

Candidate 2 evidence

Rejecting the Single Story: a literary examination of how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie develops the characters Ugwu and Olanna through their experiences of the Biafran War in her novel Half of a Yellow Sun

The Biafran War was a Nigerian civil war that took place in the late 1960s, after the country gained independence from British rule.¹ The main causes of the war were economic, cultural, religious and ethnic tensions between the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa people.² This division led to the formation of the secessionist Igbo state, Biafra.³ The war affected many lives through displacement, starvation, and disease.⁴ In her novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie focuses closely on two of her characters and how living through the war changes them. Ugwu and Olanna are both members of the Igbo community, but they each had a different upbringing that influenced them in some way. Ugwu is a thirteen-year-old boy who grew up poor and uneducated in Opi, a rural Igbo village. He has been isolated from the rest of Nigerian society, so is naïve and inquisitive. This makes him extremely impressionable during the war. On the other hand, Olanna grew up amongst Nigeria's high society. She is wealthy, was educated abroad, and now mingles with socialites and chieftains. Olanna has been protected from the real world by her overbearing parents. She thinks she knows the realities of life but, when confronted with the horror and injustice of war, Olanna is unable to cope. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie explores how war forces these characters to mature. Ugwu and Olanna learn to survive in war-torn Nigeria, and deal with new challenges, pressures and experiences which change their characters forever.

Half of a Yellow Sun is written in third person narrative, divided between three main characters: Ugwu, Olanna and Richard.⁵ In a TED Talk, Adichie argues that single story narratives – though conventional – “rob people of dignity”, limiting them to definitive stereotypes.⁶ Adichie uses three different perspectives to convey the full effects of the war. Her use of third person narrative effectively presents the characters' struggles. The narrator is omniscient and constantly aware of Ugwu and Olanna's consciousness and situations. Having multiple narratives makes Adichie's characters broader and more complete. We get to know Ugwu and Olanna based, not only on the narrator's perceptions, but also on those of other characters.

¹ Ed. Dinah L. Shelton, *Encyclopedia of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity* (Florida: Gale Cengage, 2005)

² Shelton, *Encyclopedia*

³ Shelton, *Encyclopedia*

⁴ Shelton, *Encyclopedia*

⁵ An English man who identifies more as a Biafran

⁶ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *TED TALK: The danger of a single story*, 2009

These different angles let us form our own opinions about them. The narrator also observes their actions unbiasedly, presenting us with clearer understanding of the motives behind them. The result is a coherent, realistic narrative that successfully maps out character development throughout the war.

We meet Ugwu moving to Nsukka, a university town, to work as houseboy for Professor Odenigbo. Adichie's contrast in setting highlights Ugwu's naivety and unfamiliarity with his new surroundings. Nsukka is the centre for Nigeria's educated class and a percolator for new ideas. Just as its buildings sit "side by side like polite well-dressed men"⁷, the people are well-mannered and knowledgeable. Opi, however, is stuck in the past, lacking resources and material possessions. The preconceptions about Nigerian society that Ugwu has learnt hinder his integration into Nsukka. Although "choked with expectation"⁸, Ugwu soon learns the reality does not match those expectations. At Odenigbo's meetings, there are Igbos, Yorubas and foreigners. Coming from a tightly knit Igbo community, Ugwu has never seen much diversity before or heard any topical conversation. The unanticipated differences prove too much for Ugwu, who is left disorientated from culture shock as he struggles to adjust. Adichie shows the vulnerability of people who came from rural villages with little knowledge of the outside world. Their naivety made them easy targets for Biafran propaganda which influenced boys like Ugwu into joining the army.

Ugwu is determined, a trait instilled in him from his difficult upbringing. In Nsukka, Ugwu is "busy imagining his new life away from the village."⁹ Nsukka is a great opportunity for change, specifically in getting education. Because he is illiterate, others treat Ugwu dismissively. When men come to the house with forms, Ugwu is unable to sign them. He is called "one of those village houseboys."¹⁰ This statement belittles Ugwu but teaches him that he will never be respected as himself. After the encounter, Ugwu "promised...he would learn to sign forms."¹¹ He takes action towards achieving this, enrolling in school and reading difficult books. Though disadvantaged, Ugwu excels because of his drive to succeed and "innate intelligence."¹² Adichie uses this incident to mark a crucial moment in Ugwu's life: he starts working towards his dream of

⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p3

⁸ Adichie, p3

⁹ Adichie, p3

¹⁰ Adichie, p13

¹¹ Adichie, p13

¹² Adichie, p84

education. The war derails these plans, but through Ugwu's response we learn how great his resolve is.

Family is important to Ugwu and helps him adjust to Nsukka. Ugwu is often homesick as differences between Nsukka and Opi trigger memories of home. The separation reminds Ugwu that he is unable to fulfil his role as brother and son. Regardless of distance, Ugwu tries to provide, at one point stuffing chicken into his pockets for younger sister, Anulika. However, Ugwu's familial relationships shift as he adjusts to Nsukka. He starts criticizing their living conditions, "unpalatable"¹³ food and actions. What was initially a source of comfort has become uncomfortable, and Ugwu's judgement estranges his family. Anulika leaves him, saying, "You have forgotten where you come from, and now you have become so foolish you think you are a Big Man."¹⁴ It is a spiteful yet truthful remark. Like the proverb "Blood is thicker than water", this warns Ugwu that his family relationships are the strongest, most important bonds. Adichie uses Ugwu to show how important familial bonds are in Nigerian culture. Ugwu's duties give him security, community and fulfilment. He serves others as he would his family, and soon becomes loyal to Odenigbo and Olanna. By the outbreak of war, they have supplanted his own family. We know Ugwu would never intentionally abandon his family – he has simply forgotten their importance, as his caring nature makes him heavily invested in his temporary duties as houseboy.

Olanna is a young woman from a wealthy, well-known family but, despite the privilege and status, she is unhappy. The elite lifestyle is tiring, and the company, family included, cause "slight irritation."¹⁵ Adichie portrays Olanna's family relationships as strained. Though Olanna is compassionate, her parents are arrogant and her twin sister, Kainene, is Olanna's polar opposite: distant and "hostile."¹⁶ At dinner, Olanna's parents refuse to thank their servants and she cannot understand why it is hard to "acknowledge the humanity of the people who served them."¹⁷ These disputes isolate Olanna from her family and class. She finds belonging with her extended family in Kano, where she experiences "lucid peace."¹⁸ Olanna's idealistic approach to life proves that, like Ugwu, she is naïve because of her sheltered lifestyle. By using the war to push Olanna out her comfort zone, Adichie re-evaluates this idealism. It is easier for Olanna to

¹³ Adichie, p119

¹⁴ Adichie, p121

¹⁵ Adichie, p32

¹⁶ Adichie, p31

¹⁷ Adichie, p30

¹⁸ Adichie, p39

uphold morals in peacetime. The war tests Olanna's idealism as her experiences force her to acknowledge humanity's flaws and how unsuitable an idealistic approach to life is.

Adichie emphasises Olanna's strong moral compass repeatedly in the novel. Olanna is passionate about correcting social injustice, asking, "Does inequality have to mean indignity?"¹⁹ and tries to correct her mother's cruel treatment of family servants. In more morally conflicting situations, Olanna remains firm in her beliefs. When Odenigbo's affair-child is born, the mother rejects it. Olanna decides to raise the child, although it would have been easier to walk away. This hints at Olanna's strength of character – she puts the interests of this vulnerable child above her own justified ones. Morality matters most, regardless of personal feelings. However, Olanna seems to assume this moral identity so she can dissociate from her family and class. Morality is important to Olanna, but she does not fully understand why, beyond dissociation. Adichie uses the war's moral breakdown to develop Olanna's integrity. As the situation worsens, Adichie makes Olanna choose between moral values or self-preservation, which determines how morally strong Olanna really is.

During the initial outbreak of the war, Ugwu maintains his naivety, making him very impressionable to war propaganda. Adichie's word choice paints the Biafran soldiers as heroes, "distinguished in their khaki uniforms, boots shining, half of a yellow sun sewn on their sleeve"²⁰, so Ugwu wishes he was one. The reasoning is simple: soldiers contribute to the war effort, and gain respect, admiration and support. However, Adichie hints at the unglamorous truth: becoming a soldier ruins you. Okeoma, a poet from Nsukka, changes after joining the army. When they reunite, Okeoma "looked nothing like Ugwu remembered."²¹ He later gains a "jagged, swollen scar."²² Okeoma is now damaged, subdued and a poet no more. War forces him to mature and lose his identity. Ugwu remains oblivious to this detrimental effect until he is conscripted. He realizes being a soldier does not meet his expectations. Soldiers have "no boots, no uniform, no half of a yellow sun on their sleeves"²³ and are only respected out of fear, using aggression to intimidate civilians. Ugwu is shocked. Just with Nsukka, the dream does not match reality. After returning from fighting, Ugwu stops listening to Radio Biafra, as "the voice that forced morsels of invented hope down people's throats did not interest him."²⁴ His

¹⁹ Adichie, p221

²⁰ Adichie, p179

²¹ Adichie, p201

²² Adichie, p322

²³ Adichie, p359

²⁴ Adichie, p399

disappointing experience as a soldier teaches Ugwu not to fall prey to false promises again. He finally loses his naïve outlook on life, which was a core part of his identity.

Ugwu does not react well to change. He feels helpless – defenceless even – as Nsukka falls, with change “hurtling towards him.”²⁵ Restored normality is Ugwu’s incentive to survive. When Ugwu was injured in action, he “wanted to die, at first”²⁶ but as help arrives, he fights against this. This shows that, although the situation looked bleak and Ugwu was temporarily defeated, his willpower returned and empowered him. Throughout the war, Ugwu remains strong, though this drains him emotionally: after reuniting with Odenigbo’s family, “Ugwu’s whole life suddenly gathered in a lump in his throat.”²⁷ The war is challenging but Ugwu survives and later writes *The World Was Silent When We Died*.²⁸ Adichie shows how great Ugwu’s determination is as the war fails to remove it. Ugwu overcomes the challenges of war and, although weakened, he still achieves his goals of surviving the war and becoming educated. Ugwu refuses to let weakness cripple him – just like he refused to let illiteracy stop him learning.

Adichie conveys the devastating aftermath of war for families through Ugwu’s experience. When Nsukka falls, Ugwu is forced to spend the war with Odenigbo’s family as he is cut off from his own. Ugwu does not see them until after the war and, on returning to Opi, everything is different. Everyone has “deep exhaustion etched on their skin.”²⁹ The war has taken its toll and Ugwu feels guilt, regret and grief at having not been there for them. These emotions intensify once he learns Anulika was raped by soldiers – similarly to how the bargirl was raped by Ugwu as a soldier. The “self-loathing”³⁰ and bargirl’s gaze of “calm hate”³¹ take on new, stronger meanings when he sees the rape’s effect on Anulika. She is now “an ugly stranger”³², instead of his close friend, and their conversations are stilted. Their relationship, one that Ugwu cherished, is irreparable. Ugwu blames himself for this loss and grieves: “he sat down on a rock and sobbed.”³³ Adichie demonstrates how war violence affected civilians as much as soldiers. While soldiers suffered limb loss, shellshock and post-traumatic stress on the frontlines, civilians were displaced and subjected to sexual assault and conscription. The long-lasting effects are seen

²⁵ Adichie, p175

²⁶ Adichie, p393

²⁷ Adichie, p396

²⁸ A biographical account of the Biafran War started by Richard but passed onto Ugwu

²⁹ Adichie, p420

³⁰ Adichie, p365

³¹ Adichie, p365

³² Adichie, p420

³³ Adichie, p421

through Opi: its population is reduced and the survivors are changed. This destroys the community. Like countless others, Ugwu's family unit has been broken by the war. There will never be another chance for him to restore their relationships.

Adichie explores the war's debilitating effect on everyday living. Prior to the start of the war, coups took place in Nigeria. Olanna has never experienced political unrest and finds the political climate unsettling. Despite efforts, Olanna cannot maintain order. Even in her haven Kano, "the coup was in the air."³⁴ Adichie foreshadows the coming meltdown in her descriptions of setting. In Lagos, Igbo people are being harassed and, in Kano, the night breeze is "unpleasantly cool."³⁵ The signs are clear, yet Olanna refuses to believe them. To her, news is "unreal"³⁶, so she remains sceptical, repeatedly asking "Really?"³⁷ Olanna's ignorance ends after her extended family are killed in massacres. Their deaths cause Olanna's "Dark Swoops"³⁸, moments when "burning owls"³⁹ surround her. In traditional Nigerian culture, owls are symbolic of witchcraft and bad omens.⁴⁰ Here, they remind us how close Olanna's brush with death was. Adichie's creepy image of the "grinning"⁴¹ and "beckoning"⁴² owls gives the impression they are enticing Olanna towards death. Olanna's close encounter teaches her vigilance. Once, she expected the situation to diffuse itself and is surprised when it does not, confirming her lack of real life experience. Now, Olanna refuses to let her guard down and, throughout the war, she works hard to ensure her family's survival. Olanna's naivety has grown into a crippling fear that negatively impacts her life. She becomes more on edge as the war progresses, having regular nightmares and jumping at loud noises.

During the war, society becomes increasingly immoral, surviving through theft, fraud and corruption. Adichie's decision to have Olanna, a highly moral character, resort to using status in order to survive shows that no one is exempt from doing immoral things, especially in high-pressure circumstances like war. When confronting the soldier responsible for Ugwu's conscription, Olanna wears a wig – a symbol of status – in order to win his favour. The fact that

³⁴ Adichie, p128

³⁵ Adichie, p131

³⁶ Adichie, p133

³⁷ Adichie, p132

³⁸ Adichie, p156

³⁹ Adichie, p156

⁴⁰ A. Smith, *Common Superstitious Beliefs in Nigerian Traditional Society*, 2012

⁴¹ Adichie, p156

⁴² Adichie, p156

“she hardly wore [it] these days”⁴³ confirms the wig is solely for the façade. After Ugwu is freed, Olanna is angry with both herself for falling short of her moral standards, and the situation that forced her to compromise them. Adichie answers Olanna’s question: she believes inequality does mean indignity. Olanna only has the option of using status to survive because she is upper class; others are not so fortunate. Olanna is a hypocrite. No one, no matter how hard they try, can uphold high moral standards in the real world. It is an unrealistic goal, especially in wartime.

Adichie forces Olanna to confront the realities of war when she visits a refugee camp. The camp is called “Point of No Return”⁴⁴, foreshadowing its critical impact on Olanna. Adichie heightens Olanna’s experience by referencing different senses. The first is sight. The camp buildings are “faded”⁴⁵, creating a decaying atmosphere. Adichie describes the refugees as lying unmoving on the floor, like bodies lined up for burial. The only movement is of a child with stark bones and “impossible”⁴⁶ unnatural movements. Two children, with “spurts of reddish hair”⁴⁷ and “taut globes”⁴⁸ for bellies, suffer from kwashiorkor.⁴⁹ Adichie describes how “the smell hit her”⁵⁰, like a powerful slap to Olanna’s face. As the trip progresses, the smell grows into a “foul, brown cloud”⁵¹, reflecting the sickness present. Finally, Adichie focuses on the lack of sound, particularly from the babies who only make a “thin squall.”⁵² The environment taints Olanna, “the air inside her becoming soiled.”⁵³ Having readers experience the camp through Olanna’s perspective, rather than another character’s, highlights everything wrong about the situation. Olanna’s aversion to immorality means she cannot help but react to the suffering around her. Olanna has never seen how the other half lives and reacts to it more powerfully than Ugwu. She tries to separate herself from the situation and hold onto morality, for fear of losing it and becoming like others. However, Kainene tells her, “it is up to us to decide to be somebody else or not.”⁵⁴ Adichie uses Olanna to suggest that acknowledging fears can strengthen character. We expect the visit to break Olanna, but it strengthens her moral compass instead, as she

⁴³ Adichie, p351

⁴⁴ Adichie, p347

⁴⁵ Adichie, p347

⁴⁶ Adichie, p348

⁴⁷ Adichie, p348

⁴⁸ Adichie, p348

⁴⁹ A severe form of malnutrition caused by protein deficiency

⁵⁰ Adichie, p347

⁵¹ Adichie, p348

⁵² Adichie, p349

⁵³ Adichie, p348

⁵⁴ Adichie, p388

becomes more involved in aid work. Olanna learns there will always be moments where she has to choose self-preservation over morality. Her choice does not necessarily make her a bad person – only human.

Adichie uses other women to challenge Nigerian female identity and contrast their experiences with Olanna's. Mama Oji is a refugee in Umuahia. She represents the war's draining effect on Biafran women. Gender relations researcher Deniz Kandiyoti writes, "Women bear the burden of being 'mothers of the nation'."⁵⁵ This burden evidently increased with the pressures of war. Mama Oji loses half her children in the violence yet, when Olanna offers condolences, Mama Oji shrugs them off. The war has hardened her, giving an "efficient set to her fleshless face."⁵⁶ She also demonstrates the shift away from traditional gender roles. Mama Oji is fierce and a hard worker as there is no husband to support her. She is forced into the role of provider. Olanna has become so preoccupied with herself, she has failed to see that her situation could be worse. Seeing Mama Oji survive with little (male) support is humbling and inspiring. Olanna has always been amazed at Odenigbo's strength, but he recognizes the same in her, saying "You're so strong."⁵⁷ This encourages Olanna to develop her own resilience outside men. By the end of the war, Olanna is more independent and confident in herself.

The Biafran War was a defining moment, not just for Nigeria as a country but for its people. Adichie effectively shows how war, although destructive, has the potential to change lives for the better. Both Ugwu and Olanna's characters are stripped down to their components, tested and pieced back together into someone stronger. The novel ends with Ugwu's dedication for *The World Was Silent When We Died*: "For Master, my good man."⁵⁸ Upon reflection, Ugwu understands that he owes his achievement to those years serving as Odenigbo's houseboy during the war. His determination and dreams motivated him to survive and grow from naïve village boy to successful mature adult. Olanna finally learns to see life for the bigger picture it is. She remarks, "It seemed even longer since this yard on Odim Street formed the boundaries of her life."⁵⁹ Olanna experienced the real world at its worst but came out of the war surer of her moral stance and identity. By rejecting the single story, Adichie lets us see her characters' development from different viewpoints. She does not become unfocused because of this –

⁵⁵ Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation' *Journal of International Studies*, 20, no.3 (2004)

⁵⁶ Adichie, p327

⁵⁷ Adichie, p392

⁵⁸ Adichie, p433

⁵⁹ Adichie, p432

instead Adichie crafts each chapter around a key moment in her characters' arcs. We appreciate Ugwu and Olanna more for their strength and resilience in such adversity. *Half of a Yellow Sun* takes us on a journey with compelling, realistic characters that grow to become people who are defined by more than their social and cultural backgrounds.

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