

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S NOVEL *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*: A READING IN POSTCOLONIAL MASCULINITY

Kaustubh Ranjan¹ & S. P. Prasad²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Applied Sciences and Humanities, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Sciences and Humanities, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

Received: 25 May 2018

Accepted: 04 Jun 2018

Published: 09 Jun 2018

ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) in the light of postcolonial masculinity. It analyses the influence of Odenigbo and Richard on the character of Ugwu and further tries to see Ugwu's character through the lens of Bhabha's idea of mimicry and ambivalence. In the backdrop of civil war, the novel portrays the internal struggles of developing nation post-colonialism. The war of Biafra plays an important role in determining the issue of marginality, history, and conflict present in the novel and how these themes give dynamism to characters and their portrayal.

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial Masculinity, Mimicry, Ambivalence, History, and Conflict

INTRODUCTION

The idea of masculinity has been a contentious subject within the paradigm of feminist criticism which directs a series of rebuttal to counter the dominant narratives which have, since time immemorial subjugated and subjected 'weaker' sections of a society, especially women; however the oppressive forces which act on men in significant ways goes unacknowledged and thus subjecting men to a site of 'repression'. The binary of man/ woman, strong/ weak, practical/ emotional, logical/ sentimental, and so on, predominate social relationships and casts of the sexes as a normative identity, thus setting them within a hierarchy of identities with socio-political bearings. The contours of masculinity alter with the multiplicity of social milieus and to their definitions, normative performativity it caters to. However the idea has undergone alterations with the changing socio-political and economic scenario; thus the 'development' in the social setup contributes a new set of definitions to its sequel- masculinity.

Adichie's writings bear a trace of Achebe's storytelling that Adichie herself admits and most of the critics have vouched for the same. The point of discussion emerges in the representation of characters, especially the portrayal of 'new' male and divergent masculinities in Adichie's writings. The transition in the preconfigured identities and relationships marked by altering social fabric due to colonial intervention serves as an immediate bearing on defining these divergent masculinities. The novel in discussion here is *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Half of a Yellow Sun - the title stands for the symbol they had on a Biafra flag, Igbo people had designed it to be a flag of their new nation they were fighting for. *Half of a Yellow Sun* thus symbolizes- a ray of hope for a new nation of the Igbo people, where all their struggles, pain and trauma would come to an end. It is a novel that takes us to the heart

wrenching Biafra war situation, where people are dying hungry, young kids are being sent to the war front without any adequate training or shoes, women are being raped for no reason by soldiers and army men. The course of the novel takes us to such a misery and difficulty that locating any other issue and criticism, except the struggle for survival in the novel, stands tough. In the Indian scenario, it becomes jarring to reader's conscience to visualize children chasing and eating lizards, snails and mouse as is depicted in the novel. The novel has theme of nationalism, nation building, and internal suffering of a nation after decolonization. Such novel lets one understand that decolonizing one's nation is not all that one struggle for both post-colonization, the regionalism, crude national politics driven from power and postcolonial differences are certain divergent issues one ends up struggling against. Apart from nationalism, class politics and regionalism, gender is one of the prominent themes that the novel addresses. The novel revolves around Odenigbo- a University professor of Mathematics, Richard- an English writer aspiring to write a novel about Igbo Folk Art and Ugwu- houseboy working for Odenigbo. We have some characters who are educated and are above the rural struggles, but their love, ideologies and relationships are put to test during the civil war and all characters come out with alternative aspects to their characters after the war.

The point of analysis in the present paper is the character of Ugwu and the influence of Odenigbo and Richard on his personality in the light of the colonial idea of ambivalence and mimicry. Ugwu is a prominent voice throughout the novel and the novel can be considered as a Bildungsroman from the viewpoint of an Ugwu's character. We get to see three different types and aspects of masculinity together in Nsukka. Nsukka as a town and particularly Odenigbo's house becomes a cosmos where the variety of characters can be assessed on their thoughts and viewpoints. Odenigbo represents the learned African man- a professor of Mathematics at University of Nsukka. He has dreams about his nation and who understands the role of an individual and his contribution towards the development of the nation. The dream of building a nation that is better and sustainable for the upcoming generation are strong forces present in Odenigbo's personality. Masculinity and nationalism have been often associated with bloodshed and violence. Prof. P.K.Vijayan rightly writes about the relation of Masculinity, Violence, Nationalism, in his course on *Gender, Sexuality Nation*:

It appears, the widespread tendency to associate masculinity with violence, or to treat violence as an essentially masculine phenomenon, is not because of any natural or innate tendency to violence in men, but because of the historical reliance of patriarchal formations, understood as masculine hegemonies, to rely – like all hegemonic formations – on a combination of force, or violence, and consent – and in this case, because the hegemony is gendered, so is the violence. Therefore, so also the discourse of nationalism that it is related to. (203-204)

An extremely important aspect of Odenigbo, while studying the representation of men in the novel, is his viewpoint on nation building and nationalism. The nationalism that he propagates is entirely different from the popular idea of fighting for your nation with arms and physical power, something that we see in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or something that we see Ugwu imagining. The idea of taking guns against the opponent's is not the idea that Odenigbo's nationalism is limited to, his character shows the aspect of research and development and foresightedness that are vital in the development of any nation.

Ugwu represents the rural idea of masculinity which see people like Odenigbo with awe and who see learning as far-fetched dreams. In the novel we really see Ugwu keen on learning and to the surprise of the readers at the end we see not Richard completing his novel that we keep on hearing since beginning but It is Ugwu who comes up with a novel about

war and the last line of the novel reads, "8 The Book: The world was silent when we did: - Ugwu writes his dedication last: Master, my good man". The Ugwu's character has multiple layers he represents the conscious, subconscious and unconscious aspects of the human mind. The Narrative takes us both to the unconscious and conscious views of Ugwu's self.

Richard, a white man on the black man's land shows us the alternative dimension of white man post-historical event of Colonialism. He is here to write a novel about African, Folk Art which he fails to do so till the end. It is again an attempt by the white men to tell the story of a culture he is not familiar with, a narrative that would be biased in nature. Richard is a mediocre journalist in London and his writing of the novel in Nigeria must be seen as his attempt to come to the center from the margin of his own land. Though we see this white man tries to sympathize with the pains that Nigerians are afflicted with during the war still cultural alienation is an aspect that can never be disassociated with the character of Richard. As a journalist reporting on a war he reports the pain and tragedy of the natives and also gets angry on other white journalists who have just landed to report the war and want to see some authentic pains and cry of the people. For the alien white journalists these natives are nothing more than a subject which they want to report about for their personal reward. The feeling of love and affection that Richard has for Kainene is genuine and it also adds to the dynamism of his character, his interest in the Nigerian folk art and culture must be seen as part of his attempt to understand the art of the land unexplored. All the characters mentioned above briefly allow Adichie to deal with various facts and themes which are not only popular, but also related to the development of society and the individual as a whole.

If war has been meaningful for someone the most, it is Ugwu, as his character goes through a complete transformation during the war. We see a writer developing out from a house boy who had no knowledge of English, speaking, reading or writing, but just through his listening, broken reading habit, and being aware of the surrounding he lives in, he becomes a writer. The experiences of life become his muse and we see a writer coming out of Ugwu. Ugwu experiences almost everything, the love, the hate, the struggle, hunger, power, he teaches his students, takes arm for the nation, fights, he is injured but he survives everything at last. In the backdrop of all we see him aspiring for one woman or the other his sexual fantasies are endless throughout the novel. He imagines almost all the women characters in his arms. His sexual fantasies and rape of the Bar girl shows the unconscious side of Ugwu's mind. The moment Ugwu is in the unexplored ambience, his wilderness comes out and he rapes the girl just simply to uphold his manliness before other members. P.K. Vijayan points out that "it appears, the widespread tendency to associate masculinity with violence, or to treat violence as an essentially masculine phenomenon". Rape is one sort of violence that Ugwu inflicts on the 'weaker sex' in the patriarchal company of other boys who conform to the thoughts that masculinity can only be proven through violence. Ardener's model of the relationship of the dominant and the muted group discussed in the essay *Feminist criticism in the wilderness* by Elaine Showalter, talking about a space exclusively dominated by men:

A corresponding zone of male experience alien to women. But if we think of the wild zone metaphysically, or in terms of consciousness, it has no corresponding male space for all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure and thus accessible to or structured by language. In this sense, the 'wild' has been always imaginary; from the male point of view, it may simply be the projection of the unconscious. (322)

Boy's quarter and the time that Ugwu spends in the army can be seen as a secluded space- a place where all of his fantasies are exercised. Ugwu is well behaved rational and reasonable in front of his master and other members of the

society, but his thoughts, his unconscious mind-set is in complete contrast to his conscious self. For Ugwu this novel comes as a Bildungsroman leading to the development of his character social as well as psychological development. Ugwu turning to be a writer towards the end of the novel must be seen as a crucial aspect of the novel. Ugwu represents the upcoming generation, the generation who resides in rural locality, but are putting all their efforts for their development. It is also important to note the dedication that Ugwu make to his master in the final line of the novel.

For Ugwu, his master is his role model that he wants to be like. Ugwu take his fellow black learned men as his role model. It is important to note that Ugwu doesn't see Richard- a white man, as his role model, but he sees Odenigbo as an ideal he should follow. We often see Ugwu looking at Odengibo's books and trying to read them, these are some visuals in the novel which showcase his desire to be like Odenigbo. The younger generation of Africa must have its own role models. The idea of hybridity and imitation stands relevant here as an aspiration to become like colonial master, one ends up losing one's own aboriginal roots and hence for Ugwu, his choice reflects what Africa and other colonized nations must look for. Adichie must be appreciated for giving this turn to the novel. Adichie herself admits in many of her interviews that she gets inspiration for her writings from Chinua Achebe and that are what Ugwu does. In a way Adichie's inspiration in the writing of a fellow black writer is put forth in the character of Ugwu. Who aspires to be learned like his master and not like his foil Richard, who wants to be a writer? Odengibo's house discussions in the evening, joined by fellow black teachers from the university, plenty of books and Odengibo's study help Ugwu what he ends up being at least. Richard must be seen as a symbol of colonial presence and Ugwu could have very well looked towards him for the lack and the difference that he has by being black. Richard must be seen symbolically as a stereotype and affirmation that Ugwu or blacks are expected to conform to but he disrupts that vicious circle and looks towards his fellow countrymen, who if not more, is still equally efficient and some who can inspire Ugwu. The idea of mimicry gives one fractured identity, something that may be seen in one way in the characters of the parents of the twin sisters Kainene and Olanna. The main argument raised by colonial power was - their burden to civilize the blacks, and the politics of the civilizing meant adopting the habits and forms of the colonial master. The natives should mimic their colonial masters in all aspects, but Ugwu mimics the speaking and the reading of his master Odenigbo. He turns the table and their relation of master and a houseboy comes as subversion- a colonial subversion, where the 'master' and the 'servant' both belong to the same race. In the book *Location of Culture* (1994) by Homi K. Bhabha writes:

If colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce irony, mimicry and repetition. In this comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects Mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. (85)

The history that is available to Ugwu is of his master who is described by her mother in the beginning of the novel as

The master was a little crazy; he had spent too many years reading books overseas, talked to himself in his office, did not always return greetings, and had too much hair. Ugwu's aunt said this in a low voice as they walked on the path. (Adichie, 1)

It was important for the young generation of Ugwu to be given a history, some inspiring figures they can look up to and that's the way Ugwu emerged looking towards his 'black' master who was well learned and not like any colonial

master but a man sharing the same culture, color and roots. When we analyze the relation of Ugwu and Odenigbo, we must look it through the equation of Adichie and Achebe. Achebe's writing in the English language- the colonial tongue has often been debated to which Achebe replies:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (Wroe)

Adichie uses the same style in her writings by africanising the colonial tongue so that it suits the native surroundings. The stereotype set by the colonial master that the colonized native looks up to, produces a subject, which is distorted, which reflects the deformed image of the colonial master. The relation between the master and his subject is that of power and authority, but in the blindness of the race for power and authority, the colonized subject loses his own roots and at the same he can never be uprooted to roots of colonial master. In case of Ugwu the relation was totally real and it never required any rooting and uprooting, he could look towards Odenigbo being rooted in his own culture and never going through the identity crisis, something most colonized subjects go through. While talking about the *ambivalence of mimicry*, Bhabha writes:

It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence. By 'partial' I mean both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'. It is as if the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once a resemblance and menace. (86)

The above extract clearly shows that the complete idea of 'being like someone', the resembling efforts leads you to a menace. The threat of being lost in the process of imitation is too high. The idea of 'partial presence's talks about the same thing- it means the process remains 'incomplete' and at the same time it disguises you from your true self, you go ambivalent in the process and experience Hamlet's dilemma of 'to be or not to be'. The issue with colonial master and colonized subject is the pressure of performance- trying to be like someone puts you under, the pressure of doing your best to resemble the other- the colonial master and the process interestingly is never ending and never satisfying. You cannot attain the semblance of someone and even if you do, people judge you on your exterior appearance and hence you fail. Ugwu falls prey to the idea of being under the shadow of white man- Richard. For instance, note his viewpoint where Richard expresses his desire to go to Ugwu's village for a traditional Igbo festival:-

But he (Ugwu) was pleased that he had mentioned the festival to Mr Richard, because it meant an opportunity to see Nnesinachi before she left for the North. To think how impressed she would be when he arrived in a white man's car, driven by the white man himself! She would certainly notice him this time, he was sure, and he could not wait to impress Anulika and his cousins and relatives with his English, his new shirt, his knowledge of sandwiches and running tap water, his scented powder. (Adichie, 86)

The complete idea that can be perceived from Ugwu's above statement is his attraction to resemble as close as one can to the ways of the white men and white men himself. Impressing your fellow villagers when you come out of a white man's car makes you thrive a little higher in your 'black' society. Being a guide to a white man and showing him the ways of your society lets you command respect from your own people. The trip to village with Mr. Richard for Ugwu was a luxury, a way to show off one's semblance to the white man. On the other hand, Odenigbo's visit to an Ugwu's village, when his mother is ill, is out of fellow feeling, out of humility and brotherhood.

“Put on a shirt and get in the car. Your village isn't far away, really. We should be back in good time.”

“Sah?”

“Put on a shirt and get in the car!” Master scribbled a note on the back of a flyer and left it on the table.

“We'll bring your mother here and have Patel take a look at her.” (89).

The stark difference of both the masters- the colonial master and the employee master let Ugwu understand the difference and lets readers also see clearly the idea of mimicry and ambivalence exquisitely apparent in their characters. The difference in Odenigbo and Ugwu's relation is that, in their relation, Ugwu is not under the pressure of coming up to his master's position. If he comes up to that position It is extraordinary for him, but even if he comes halfway, he is not going to fall into the nexus of mimicry and ambivalence that would be equally commendable of him. If his desire doesn't come to any conclusion of being close or half close to his master, it still won't spoil his identity and he shall still remain his 'good man'. In fact Ugwu's turning to be a writer at last must be seen as coming halfway close to his master, but it didn't lead into the 'rupture' of discourse. Ugwu's aspiration to be like his master is not only a resemblance, but It is his process of developing his own self-identity. Odenigbo also held a sense of responsibility towards Ugwu. The first thing that was Odenigbo's concern after Ugwu's arrival was his education. He says:-

“Why did you stop school?”

“My father's crops failed, sah.”

The master nodded slowly. “Why didn't your father find somebody to lend him your school fees?”

“Sah?”

“Your father should have borrowed!” Master snapped, and then, in English, “Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tools to understand exploitation?” (11)

Odenigbo tries to teach Ugwu the importance of education in resisting colonial idea and rule. Odenigbo is well aware that how he could overcome that politics and thus he explains Ugwu the colonial politics in education.

“There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass. You must read books and learn both answers. I will give you books, excellent books.” Master stopped to sip his tea. “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)

Odenigbo shared the situation Ugwu is in now and hence he also knows the way to uplift one from the situation. Odenigbo at times also introduced Ugwu to his guests in the most adequate manner by saying that, "Ugwu helps me around the house very clever boy." For Ugwu, this entire ambience was a space unexplored and something that might have changed the course of his living and thinking and that's exactly what happens. Ugwu is not well known to the ideological state apparatus of race, of color. For him the learning and supremacy that his master holds with other guests in his house itself makes him aspire to be like his master. For Ugwu the master's study, his evening discussions and his bare readings and imitations change Ugwu's destiny towards the end of the novel. It is important to note what Ugwu says in the beginning to his master Odenigbo- "But I learn everything fast" and that's what he does, he observes everything minutely and acutely. He often tries reading the books that are there in his master's study. Ugwu observes the evening discussions and of the guests, and later on imitates Odenigbo:-

Ugwu would sit on the same chair and imagine himself speaking swift English, talking to rapt imaginary guests, using words like decolonize and pan- African, molding his voice after Master's, and he would shift and shift until he too was on the edge of the chair. (20)

Ugwu's observation skills are commendable and It is important to note that there are various persons joining the evening discussions, even Richard does, but It is Odenigbo that Ugwu wants to be like. The novel shows the importance of good upbringing and environment. Ugwu under the shadow of Olanna and Odenigbo does quite well.

The sexual fantasies that he has for every next girl he meets are part of his teenage psyche and part of his unconscious space of the mind. That's why when Ugwu molests the bar girl just so that his fellow army men don't think he is weak and later on he also expresses his fear what if Kainene and Olanna get to know of this. Richard is asked by Ugwu if he is writing the novel and he says no, writing about war is not his cup of tea, trying to understand a cause that's not his own and that's where Ugwu appears to be more appropriate as It is his cause and he has experienced various colors of the war of his land that's his own. Richard applauds Ugwu's effort to narrate the pain of his fellow countrymen.

To conclude, the relation between Odenigbo and Ugwu appears to be of a master and subject which is in a great contrast to the idea of colonial master and colonized subject. A relation that shows the dynamism of colonized master and subject that will contribute the nation in a true manner. A relation that doesn't demand to leave your own roots, that doesn't tamper with your originality. The identity built has no mixed or partial presence. As Bhabha says:-

"In the ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white', on the margins of metropolitan desire, the founding objects of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental objects: *trouvés* of the colonial discourse - the part-objects of presence. It is then that the body and the book lose their part-objects of presence. It is then that the body and the book lose their representational authority. Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body" (92)

The identity made out of Ugwu and Odengibo's relation has no 'lack', a lack that he would like to fill or eradicate. There is no supremacy of gaze under which he must appropriate his identity and the self. Ugwu gets from Odenigbo what he could have never got from Richard or any colonial master. In the words of Frantz Fanon:

I am black: I am the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth, an abandonment of my ego in the heart of the cosmos, and no white man, no matter how intelligent he may be, can

ever understand Louis Armstrong and the music of the Congo. If I am black, it is not the result of a curse, but it is because, having offered my skin, I have been able to absorb all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a ray of sunlight under the earth. (31)

The dedication of Ugwu at last emerges a dedication that has a polyphonic meaning. It must also be seen as Adichie's tribute to Achebe. It is a tribute to making him familiar with his own abilities, his culture and roots. It is a gratitude to a person who gave Ugwu his identity. A person who never saw a servant in Ugwu who never saw the relation between the two to be that of the oppressor and the oppressed. A master who always called Ugwu as 'My good man' and hence to reciprocate the same was the idea most appropriately conveyed by a house-boy at last.

REFERENCES

1. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half Of A Yellow Sun*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014. Print.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location Of Culture*. London [etc.]: Routledge, 2004. Print.
3. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 2008. Print.
4. Lodge, David, and Nigel Wood. *Modern Criticism And Theory*. 2nd ed. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2000. Print.
5. Vijayan, P.K. *Gender, Sexuality Nation*. Delhi: IGNOU, 2017. Web. 4 Feb. 2018.
6. Bhattacharya, Anirban, *Why is Nigeria Adichie's Lowland? A Comparative Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's the Lowland and Chimamanda Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun (March 2018)*. *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature (IMPACT: IJRHAL)* ISSN (P): 2347-4564; ISSN (E): 2321-8878 Vol. 6, Issue 3, Mar 2018, 105-110.
7. Wroe, Nicholas. "Chinua Achebe: A Life In Writing." *the Guardian*. N.p., 2018. Web. 16 May 2018.