

### **Sophia O. Ogwude**

Sophia O. Ogwude is Professor of English and Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja, Nigeria, where she teaches Literary theory as well as African and Comparative literatures. Her recent publications include works on postcolonial studies, non-fiction prison literature and Nawal el Saadawi.

E-mail: soogwude@yahoo.co.uk

## **History and ideology in Chimamanda Adichie's fiction**

### **History and ideology in Chimamanda Adichie's fiction**

The colonial experience of the African and the imposition of colonial values on the African worldview are factors that indeed had provided the impetus and even motivation for much of the literary production in the continent. This essay traces specifically the issue of religious ideology/conflict from Achebe through Ngũgĩ to Adichie. It attempts to show that in the successful execution of her goals and objectives in *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Adichie mounts the rostrum reserved for the African masters of the art. In this novel, she, in addition to other things, shows the wickedness perpetrated by overzealous African converts who often demand and expect (from their dependants) the degree of self-negation which Soyinka has identified as cultural hostility. The essay further posits that in the celebration of Nigerian history, even when 'temporarily dislocated', as well as our legitimate niche in the Commonwealth of Nations, as she has done in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie educates non-Africans and alienated Africans about the indomitable African spirit. **Key words:** African cultural traditions; African male autocracy; colonial social values; Nigerian women fiction; religious chauvinism.

The colonial invasion of Africa in the late nineteenth century and the consequent cultural conflict between the colonising power and the colonised other is now a well-worn theme of the African novel. This cultural conflict was manifested on many fronts. Conversion to the Christian religion with its ripple effects, especially religious intolerance and its often disheartening disavowal of much of our African cultural beliefs and ways that it bred on the part of these new converts, constitute an integral part of this conflict. Significantly, this contact with the imperial power and its attendant conflicts, were in part, and to varying degrees, cultural as well as ideological. O' Flinn's (1975) article "Towards a sociology of the Nigerian novel" shows statistically that creative works from Nigeria, and in particular the South East region of Nigeria, from where Chinua Achebe comes, have enjoyed commendable boost since after the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. Nigerian fiction has continued to flourish even after the Nigerian civil war during which there was the inevitable lull in the production of novels. Names such as Christopher Okigbo, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, John Munonye, Vincent Ike, and now, more recently Chimamanda Adichie and many more make an impressive list of creative writers from that region.<sup>1</sup>

On various fronts, the conflict in Achebe's second novel, *Arrow of God* (1964) is largely ideological: the African worldview and culture in collision with imposed Eurocentric values. The religious ideological conflict is not independent of the cultural contact but has essentially stemmed from it. This study is not concerned with an examination of Achebe and the Christian religion. Rather, we shall attempt to examine and delineate earliest traces of religious zeal as enunciated in *Arrow of God*, our goal being to situate Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006) appropriately in the canon of our literature especially where religious fanaticism has been explored as 'cultural hostility' in the African novel. In this essay the marked affinities Adichie has with the early masters of African creative writing and criticism, especially Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and Soyinka will be highlighted, especially with respect to her style, thematic concerns, and her social vision and commitment.

In *Arrow of God* pure pragmatic considerations informed Ezeulu's decision to send his son, Oduche to the white man's school and thus, inescapably, to his church also as one could not have one without the other. The colonisers' "great power and conquest" convinced Ezeulu of the necessity for "some people [to] learn the ways of his deity" (*Arrow*, 42) and knowledge of their wisdom persuaded him to encourage Oduche to go to the white man's school that he might acquire this wisdom. Thus, having "satisfied himself that the white man had not come for a short visit but to build a house and live" (*Arrow*, 45), he concluded that it would be wise to understudy the white man through his son, Oduche. However, he was never under any illusions as to the ultimate objectives of the new religion which he likens to leprosy. In his own words, "allow him a handshake and he wants to embrace" (*Arrow*, 42) and he was thus fully prepared to draw a firm line should the need arise as he demonstrates when Oduche sought permission to absent himself from the family manual labour in order to go to Okperi on account of the school. His indignant outburst leaves no room for any doubts as to his unwillingness to surrender more than he was ready to:

Listen to what I shall say now. When a handshake goes beyond the elbow we know it has turned to another thing. It was I who sent you to join those people because of my friendship to the white man, Wintabota. He asked me to send one of my children to learn the ways of his people and I agreed to send you. *I did not send you so that you might leave your duty in my household. Do you hear me? Go and tell the people that chose you to go to Okperi that I said no. Tell them that tomorrow is the day on which my sons and wives and my son's wife work for me. Your people must know the custom of this land; if they don't you must tell them.* Do you hear me? (*Arrow*, 13–4; emphasis added).

Unfortunately, even though expectedly, Oduche soon began to nurse ambitions of his own quite apart from his father's initial design; he recognized the self-actualising potential of the new education and its enormous possibilities for enhanced social status. His secret ambitions helped to make him a pliable instrument in the hands of Mr John Goodcountry.

New African converts, as exemplified in this case, goaded both by overzealousness on their own individual part as well as by over-enthusiastic masters, assumed that traditional African religions and Christianity must be opposed one to the other. And this to the chagrin and consternation of moderate Africans, who while acknowledging and accepting the inevitability of the colonisers' occupying presence, recognised as well that all efforts geared towards encouraging the abrogation of their African cultural values, could only be deemed cultural hostility. The playing out of this binary antagonism aggravated and worsened the culture clash of the colonial era in Africa.

Ngũgĩ's *The River Between* (1965) brings more forcefully to us than *Things Fall Apart* the assumed polarity between African religion and culture and Christianity. This is as embodied by Joshua, against whom in contrast, the author pitches his daughter Muthoni particularly, and to lesser degrees, the rest of his family. In place of the total denunciation of African ways that Joshua urges, Muthoni's own belief is summarised in her soul cry:

I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges [...] Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. (*River*, 26).

Not even on her deathbed did she ever doubt her vision of a truly fulfilling synthesis of the African ideology of initiation into the ways of the tribe and, the Christian religion. "I am still a Christian", she tells her sister and confidant Nyambura, "see, a Christian in the tribe" (*River*, 53). Ngũgĩ uses this native custom to make important comments. The ultimate goal of the vicious attack on circumcision by Livingstone and his convert, Joshua, in the guise of religious fervour is actually not religious but rather political and economic, as the narrator intimates:

Circumcision was the central rite in the Gikuyu way of life [...] [it] was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept people together, bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and something that gave meaning to a man's life. *End the custom and the spiritual basis of the tribe's cohesion and integration would be no more.* (*River*, 37, 68; emphasis added).

Lloyd Williams (1971: 54) summarises the novelist's position in the following words:

He knows that religion can be meaningful to a people only if it relates to them in their daily lives, only if it rises out of the important aspects of their past and speaks directly to their experiences in the present. A religion which speaks only of religious ideals and moral truths, without touching on the concrete situation of man in his everyday life, can give to man nothing but emptiness.

It was to fill this gaping hole of nothingness that Muthoni sought and found fulfilment in the ways of the tribe. Sadly, her father who had himself at times wondered why it was now considered a sin to marry more than one wife when in the old testament, many of the fathers of the faith had themselves married many wives, was far too blinded by his own self-righteousness and sheer misguided religious bigotry to be able to look beyond his nose and empathise with his daughter; pitifully too, he does not even grieve her loss:

Joshua heard about the death of Muthoni without a sign of emotion on the face. [...] He did not ask Miriamu when she died or how Miriamu had learnt of the facts. [...] To him, Muthoni had ceased to exist on the very day she had sold herself to the devil. Muthoni had turned her head and longed for the cursed land. Lot's wife had done the same thing and she had turned to stone, a rock of salt, to be forever a stern warning to others. The journey to the new Jerusalem with God was not easy. It was beset with temptation. But Joshua was determined to triumph, to walk with a brisk step, his eye on the cross. (*River*, 53–4).

I have taken the liberty to quote this passage at length because in it Ngũgĩ actually encapsulates salient aspects of the heavily self-indoctrinated, self-righteous, religious ideologues like Joshua and Adichie's Eugene Achike as we shall soon see. The most unfortunate aspect of this phenomenon is the untoward misrepresentation as well as the misapplication, of biblical teachings. Does Joshua's Bible not have the story of King David and his erring son, Absalom? Can a people's ways and culture, in this specific case, circumcision, be deemed devilish even if we concede that sanitary standards may not have been accorded the attention due it in these operations? By what stretch of the imagination can any truly informed mind compare Muthoni with Lot's unnamed wife and, Muthoni's Kenya with Sodom and Gomorra? Also, where is the temptation, of which he speaks? And where is this imagined new Jerusalem to which he must march? Obviously, Ngũgĩ here satirises obsessive African converts to the new Christian religion especially because they barely understood much of what they so resolutely defended and held up for emulation against their tested culture. Indeed we learn that:

Joshua believed circumcision to be so sinful that he devoted a prayer to asking God to forgive him for marrying a woman who had been circumcised.

Sometimes, when alone with Miriamu, his wife, he would look at her and sadly remark, 'I wish you had not gone through this rite.'

Not that Miriamu shared or cherished these sentiments. But she knew him. Joshua was such a staunch man of God and such a firm believer in the Old Testament that, he would never refrain from punishing a sin, even if it meant beating his wife. He did not mind as long as he was executing God's justice. (*River*, 31).

Yet, it is difficult to recall anywhere in the Bible where it is shown that men beat their wives for any reason; neither is there anywhere in the Bible where it is written that men are, or should be expected, to execute God's justice! Joshua's Christianity has no room for compassion. In him we see a man with a self-imposed mandate to "execute God's justice." Interestingly, this theme reoccurs in *Petals of Blood* (1977) where, Munira, the headmaster and his doubtful or misguided desire to save Karega, from the whoring Wanja, leads him to set her house on fire. Chimamanda Adichie's debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), as we shall also see, joins the fray with a stunning newness. By this time too, Oduche's escapade with the deified royal python becomes a mere child's play.

Even though our effort here is not to attempt a feminist reading of Ngũgĩ, we need to note that Joshua's autocratic nature as moulded and nurtured by religious narrow-mindedness, is the bane of his family comprising his wife and two daughters, all of whom are subjected to, and suffer, severe emotional as well as psychological abuse. A reading of *Purple Hibiscus* may further help us conclude that the economically dependent, the aged and, African women especially, are often at the receiving end of the wickedness perpetrated by overzealous male converts who invariably demand and expect the degree of self-negation which Soyinka has identified as 'cultural hostility'. *Purple Hibiscus* has helped to bring this reading to the fore.

*Purple Hibiscus* explores religious chauvinism as cultural hostility. Within the first fifty pages of the text, the major characters are introduced and the major themes as well. In the very section appropriately titled, "Breaking Gods", these main portraiture are firmly established. The first sentence of the novel reads: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère." In addition to the obvious allusion to the classic, *Things Fall Apart*, in this one sentence we learn a lot. Before now things did not fall apart and the status quo was maintained; Jaja went to communion; and, the figurines rested secure on the étagère to be meticulously scrubbed and polished after the inevitable and unjustifiable battering. Then we are further told that during Ash Wednesday "Papa, wearing a long, gray robe like the rest of the oblates, helped distribute ash. [...] His line moved the slowest because he pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross with his ash-covered thumb, and slowly, meaningfully enunciated every word of 'dust and unto dust you shall return.'" (*Hibiscus*, 3).

The family of Eugene Achike as presented here leaves us with much to desire. Eugene always sits in the front row, receives communion first, is known for giving the biggest donations, buys the most communion wine, and virtually finances all the major expenditures of the church. Within the next two pages, we also learn from Father Benedict that Brother Eugene and his paper, *The Standard*, spoke out so much

on the part of truth and justice that *Amnesty World* thought it fit and proper to confer on him the human rights award. Yet in his home paradoxically, there is no freedom! Autocracy breeds and perpetrates fear of physical assault and injury, and attempts at self-preservation combine to produce teenagers whose normalcy seems doubtful even to their relations.

Eugene is presented to us as a socially and financially successful but fatally flawed personality. This in itself is an apt summary of the ambiguous gains of the 'converted African' who while acquiring socioeconomic gains on the one hand, accepts a truncated cultural matrix on the other. Like Joshua, Eugene Achike's religious fervour is essentially empty and devoid of basic Christian tenets. He is evidently oblivious of the fact that physical abuse and an absolute lack of humanness is anathema to Christianity and to all well-known Christian values.

With amazing craft and talent the initiating action of the novel is situated *in medias res* at a critical turning point, bringing to mind the epic as a literary genre as well as the stream of consciousness technique. *Purple Hibiscus* may not qualify as an epic in the strict sense of the word, all things considered. However, it exhibits the epic spirit especially when we look beyond our sentiments towards the main character, Eugene, in his domestic affairs to consider his immense socioeconomic success. And as for the appropriateness of the genre, we recall Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) and the redefinitions of poetry and the language of poetry in the Romantic period, a position which has been aptly summarised by Bloom and Trilling (1973: 591) where they observe that Wordsworth's submission translates ultimately to the assertion "that between the language of prose and of poetry there was no essential dissimilarity and that prose can be just as poetical as poetry itself, [and that this declaration] may be thought of as the trumpet which brought down the wall separating the two modes of expression." Then as regards the novel's subject matter – colonisation and colonialism, religion and religious intolerance, and domestic violence – these are all very serious subjects and in addition, many aspects of the Nigerian state are realistically portrayed in the novel thereby meriting the appellation of bourgeois epic which, for Lukacs, as quoted by Abrams (2005: 83), would include "all novels which, in his view, reflect the social reality of their capitalist age on a broad scale." And then finally, and significantly, is the fact that the fate of Eugene's family depended on his actions.

The novel begins at the point where Jaja and his sister Kambili having had the opportunity of visiting their aunt and cousins, had then come to the realisation that there was need to call to question much of what they had in the past assumed normal and acceptable. The contrast between their luxurious but lifeless prison, which they called home, and their Aunty Ifeoma's truly lived-in earthy household made the difference; here, as Kambili tells the reader, the air is free for you to breathe as you wished and even laughter is prayed for. Praying is not done mechanically but with joyous expectation. And no one is compelled or conditioned to talk in whispers. The

contrast is implicit and convincing, spoken and observed as it is, from an innocent young adult's point of view. In Aunty Ifeoma's house, children are allowed to be children and are an essential part of the decision-making concerning their future. The practical atmosphere here aroused and maintained self-confidence unlike the austere, inhibiting environment at home. Upon their return, Kambili notes this difference in this internal monologue:

I wanted to tell mama that it did feel different to be back, that our living room had too much empty space, too much wasted marble floor that gleaned from Sisi's polishing and housed nothing. Our ceilings were too high. Our furniture was lifeless: [...] the leather sofa's greeting was a clammy coldness, the Persian rugs were too lush to have any feeling. (*Hibiscus*, 190).

Naturally, and as might be expected, things began to fall apart upon their return because their time away had exposed them to alternative and wholesome values. Their grandfather whom they had been taught to distance themselves from, they had now had the golden opportunity to see at very close quarters. This close proximity proved illuminating. First, they could see that he is loved by their aunty and first cousins, all of whom are themselves Christians. Moreover, they witness that he is on his part, and in contrast with their father, large hearted enough to remember to pray for his misguided son, whom the old man believes, is under a curse. Ironically, his hypocritical and self-righteous son lacks the gentleness, patience, fortitude and dignity of the purported heathen. Regrettably, of Eugene's palatial mansion, we learn that "Papa-Nnukwu had never set foot in it, because when Papa had decreed that heathens were not allowed in his compound, he had not made an exception for his father" (*Hibiscus*, 62).

A close reading of this text ultimately leads to the conclusion that Adichie's artful combination of wit and technique shows her talent. The parallel between her work and Ngũgĩ's is obvious and the differences, no less so. If per chance it was inevitable to draw to conclusion that Joshua's poorly digested Christianity encouraged and fuelled his repulsive attitude to his family, we are shocked at the degree of Eugene's inhumanity to others under the pretext of religious zealousness. Like Joshua, his Christianity is without humanity. His brand of Christianity does not include the well-known Christian commandment to honour one's father. Charity and kindness are all not part of it as well: "Papa himself never greeted Papa Nnukwu, never visited him, but he sent slim wads of naira through Kevin or through one of our umunna members, slimmer wads than he gave Kevin [that is his driver] as a Christmas bonus." (*Hibiscus*, 61).

Eugene is both vindictive and unforgiving; for no degree of silent imploring can dissuade him from inflicting severe physical abuse on members of his family for any imagined offence.

His house is for all purposes a luxurious prison where indices of battering abound. His wife, Beatrice's polishing of the étagère was her way of containing her emotional and psychological turmoil after each physical assault. Not even the pregnancy of a much-awaited child is enough to persuade Eugene against executing God's imagined justice on his hapless and long-suffering wife whose physical demands as a result of early pregnancy could not be countenanced. Of all the accounts of marital violence recorded in the African novel, none is as brutal or as sadistic as Chimamanda Adichie's in *Purple Hibiscus*, especially because of its realistic and matter-of-fact narrative point of view.

As for Eugene's equally unfortunate children, at ten, Jaja's finger had been disfigured as punishment for failing "two questions on his catechism test" as a result of which he "was not named the best in his First Holy Communion class" (*Hibiscus*, 144). Still on the matter of Holy Communion, for taking some food before medication as is usually advised, Kambili is badly beaten for the little cornflakes she takes before the panadol tablets she has to swallow to assuage her menstrual pains. Her father is fixedly concerned that as a result of that failing, she would not be able to go for communion! Her mother and brother were also victims of this assault, ostensibly for conniving with Kambili instead of restraining her.

By the time we meet the child narrator, she had unintentionally become "a backyard snob to most of [her] class girls" (*Hibiscus*, 52) and had since been consigned to the unsociable group of her class. Her regimental upbringing did not allow her to socialize with her mates. In her words: "Once, Kevin had told Papa I took a few minutes longer, and Papa had slapped my left and right cheeks at the same time, his huge palms left parallel marks in my face and ringing in my ears for four days." (*Hibiscus*, 52). This had served as a permanent deterrent for Kambili to know that she must not socialize with her classmates after school but must always run to the waiting car. And for allowing themselves to be housed under the same roof as their biological grandfather, Jaja and Kambili receive the shocking bestial treatment of having their feet burnt in boiling hot water from the bathtub.

Eugene is a man lacking in self-control in matters of imagined Christian piety, he is devoid of genuine Christian charity as seen in his determined oppression of the weak and helpless, his wife and their teenage children as well as his aged father. He uses his wealth as a bribe to win others to 'the fold' and also as a veritable tool to coerce and ensure compliance; and therefore refuses to be malleable and insistence on self-dignity unleashes his fury and wickedness. His exasperated sister sums up our position in the observation that "Eugene quarrels with the truths he does not like. [...] Eugene has to stop doing God's job. God is big enough to do His own job. If God will judge our father for choosing to follow the way of our ancestors, then let God do the judging, not Eugene." (*Hibiscus*, 95–6). For her economic survival, his wife must sacrifice her physical and indeed emotional well-being. Eugene's charity we note, does not begin at home, his father as we have seen already, is not allowed into his house and is only

barely supported financially; his charity is only for public consumption.

Significantly, neither the priests nor the numerous sisters who are all privy to his physical and emotional battering of his family are able to remonstrate with him; they do not even attempt to help him find genuine help possibly because such will ultimately help to slacken the vice-like grip the church has on him, and by extension, on his finances. The hypocrisy of the church is adequately captured in Father Benedict and all the other religious who are not able or willing to intervene in the physical abuse of members of his household. The priest's warped sense of Christianity is summed up as in the observation that "[D]uring his sermons," he "usually referred to the pope, Papa and Jesus – in that order." (*Hibiscus*, 4). The older Achike, Papa Nnukwu, is obviously correct in his assumption that Eugene is cursed. He will persistently inflict bodily harm, often life-threatening, on members of his family and then in tears, go after cures in hospitals. His wretchedness is made more vivid when he and his life and demise are juxtaposed against his father's culturally grounded simplicity, self-respecting confidence and dignified death.

The even-handed handling of the Roman Catholic clergy is worthy of note. Reverend Father Amadi, like everything else around Ifeoma and her children in Nsukka is authentically Christian. Despite his down-to-earth approach to life and his creative relationship with others, he is nonetheless ever mindful of his vocation to priesthood. Even the most devout Catholic will find it difficult to accuse the author of disrespect to the Catholic faith, because allowing for a free creative spirit, Adichie's portraiture are realistic and credible.

Jaja's defiance is obviously borne out of pent-up resentment against his father and his determination as the alternative male in the house, to protect his mother, sister and the unborn brother whom he had loved and sworn to protect even before it could be born. That the so-called accident in which it was lost affected the examination performance of even the-quick-to-please Kambili leaves no one in any doubt as to how devastating it must have been for Jaja. His deliberate provocation of his father on that fateful Palm Sunday was to signal the end of placid compliance and impotent acquiesce and, the beginning of a new era, an era of frank and out-spoken resistance in the house: "Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do." (*Hibiscus*, 15–6).

It is hardly surprising that Eugene died from poisoning from his wife and her maid, Sisi. The semblance of grief from his bereaved family was their "bewildered silence" (*Hibiscus*, 283). And remarkably, Jaja's main regret is summed up in his remarks that he "should have taken care of Mama." Continuing he says, "Look how Obiora balances Aunty Ifeoma's family on his head, and I am older than he is. I should have taken care of Mama." (*Hibiscus*, 15–16).

Exactly what kind of mindset has been responsible for the production of a work of these sentiments and projections? Adichie is “the truly self-apprehending entity within the African world reality,” who knows that “knowledge and exposition of the reference points of colonial cultures,” is essentially “false intellectualism,” the exhibition of which “amounts to intellectual bondage and self-betrayal,” to quote Soyinka (1976: viii). With painstaking exposition, and a fine eye for details, the novelist contrasts various life-styles within her social matrix, showing the wholesome and life-supporting alternatives as well as the negative and self-destructive ones. In this work as in her other novel, she debunks the notion and legitimacy of the position that foreign colonial culture and values should be the benchmark for us Africans. She argues like the masters of the art have done before her that alien values which are embraced even when they were not properly understood can only lead to self-destruction. Ideologically, Soyinka, Ngũgĩ and Achebe have insisted and demonstrated that our creative writers must look inward for that which would uplift and nurture and educate, without jeopardising their role of maintaining the moral standard of our society through the critical appraisals of every aspect of our social life. In this novel, the novelist shows a clear understanding of this objective.

Adichie’s second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) is essentially a fictionalised account of the Nigerian civil war.<sup>2</sup> The war was a dark period of our history as a people. However, the story is told in a rather comforting tone for all who actually experienced the war, irrespective of tribe. They were, no doubts, the Abdumaliks of the war; equally true also, were the Mohammeds. Of the senseless massacres, Mohammed fumes, “Allah does not allow this [...] Allah will not forgive them. Allah will not forgive the people who have made them do this. Allah will never forgive this.” (*Sun*, 150). And he remained faithful to Olanna and his love for her through the war period and after.

The pertinent question to consider at this juncture would be the authorial intention for engaging in such a project. Many historical novels are quite content to recount past events in such a manner as to “make the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and the course of the narrative.” (Abrams 2005: 201). Others, like the early novels of Achebe and Ngũgĩ and many of Bessie Head’s historical works aim to refute the contention that there was nothing positive in the African worldview prior to the colonial invasion. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is Janus-like. It goes beyond recounting historical events to provide a positive social vision. Of interest is the novelist’s handling of relationships, within the academia, across various strata of the society, and interestingly, among women of different social and educational standing. In this novel, the African world, including its values, its culture and its civilisation, are all portrayed positively. Even when it seems that the incidents narrated might only be seen and experienced in the upper echelon of the Nigerian society, by

capturing such in the novel, the novelist brings such incidents up to a general place for our education as Nigerians, especially the misguided or alienated, as well as others, that is, Europeans and other foreigners. The picture of the Nigerian society that she paints is authentic and positive and one for which we can all be collectively grateful and proud.

Soyinka had written in the preface to his acclaimed volume, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976: ix) that the book:

is engaged in what should be the simultaneous act of eliciting from history, mythology and literature, for the benefit of both genuine aliens and alienated Africans, a continuing process of self-apprehension whose temporary dislocation appears to have persuaded many of its none existence or its irrelevance (retrogression, reactionism, racism, etc) in contemporary world reality.

In this postulation, he provided a veritable manifesto for writers from the continent, the aim of which was to point the way forward. There is a great deal to say about our true history, our myths, and our literature, and only our people can be effectively trusted with the task of informing others of the existence and relevance of these realities. Adichie had not even been born at the time of this publication and this fact among others then must reveal the magnitude of the success of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In the consciousness of the committed African writer, his or her reader(s) should be 'aliens', that is people who may need to learn a few authentic things about the African mind, African thought processes and African values. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is unquestionably the product of a committed female African writer. The novel is a true celebration of the *Niaga* spirit. The indomitable spirit of our common people is here lavishly extolled.

The novel is a delight when held up for a feminist reading. Writing on "The female writer and her commitment", Ogundipe-Leslie (1986: 8) argues that the female African writer should be committed in three ways: first as a writer, then as a woman and finally as a third world person. Expatiating further, she writes that: "As a writer, she has to be committed to her art, seeking to do justice to it at the highest levels of expertise. She should be committed to her vision, whatever it is, which means she has to be willing to stand or fall for that vision. She must tell her own truth." (Ogundipe-Leslie 1986: 8). One of the feminist approaches has been for women writers to project women characters in clear positive light as against what it is believed many male writers have either been unwilling to do, or have been incapable of doing. The novel bustles with bold and successful full-bodied women with no inhibitions. These women – Kainene, Olanna, their mum, the visiting black American lecturer, Edna Whaler, Aunty Ifeka, and Miss Adebayo – and their worldview and life-styles remind us of Soyinka's sophisticated female characters who are also well grounded in, and proud of our culture. Adichie's women are all very strong. Olanna we are told:

was used to her mother's disapproval; it coloured most of her major decisions, after all: when she chose two week's suspension rather than apologise to her Heath-grove form mistress for insisting that the lessons on Pax Britannica were contradictory; when she joined the Students' Movement for Independence in Ibadan; when she refused to marry Igwe Okagbue's son, and later, Chief Okaro's son. (*Sun*, 36).

Her twin sister, Kainene is devoid of sentiments and is even more wilful. It was she who "used to say their mother's breasts did not dry up at all, that their mother had given them to a nursing aunt only to save her own breasts from drooping" (*Sun*, 40). Expectedly, like her twin sister, Kainene, she makes her choices and stands by them. In Olanna's time of crises, help comes from unexpected quarters. Her presumed uneducated Aunty Ifeka, helps her to stand on her feet and fight instead of running to Kano as an escape route:

No [...] You will go back to Nsukka. [...] I am not asking you to go back to his house. I said you will go back to Nsukka. Do you not have your own flat and your own job? [...] You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me? Your life belongs to you and you alone. (*Sun*, 230).

The striking aspects of the exposition and resolution of the crises between Odenigbo, Olanna and Amala, on the one hand, and Olanna, Richard, Kainene, and Madu on the other hand, are many. With Olanna and Odenigbo, as with Kainene and Richard, Adichie presents couples whose values and lives testify to the dynamic African spirit. Significantly, motherhood as well as childlessness is made quite inconsequential. In this novel, the vexed issue of bride-price and the quest for acceptance by the larger family as recipe for a successful marriage are all jettisoned. Olanna, the apparent victim of Odenigbo's unfaithfulness rightly detects the actual victim in Amala, "who did not have a voice" and who "was so helpless" (*Sun*, 256, 258). Human lapses are condoned in a humane stance, and this in the final analysis, proves redemptive for the offender as well as for the offended. In these aspects, the novelist tears down major age-long crippling notions of what may or may not be acceptable in relationships.

Unquestionably, characterisation is one of Adichie's major strong points. It is banal just to say that her characters all come alive. The magnitude of her project in these works is astonishing and the painstaking portrayal of individual characters is actually amazing. Whether we consider the key players in Odenigbo's house parties, or his energetic mother, or the unfortunate Amala seeking desperately to abort an unwanted pregnancy by eating hot peppers, or the various house helps and their intrigues and rivalries, or her various women characters in different scenes – market, homes, the university, relief items sharing grounds, etc, each individual personality is etched in

the readers' memory. Edmund White's apt critique of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is reproduced at the back cover page, reads thus:

What is so memorable and accomplished about *Half of a Yellow Sun* is that political events are never dryly recited; rather they are felt through the medium of lived lives, of actual aching sensitive experiences. To my knowledge it is unusual for a young woman author to capture with such precision and verisimilitude the feelings of a man, but Ugwu is a totally realised character, ambitious, devoted, sexual, scholarly, courageous, uncomplaining, resourceful and intuitive. These characteristics, easy to rattle off, are all dramatized and substantiated in this long and intricate but always compelling narrative.

Adichie's projections of her society are largely visionary. She goes beyond mirroring the contemporary Nigerian society in that in exposing our current existence, she emphasizes what we could become. Masters and houseboys relate as human beings and not as masters and slaves; the woman of the house does not need to be accepted by her mother-in-law or to prove her usefulness as a child-bearer before she can confidently take charge of her house. For minds trapped in primordial African values, the novelist could be considered iconoclastic but in reality, she is delightfully progressive. In conclusion, it is inevitable to observe that Chimamanda Adichie is pleasurable to read.<sup>3</sup> Her choice of subject matter in the texts discussed in this essay is ambitious and this makes her successful execution of her objectives all the more impressive and laudable. This is one writer who has now put us squarely back on the right and dignified path established by the masters of the art on the African continent after some years of pedestrian literary output. The remarkable and distinguishing aspect of this writer is in the celebration of contemporary Nigerian life regardless of all odds.

#### Notes

1. Critics from this geographical area make an equally impressive list. We draw attention particularly to the laudable role of Ernest Emenyonu who time and time again calls for critiques of these works. His *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* (2004), co-edited with Iniobong Uko and published in two volumes comes to mind. The six articles in the second part of the second volume are germane to the discussion at hand as they are devoted to Achebe's exposition on the Igbo worldview and Christianity.
2. Her descriptions are so vivid and incidents so well-captured that but for the fact that the author's age is common knowledge, it may have been easier to conclude that she wrote from her own life experiences. It is therefore not surprising that this book has won so much international recognition. In addition to the remarkably positive appraisals and reviews that it has received, it is the winner of The Orange Broadband Prize for fiction, 2007 as well as the 2009 International Nonino Prize. The jury headed by the Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul describes the novel in relation to its author, as "pages full of domestic mercy and love for her land, portraying living affections in the scenery of the difficult post-colonial years" (*This Day*, 18 January 2009, 9). With this award, Adichie joins a formidable list of writers like Jorge Amado, Chinua Achebe, Sembene Ousmane, Henry Roth, Edward W. Said, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and William Trevor. The point being made is that *Half of a Yellow Sun* is easily recognisable as a brilliant work.

3. It only remains to observe that the liberal use of the vernacular is distracting and could in fact be found tedious for native speakers of the Igbo language for whom the literal translations which follow prove actually superfluous. Greater confidence in her readers' ability to read inferentially will stand her in good stead. Or a glossary could be introduced.

### Works cited

Abrams, M. H. 2005. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Eighth edition. London: Thomas & Wadsworth.

Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1964. *Arrow of God*. Oxford: Heinemann.

Adichie, Chimamanda. 2004. *Purple Hibiscus*. Lagos: Farafina.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2006. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Lagos: Farafina.

Bloom, H. and Trilling, L. 1973. *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* Vol. II. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Emenyonu, Ernest. 2004. *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* Vol. 2. ISINKA: The Artistic Purpose. Trenton, NJ, African World Press, Inc.

Ngũgi, James. 1965. *The River Between*. London: Heinemann.

Ngũgi wa Thiong'o. 1977. *Petals of Blood*. London: Heinemann.

O'Flinn, J. P. 1975. Towards a sociology of the Nigerian novel. *African Literature Today*, 7: 34–52.

Ogundipe-Leslie, O. 1986. The female writer and her commitment. *African Literature Today*, 15: 5–13.

Soyinka, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*This Day*, 18 January 2009, 9.

Williams, L. 1971. Religion and life in James Ngugi's *The River Between*. *African Literature Today*, 5: 54–65.