



Book Review

The World Was Silent When Biafrans Died

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2006), *Half of a Yellow Sun*, United Kingdom, Fourth Estate, 2006, Pages 433, ISBN: 9780007200276.

It is quite absurd to be writing about a book about a war in the middle of an ongoing war. Of course, I am going about with my life quite comfortably writing this from my desk. *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, however, talks about a war in a country far away, and the harrowing experiences that the citizens of a war-ravaged country face. The novel is set in Nigeria of the 1960s. The Nigerian Civil War went on from 1967 to 1970, as an armed conflict fought between Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra, a secessionist state that had declared its independence from Nigeria in 1967. During the course of war, there were approximately 100,000 overall military casualties, while between 500,000 and 2 million Biafran civilians died of starvation.

The book follows three characters through the tumultuous years: Ugwu, a teenage Igbo boy who moves to the city to work as a houseboy for a professor Odenigbo; Odenigbo's girlfriend Olanna; and Richard, a British white writer who marries Olanna's sister. The novel dabbles with the contradictions that people face in a newly independent Nigeria where a new class of Nigerians are getting educated, getting employment in universities and government offices, and are critical of the British policies and the corruption of the government. However, soon there is a coup that overthrows the Nigerian government, and ethnic tensions break out between the Igbo and the Hausa people of the country. The massacre of the Igbos led them to declare a new republic incorporating the southern part of the country called Biafra. During the conflict, Olanna's aunt and uncle get killed. The difficulties of the war force Ugwu, Olanna, Odenigbo, and their baby to shift to a refugee town. They are displaced refugees living under the threat of constant air raids, food shortages, and paranoia of being labelled a traitor to Biafra. Life gets complicated with domestic drama and living under constant fear.

Olanna is a critical character in the novel who symbolises the hope

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and courage of a new nation of Biafra. She is educated in London and is a synthesis of her Igbo culture and tradition, and the modern pragmatism. Olanna is educated, politically engaged, and embodies the spirit and hopes of a newly independent country. We experience the trauma of the war through Olanna. She witnesses the massacre of her relatives, paralysis, paranoia, and dark swoops which suffocate her. The gendered experience of the war comes from her character being one of the main sufferers of war. Her resilience and endurance to emotional, physical, and political turmoil forms a type of resistance that is gendered in nature.

Richard is the ambivalent white outsider to the Biafran struggle. He formally becomes a Biafran citizen, but his position is always one who has a racial privilege. He is often sympathetic and brave, but he is never in the danger that his fellow Biafrans are. The contradictions that take place in Richard makes for an emotionally rich description of a person looking for an identity in the middle of war. Richard writes a book about the war, but abandons it midway mentioning that “the war isn’t my story to tell.”

Ugwu is the coming-of-age figure in the novel. His development has a life in Odenigbo’s household with security, and then later as a refugee and child soldier, which brings the baggage of trauma and disillusionment. As Ugwu joins the army for the Biafran cause, he is not made a hero or glorified. He participates in wartime atrocities, for which he does not forgive himself. Ugwu later develops as the author of the book which Richard gives up writing: denoting a crucial movement where Africans take agency to narrate their own history.

The atmosphere of the novel is thick, with a fear so palpable it feels like a physical weight on the chest. Adichie transforms the abstract concept of “war” into the agonizing, minute-by-minute anxiety of a mother watching her child’s ribs begin to show. We feel helpless in the face of the tragedy that the baby of Odenigbo and Olanna faces as the blockade caused by the war tightens. The haunting description of hollowed-out bellies and thinning hair of children dying from kwashiorkor paints a distressing and visceral descent into the lives of people ravaged by the war.

The novel is not an account of the war. It does not deal with the intricacies and nuances of geopolitics that eventually led up to the civil war. The book focuses on the harrowing raw trauma inflicted on the human psyche. It is a story told from the inside out, where the first casualties are almost inevitably women. This gendered lens is most striking in the evolution of Ugwu, whose loss of innocence is tied directly to the systemic dehumanization of women. Even the Biafran heroes are no exception to the crimes they commit against women. Power is always exercised on women through emotional or physical means. This is perpetuated by the army, guards, police, neighbours, and

even husbands.

Ethnic conflict is a theme that is ubiquitous in the history of the modern African nations. Most of these can be traced back to the times of colonisation and their impacts. Britain was largely responsible for the civil war in Nigeria. The colonial administration amalgamated incompatible regions in 1914 and fostered ethnic divisions. This combination of the Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria was done for administrative ease and to maintain control. During the civil war, the British government actively supported the Nigerian government against the Republic of Biafra to protect their investment in the oil sectors.

In the discussion of mainstream economics, we often overlook the role that colonialism played in affecting the different national outcomes. However, Africa probably is the primary example of the deep wounds that colonialist policies can cause and fester. The problems of colonialism did not magically disappear when the countries of the global south became independent. Rather they took different shapes and forms. It is important to appreciate the power relations that exist among countries, and how these are reflections of the colonial past.

The book is not an easy read. It makes space in the depths of the consciousness, even when we are privileged enough not to be first hand victims of wars. She breathes life into the anonymous statistics of conflict, attaching intimate faces and trembling voices to the “hundreds” we so conveniently scroll past in our daily feeds. The world has borne witness to the wars that are driven by colonialist ambitions, wars which have been started by developed countries to access resources of developing countries. In an article in *The Guardian*, Frederick Forsyth, a former war correspondent and author, mentions:

As for me, sometimes in the wee small hours I see the stick-like children with the dull eyes and lolling heads, and hear their wails of hunger and the low moans as they died. What is truly shameful is that this was not done by savages but aided and assisted at every stage by Oxbridge-educated British mandarins (Forsyth, 2020).

References

Forsyth, F. (2020). Buried for 50 years: Britain’s shameful role in the Biafran war. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfre-e/2020/jan/21/buried-50-years-britain-shameful-role-biafran-war-frederick-forsyth>