayden White points out that all historical facts emerge to us only through the form of language or narrative. In this context, the novelist writes about his protagonist,

Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook,

preposterous: 'Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings, and intentions to each other.' His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul.[13]

After the above discourse, it is quite clear to us that Adichie through her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* highlights the cultural forms which depict the real or material transactions of power in Nigerian society and how these forms subvert the established beliefs. She questions the interpretation of history, which locates the circumstances of state in contemporary time. She focuses the materialization of imperialism, power politics, culture, racial oppression, gender, abuse and even human emotion, pleasure and sexuality through the terrible dictatorship of state in his narratives. In this context she actually tries to textualize the materialistic production of imperialism and attempts to disrupt the terror of torturing democracy.

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