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## A New Historicist Approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun

*Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'nin Half of a Yellow Sun Adlı Eserine  
Yeni Tarihselci Bir Yaklaşım*

### Öz

Yeni tarihselci teori edebiyat incelemelerinde “tarihe dönüşü” temsil eder. Ancak tarihin bu dönüşü tarihe alternatif bir anlayış sunmaktadır. Bu yeni anlayışa göre tarih, onu yazan kişinin bakış açısına göre yeniden şekillendiği için nesnel değildir. Yeni Tarihselcilik, ‘tarih’in açıkça ulaşılabilir, üniter ve doğrusal bir geçmiş olduğu fikrini reddeder. Yeni tarihselcilik tarih ve kültür kavramlarını yeniden yorumlayarak tarihi olayları güç ilişkileri bağlamında yorumlar.

Half of a Yellow Sun romanında Adichie, İngiliz egemenliğinden ve Biafran Savaşı'ndan sonra Nijerya'nın tarihinin yeniden anlatarak sömüren/ sömürülen paradigmasını keşfetmeye çalışmıştır. Adichie, postkolonyal Nijerya'yı üç farklı anlatıcının görüşleri ile tasvir etmektedir. Bu bağlamda Adichie romana yeni tarihselci bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır., Roman Biafralıların 1960'larda yaşadığı çeşitli deneyimleri yansıtmaktadır. Adichie, sömüren/ sömürülen paradigmasına birçok açıdan yaklaşarak sorunsal bir hale getirmektedir

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yeni tarihselcilik, Half of a Yellow Sun, Nijerya İç Savaşı, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tarih yazımı

### Abstract

In literary criticism the new historicist theory represents “a return to history.” But this turn of history offers an alternative understanding of history. According to this new understanding, history is not objective as it is reshaped according to the point of view of

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*the person who wrote it. New Historicism refuses the idea of history as a clearly available, unitary and linear past. New historicism reinterprets the concepts of history and culture and interprets historical events in the context of power relations.*

*In Half a Yellow Sun, Adichie tries to explore the colonizer / colonized paradigm with the retelling of Nigeria's history after its freedom from Britain's rule and the subsequent Biafran War. Adichie depicts different views about postcolonial Nigeria with three narrators. In this context, Adichie offers a new historicist perspective to the novel. The novel reflects a variety of experiences that Biafrans experienced in the 1960s. Adichie is problematizing the colonizer / colonized paradigm by approaching it from many perspectives.*

**Keywords:** *New historicism, Half of a Yellow Sun, Nigerian Civil War, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, historiography*

## Introduction

Postcolonialism is characterized as the relationship between European nations and territories that they once colonized and controlled. Postcolonial theory provides a new way to look at texts written in colonial-dominated countries. Postcolonial works are literary texts describing what happened during and after colonial domination. During colonization, colonized countries witnessed unimaginable suffering. They became deprived of their precious wealth at the end of colonial domination.

When the colonizer came and ruled over the colonized, they not only lost their financial resources, but also suffered from racism, oppression, extreme poverty and violence and they are confused about their own identity. Their history was even written by colonizers. The identity of the colonized is reconstructed through the identity of the colonizer. They faced an identity crisis related to the mixture of their native culture with the colonizer's culture. In other words, colonization was an assault on the basic human rights.

The quest for indigenous African identity and misconceptions regarding African history is one of the key issues of postcolonial authors. Edward Said, a leading contributor to this theory in his book *Orientalism*, for example, points out that people in colonized countries are stereotyped in the first world by Great Britain and other nations.

One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient." This is nowhere more true than in the ways by which the Near East is grasped. Three things have contributed to making even the simplest perception of the Arabs and Islam into a highly politicized, almost raucous matter: one, the history of popular anti-Arab and anti-Islamic prejudice in the West, which is immediately reflected in the history

of Orientalism; two, the struggle between the Arabs and Israeli Zionism, and its effects upon American Jews as well as upon both the liberal culture and the population at large; three, the almost total absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam. Furthermore, it hardly needs saying that because the Middle East is now so identified with Great Power politics, oil economics, and the simple-minded dichotomy of freedom-loving, democratic Israel and evil, totalitarian, and terroristic Arabs, the chances of anything like a clear view of what one talks about in talking about the Near East are depressingly small<sup>1</sup>.

According to Said, this stereotyping helps the colonizer to justify its invasion of other countries. Postcolonial texts discuss colonial experience's consequences on colonized people. According to Ann Dobie:

The formal termination of colonial rule does not wipe out its legacy, and the culture that is left is a mixture of the colonized one and that of the colonizer, often marked by contrasts and antagonisms, resentment and blended practice.<sup>2</sup>

Africa's colonial past caused severe antagonisms that the newly independent countries were unable to handle effectively. In colonial times, for example, ethnic groups were considered hostile to each other for their physical features. It was Hausa/Fulani against Ibos and Yorubas<sup>3</sup> in Nigeria.

The African continent was subjugated by the colonial rulers during the colonial era. In the search for freedom, many African authors spoke clearly against colonial rule and subsequent inhumane treatment of Africans. The furious struggle for freedom that swept across the African continent resulted from barbaric treatment to Africans by the different colonial masters. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Agostinho Neto of Angola, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya headed the freedom protests in Africa, were united by the fact that the black man should handle his own affairs. All those leaders claimed that if an African was in charge of his country's governance, he would be better able to raise his people's living standards and bring prosperity to his country. Finally, most Africans' persistent search for self-governance started to produce results. Civil wars occurred in many African nations. Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Uganda and Nigeria are among the countries suffering civil war. Some diligent scholars have potentially written about the shortcomings in Africa since independence. Frantz Fanon and René Dumont discussed the new colonial process that could continue after independence. These critics have predicted that Africa after independence will face leaders whose unethical activities will lead to a politically divided continent with coups. They also predicted that the increasing dependence of these leaders on colonial masters for monetary help would expose the continent to external exploitation. This will damage the continent's independence and growth. As Claud Ake puts it:

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1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Melbourne: Vision Australia Personal Support, 2010), 27.

2 Ann B. Dobie, *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2015), 186.

3 Ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Three decades of preoccupation with development in Africa have yielded meagre returns. African economies have been stagnating or regressing. For most Africans, real incomes are lower than they were two decades ago, health prospects are poorer, malnourishment is widespread and infrastructure is breaking down, as are some social institutions... However, the assumption so readily made that there has been a failure of development is misleading. The problem is not so much that development has failed as that it was never really on the agenda in the first place. By all indications, political conditions in Africa are the greatest impediments to development<sup>4</sup>.

According to Ake, African leaders who strive for regional growth do not see Africa's progress as part of their goals. According to Chinua Achebe:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise up to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership<sup>5</sup>.

Considering its critical issues as slavery, diaspora, struggle for survival and tribal fighting, it can be claimed that African-American literature is still continually evolving. Although many printed texts about African literature have been lost somewhere, new developments and understandings about literature are constantly emerging. African-American literature has now become a cornerstone of American philosophy and literature. African-American literature has explored the problem of racial discrimination. The complexity of race and color discrimination has driven African Americans to write to build a unique place in the world. During the last decade, African American scholars have become more conscious of problems that go far beyond post-colonialism.

Post-colonial writers use history as a method to represent past experiences. Likewise, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's piece of fiction also reflects history. She fictionalizes history to reflect Nigeria's rivalry and internal conflict. Identity problems concerning the history of war that is fundamental to Nigerian-Biafran's historical experiences take an important place in Adichie's second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). This novel portrays social, economic, political, racial and war conflicts. This also looks at the issues of countries in the third world and how historical implications affect the life of the ordinary man. Nigeria's history has been severely plagued by conflictual war crises. There are two primary forms of conflict: internal and external conflicts. Adichie focuses mainly on internal disputes; the characters of Ugwu, Baby, Odenigbo, Richard, Olanna and Kenaine deal with questions of ethics and morality. All these characters deal internally and externally with unhappiness, discomfort and unhappiness. According to Kwame Anthony Appiah:

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4 Claude Ake. *Democracy and Development in Africa* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1997), 1.

5 Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 2005), 1.

For all the while, in African cultures, there are those who will not see themselves as Other. Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease and political instability, African cultural productivity grows space: popular literature, oral narrative, poetry, dance, drama, music and visual art all thrive. The contemporary cultural production of many African societies and the many traditions whose evidence so vigorously remain is an antidote to the vision of the postcolonial novelist.<sup>6</sup>

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Enugu City, Nigeria, on 15 September 1977. As the fifth out of six children she grew up in an Igbo family in Nigeria. Her father was a statistics professor at the University of Nigeria and eventually became deputy chancellor of the institution, her mother, a sociology graduate, was the first woman registrar. Adichie started writing stories when she was a child. When she was about ten years old, Adichie read Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's African novels like *Things Fall Apart* (1958). She described reading these books in numerous interviews as a pivotal moment in her development as a writer. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the best contemporary Nigerian authors. She features various current problems that Nigerians have today. Adichie's works show how Africans face new society and religion in exchange for their personality. Her books describe the challenges of Igbo people from the viewpoint of women who rescued from their lower positions.

Chimamanda was influenced by Chinua Achebe, one of Africa's best authors. Some scholars found parallels between Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie. Achebe has remained a national figure worldwide since publishing his first novel *Things Fall Apart*. Afterwards, Achebe spoke about African issues like imperialism and conveyed African values to the world. His participation in Nigerian literature was a landmark in Nigerian literature. In addition, Chinua Achebe continues to be the world's leading African authors.

A variety of works of literature looked from various viewpoints at the Nigerian Civil War and military rule. According to Adichie, the problems which caused the war remained unresolved. *Half of a Yellow Sun* deals with Nigeria's civil war and military coups. Nigeria's situation in this novel has political implications for Ghana, as there have been many instances of ethnic rivalries in the country that have led to serious clashes in certain parts of the country recently. Ghana has also undergone a series of military coups because of weak leadership. Adichie's novels are thus good source of reflection of Ghana.

In 1960 Nigeria became independent from the United Kingdom. The civil war between Nigeria and Biafran lasted between 1967 and 1970 and was characterized by severe hunger and ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflicts encouraged by the British played a significant role in the war. Most of the people in eastern Nigeria were Igbo people.

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6 Anthony Appiah, *In My Fathers House Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, (London: Methuen, 1992), 157.



The 'half of a yellow sun' is an emblem of the Biafra Republic which appears on both its flag and its military uniforms. The book follows the Nigerian-Biafran civil war from the perspectives of Igbo people Olanna, Odenigbo, Kainene and Ugwu. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is told in four sections from a third person viewpoint.

In the first part Ugwu, a 13-year-old boy, left his village to work for Odenigbo, a university professor in Nsukka. Olanna, daughter of a rich Nigerian chief, comes soon afterward to visit Odenigbo. Ugwu discovers that she's going to move in soon. Ugwu is at first jealous of Odenigbo's admiration for Olanna, yet he finally becomes a friend of his master's lover. Olanna is worried about Odenigbo, because she's afraid that she's going to fall out of love with him but then she planned to give birth to a child. Kainene, Olanna's cold and distant twin sister, runs her father's company in Port Harcourt. Richard is a quiet and humble Englishman who tries to write a Nigerian novel. He feels isolated from his ethnic expatriate group in Nigeria.

In Part Two, something has happened between Odenigbo and Olanna and they have been separated for some time and they have a daughter, Baby. A variety of troubling incidents have taken place in these chapters, marking the start of the war. Richard witnesses the mass slaughter of Igbo people. While visiting her former boyfriend, Olanna witnesses a similar slaughter in her cousin's village. The pain inhibits her from walking for a while. Independence of Biafran is proclaimed. As Kainene and Richard remain at Port Harcourt, Odenigbo and Olanna and Ugwu are leaving Nsukka.

Part Three outlines Odenigbo, Olanna and Richard's affairs. Odenigbo's mother did a trick and as a result of this trick, Odenigbo and his mother's maid, Amala slept together and then Amala became pregnant. Overwhelmed with sorrow, Olanna, after a night of drinking goes to bed with Richard. Finally Olanna forgives Odenigbo and looks after Amala's child. Kainene is furious over Richard's unfaithfulness and burns Richard's manuscript book.

Part four reveals the realities of war and poverty. Olanna, Odenigbo and Ugwu are being transferred to the refugee camps which are getting worse. Ugwu is in love with a refugee called Eberechi. When he walks with her he is pushed into the Biafran Army, where he engages in a rape of a waitress. This memory horrifies him.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* is a novel about the lives of many characters who are interrelated. The novel depicts how people are victimized and how their lives and relationships change as a result of the Biafran war. The events in this novel can be explored together in order to have new insights which can shed light on the experiences of the underrepresented.

The concept of 'history' and 'history writing' dramatically shifted by the end of the 20th century. It naturally had implications for the literary branch that deals with history, because the historical novel and history are two closely related areas. Daniel Little describes 'history' as follows: "History is a temporally ordered sequence of events and processes involving human doings, within which there are interconnections of causality, structure, and action, within which there is the play of accident, contingency, and outside forces"<sup>7</sup>. Important concepts in this description are 'chronology', the 'human aspect', and

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7 Daniel Little, *New Contributions to the Philosophy of History* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 14.

‘interaction’. The theory of history focuses on topics such as the potential of objectivity, how history is preserved, whether we can research history, or a trend can be ascertained in history or not. The objective argument is of special concern in this context as it appears to be the definitive factor which distinguishes history from historical fiction. Historical writing was historically been seen as providing a true account, whereas a novel’s subject is regarded fictional. When seen in a specific context, the historical novel centers around the effort to catch a certain moment or time in the past and locate its significance or purpose.

Over time, the perspective on historiography has changed continuously. It was used at the end of the 18th century as an utterly separate debate from the literature, as the meaning of literature began to change. The discussion about the nature of history in the twentieth century centers on the topics of reality, subjectivity and interpretation. The discussion is led by the narrative school members, including literary critics such as Brown, Ankersmit and Kellner. The unbiased historian who is absent from his narrative is an idea denied by this trend because the historian is involved in the making of history.

Hayden White is one of the major figures in literary theory and history; he is one of the creators of the historical debate. During the second half of the 20th century, he achieved popularity for his (post) structuralist perspective on language; his best-known work is *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. In this work, White attempts to examine Europe’s history of historical knowledge in the 19th century and tries to contribute to the debate of the question of historical knowledge. In all cases, he sees the methods used as predominantly Western and as manufacturing procedures, instead of mimesis or duplication.

In my analysis of the main forms of historical consciousness of the nineteenth century, I have utilized a general theory of the structure of the historical work, I have maintained that the style of a given historiographer can be characterized in terms of the linguistic protocol he used to prefigure the historical field prior to bringing to bear upon it the various “explanatory” strategies he used to fashion a “story” out of the “chronicle” of events contained in the historical record. These linguistic protocols, I have maintained, can be further characterized in terms of the four principal modes of poetic discourse. Using the tropes of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony as the basic types of linguistic prefiguration I have discussed the modes of consciousness in which historians can implicitly or explicitly justify commitment to different explanatory strategies on the levels of argument, emplotment, and ideological implication respectively<sup>8</sup>.

White ends his statement with a strong focus on language use. Writing about history can have several different reasons, and for a historian it can be somewhat different from a fiction writer. Daniel Little describes three specific historical reasons:

The idea of learning some of the facts about human circumstance in the past; the idea of providing a narrative that provides human understanding of how a sequence of historical actions and events hangs together and “makes sense”

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8 Hayden V. White, *Metahistory* (Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1987), 426.

to us; and the idea of providing a causal account of the occurrence of some historical event of interest<sup>9</sup>

Considering White's theories of history writing, a historian and a fiction writer build basically the same thing: this is the job of producing a narrative. A historian is attempting to view history and his research with the intention of writing the facts in so far as possible. A fiction writer definitely has the same intent, but in the example of fiction the theoretical motives are limitless and can vary very greatly from the historical author's goal of reality. In Adichie's unique case, the first obvious distinction between her and a historian is the purpose of her book. She does not write as accurately as possible to portray the Nigeria-War; It is evident that Adichie is interested primarily in applying history to everyday citizens and in "showing" the past. In an interview she states:

Because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra" and „because I wanted to engage with my history in order to make sense of my present, many of the issues that led to the war remain unresolved in Nigeria today<sup>10</sup>.

Some might argue that a historian should take on the job of documenting a whole community, and Adichie approaches this as a personal enterprise. *Half of a Yellow Sun* however reflects on the richness of African culture rather than on one Nigerian national identity. This is likely to say that Adichie interprets this identity by presenting so many characters who vary regarding age, race and class but are nevertheless unified in their fight for Biafra. In the book, personal life and struggles, not historical events, are the subject. It is a fictional narrative in which real experience is the main point of the story.

This research is centralized well into the new historicist framework. Therefore, new historical theory acts as the basic guideline for the study of this text. This theory is considered most appropriate for this analysis as it focuses on political issues and is largely based on postcolonial backgrounds as well as real life experience. New historicism argues that literary texts are cultural assets and manifestations of an interrelation between the author on the one hand and several socio-political and historical determinants on the other. According to Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray:

New historicist critics assume that works of literature both influence and are influenced by historical reality, and they share a belief in preferentiality... New historicists have also asserted that literature is not distinct from the history that is relevant to it... New historicist remind us that it is treacherous to reconstruct a past as it really was rather than as we have been conditioned to believe that, it was<sup>11</sup>.

The definition notes that while literature applies to and is conditioned by history, history is often influenced by literature. New Historicism is a methodology in literary criticism and literary theory which relies on the assumption that the literary work must be

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9 Little, 15.

10 Michael Borum, "Q & A With the Author," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - Half Of A Yellow Sun, a novel, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.halfofayellowsun.com/content.php?page=tsbtb&n=5&f=2>

11 Ross C. Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2018), 239-240.



viewed as a result of the composition, rather than as an isolated art work or document, from its time, place and historical circumstances. Therefore, generally, it can be explained that new historicism is concerned with how a literary work represents its historical and socio-cultural background. New historicism offers all forms of hyper-interesting meanings to understand works the readers read. New Historicism emerged in the 1980s, mainly through the works of theorist Stephen Greenblatt and this movement had widespread popularity in the 1990s and even beyond. New historicists try to explain the work in its historical and cultural context. The method owes much of its inspiration to Michel Foucault, who based his methodology on both the idea of cultural awareness and his strategy of analyzing a wide variety of documents to grasp the episteme of a particular period. New historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by analyzing the text within the historical period's dominant ideas and assumptions. New historicists are concerned with the political position of literature and the concept of power, the complex process by which cultures create and replicate. Claiming that ideology presents itself through literary production, new historians take an interest in the interpretive mechanisms related to the social or cultural interactions.

New Historicism is a contemporary methodological approach focused on reading both literary and non-literary texts, generally of the same historical time, together. New Historicism is a term to identify research undertaken by a handful of scholars in the early 1980s, mainly in Renaissance studies. New Historicism scholars offer a variety of names, such as 'critical historicism', 'historical materialist criticism' and 'cultural poetics'. Regardless of how this method is called, it is obvious that it illustrates the close connection between cultural texts and historical issues. In his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt declared the principal characteristics of the New Historicism in 1980, although he preferred to characterize his project with cultural poetics. The phrase 'New Historicism,' which Greenblatt coined, released the currency of the 'New Historicism' label two years later.

Many of the present essays give voice [...] to what we may call the new historicism, set apart from both the dominant historical scholarship of the past and the formalist criticism that [...] the New Historicism erodes the firm ground of both criticism and literature. It tends to ask questions about its own methodological assumptions and those of others [...] the critical practice represented in this volume challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between artistic production and other kinds of social production<sup>12</sup>.

New historicists are mostly based on the historical and cultural conditions. The New Historicism opens the way for the analysis of cultural texts and examines the interaction of cultural texts between historical influences such as "social, economic, political, biographical, psychological, sexual and artistic"<sup>13</sup> manifestations. New Historicism does not separate literary texts from non-literary texts. New historicism examines how the work is affected by the time it was produced. It also explores the social space in which the

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12 Stephen Jay, Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.

13 Jeffrey Cox, Larry Reynolds, *New Historical Literary Study* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3.

author lived, and any other factors that inspired the writer. “New historicists read texts and their contexts together, seeing them as manifestations of the same historical moment<sup>14</sup>”. New historicism is based on the idea that a literary work is a result of the time, place and other conditions. Therefore, in new historicist criticism, the idea of culture has gained prominence. According to Colebrook culture is:

nothing other than the values, self-understandings and ways of thinking achieved by such practices as the writing of texts, the performing of ceremonies, the exacting the punishments and the formulation of prohibitions. Cultures do not sit ‘above’ the world in the way that ideologies are seen to be determined by, or expressive of, prior economic conditions. Nor are cultures ideal or psychological entities like a ‘world-view or ‘mind-set<sup>15</sup>.

Texts are considered facets of history in New Historicism. Texts, individuals, practices and rituals are known as cultures. Consequently, a text doesn’t represent or articulate its context; it plays an active role in creating and acting in that context. Cultures are viewed as texts, individuals, traditions and practices. Consequently, a text does not convey or represent its context; it plays an active part in creating and acting within the context. In his essay, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man” Geertz expresses the idea that human is a cultural artifact:

Our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural products – products manufactured, indeed, out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which we were born, but manufactured, nonetheless. Chartres is made of stone and glass. But it is not just stone and glass; it is a cathedral, and not only a cathedral, but a particular cathedral built at a particular time by certain members of a particular society. To understand what it means, to perceive what it is, you need to know rather more than the generic properties of stone and glass and rather more than what is common to all cathedrals [...] It is no different with men: they, too, every last one of them, are cultural artifacts<sup>16</sup>.

Geertz claims that culture is a central component in shaping people. Therefore, in order to understand people, we need to perceive them as cultural objects. In the work of Geertz, therefore, the new historians have found a way of analyzing how a certain period of culture fashions and produces itself. Geertz focuses on the study of cultural forms and symbols in depth. New historians see literature’s position as a political activity. In other words, literature is a cultural production.

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14 Mevlüde Zengin. “A Study of Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim, Heart of Darkness and Nostromo in a New Historicist Perspective.” Diss. Ankara University, 2007.

15 Claire Colebrook, *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1998), p.68.

16 Clifford Geertz, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 22, no. 4 (1966) <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.1966.11454918>, 51.

## 1. Background of the Study

Nigeria has three main ethnic groups. Hausa / Fulani dominates the North, the Yoruba dominates the South, and the Igbos live in the Southeast. Throughout the conquest, the Europeans split the country into three main classes, dividing Africans among themselves. This eventually resulted in racial division, and potential country division. In the 1960s, the Biafrans struggled for their freedom from the federation, six years after Nigerians gained freedom from British control. It was a moment of confusion and inequality. Even before the actual war started, there was too much conflict between dominant and government leaders that Nigeria was in continuous confrontation.

Split seemed unavoidable, and for many Igbo, the Biafran war became a voice. The war and the turmoil ended in 1966, when Nigeria suffered a coup. A violent political reform was launched to expel civilian government from power. This coup resulted in the assassination of Nigeria's then-prime minister, who was from the north, and a few politicians who represented the country's western region, but none from the east. Split seemed unavoidable, and for many Igbo, the Biafran war became a voice. The war and the turmoil ended in 1966, when Nigeria suffered a coup. A violent political reform was launched to expel civilian government from power. This coup resulted in the assassination of Nigeria's then-prime minister, who was from the north, and a few politicians who represented the country's western region, but none from the east. Soon afterwards, Agui Ironsi, a soldier from the east, was elected as the senior officer of the Nigerian army. During this time of non-governance, leaders from east Nigeria were rescued from the assassination and the then ceremonial president, Nnamdi Azikiwe, was secretly removed to keep him from being assassinated, all of which posed a lot of questions for people about the Igbo's involvement in the coup.

## 2. Half of A Yellow Sun: A New Historicist Approach

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a mighty novel which discusses, along with historical injustices, the emotional and personal implications of the Nigerian war. *Half of a Yellow Sun* discusses the problems of Nigeria and the Southern Region, which endured the results of the civil war between Nigeria and Biafra in the late 1960s. The story is told in three character perspectives: Ugwu, a small town boy who serves as a houseboy for the university professor, Odenigbo; Olanna, a rich Lagos woman who leaves her luxurious life behind and lives with Odenigbo; and Richard, an English writer who gets a grant to write a book about Nigeria. Life brings these three main characters to Nsukka in the south into that will become Nigerian Civil War's center. Adichie uses economic, racial, cultural and religious differences among the different populations of Nigeria and explores the emotional and psychological implications of the conflict to create a multifaceted picture of the war. In the beginning of the novel, Nsukka's intellectual community shares their ideas through a series of dinner parties. In one event, the host proclaims with passion: "This defense pact is worse than apartheid and segregation, but we don't realize it. They are controlling us from behind drawn curtains. It is very dangerous!"<sup>17</sup> There are horrific instances that send the reader straight to the battle fields, for example when Olanna is found in the north while she was visiting a friend as the first Igbo killings started and scarcely

return to the south:

A liquid – urine – was spreading on the floor of the train. Olanna felt it coldly soaking into her dress. The woman with the calabash nudged her, then motioned to some other people close by. ‘Bianu, come,’ she said. ‘Come and take a look.’ She opened the calabash... Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl’s head with the ashy-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed<sup>18</sup>.

Adichie unfolds the war complexities from physical and literal to social and moral aspects. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a polyphonic representation of the Civil War in Nigeria. Adichie moves beyond historical study and moves deep into the history of Nigeria and into the origins of the struggle, oppression, brutality and war; in these circumstances the meaninglessness of humanity. Adichie violates the barriers of historical events by adding individual elements of each character and by switching on several microphones. The theme of war expands into the broader theme of society in which we see people struggling over problems such as gender, wealth, sex, occupation and family. *Half a Yellow Sun* illustrates one of the many ways in which fiction intertwines with history.

The author’s background is important in a new historicist understanding of a literary work to suggest that the literary text is not only a development of the author but a cultural product of his culture. This study reveals that Adichie looked at Nigerian society’s history and politics to address previous blunders. She uses vocabulary creatively to reinforce his worldview. Adichie’s bibliographic details help us understand that, in her portrayal of the war front as the Biafran’s struggle for freedom, she offers a detailed account of war experiences. She portrays war clearly like only a journalist can do. She was, of course, a writer and reporter on a radio station. That indicates why her protagonist is a radio station reporter.

Chidi Amuta put forward that “‘The particular social experiences of different nations provide the source of inspiration for the literature and performance of individual writers<sup>19</sup>’”. The novelists are influenced by the socioeconomic, cultural and political experiences which make up Nigerian history. Adichie studied at government college in Ibadan and at Yaba College in Lagos and Achimoter College in the Gold Coast. This is why she uses Ibo names in the writings to demonstrate how his social and cultural interactions have an influence on the writing and comprehension of his novel. On this basis, we may agree with the opinion of Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*: “‘The native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of arts must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place in its realities<sup>20</sup>’”. In this sense, Fanon refers to history as the truth of the culture and therefore promotes the reciprocal exclusion of society and literature as well as the inseparability of language and ideologies.

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18 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, (Jakarta: Hikmah, 2008), 188.

19 Chidi Amuta, *Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism*, (London: Zed Books, 2017), 64.

20 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 19.

New historicist approach gives the researcher an idea of the time Adichie wrote his novels, which is the postcolonial Nigerian society marked by conflicts and civil unrest that ultimately resulted in wars. New historicists claim that a literary work cannot be thought separated from its historical backgrounds. This view sees a literary work as primarily a representation of the background of the writers. New historicism is also applicable to this study as historical facts are the events that constitute this novel.

The Biafra War is an important subject for many authors of Nigerian literature. The Nigerian civil war contributed to the birth of a modern literary phenomenon that many authors have used. Many historical and socio-political occurrences may justify this issue in the first place. The war resulted in more than a million deaths. In this way, the rise of new novels on Biafra seems to tackle the political and socio-cultural complexities embedded in Nigeria's current context. All cultures have also used mechanisms to recall historical events and not lose control and reassert and revitalize their identities in accordance with the current situation.

Adichie covers key historical details in a political subplot in the *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The Biafra story is suppressed. Adichie draws attention to Ugwu's narration to raise an awareness in the reader "The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died" The title of this story itself indicates that the Igbos were mass slaughtered during the Biafran War. Ugwu establishes a connection in this second plot between the Biafran genocide, the Rwandan genocide and the Jewish Holocaust. The reader will get a clear picture of the brutality and cruelty of the war in this section of the narration. The reader recognizes the pain and misery and disturbance of people under persecution. The narrator denounces this barbaric act by painfully recognizing its historical nature. Ugwu then paints the horrifying picture of starving and dying people, in this poem: "Were you Silent when we Died":

Did you see photos in sixty-eight  
 of children with their hair becoming rust:  
 Sickly patches nestled on those small heads,  
 Then falling off, like rotten leaves on dust?<sup>21</sup>

The introduction of poetry into the novel and the discursive technique of moving to a subplot in her entire novel seem to be offer alternatives to other narrations of Biafran War. By starkly different methods and voices, Adichie detaches herself from her work. This approach adds credibility to the novel.

Adichie went to talk strongly about the Biafra case. Biafrans, relegated to the role of second-class people in their own country. As Taiwo Bello puts it in his review of the book, "Writing the Nigerian-Biafra War": "the incorporation of a full section on the roles of Biafra women during the war, [...] as most literature on the topic is dominated by the experiences of male soldiers who fought in the war, thereby ignoring the important roles played by women<sup>22</sup>". Bello's argument suggests that the Biafra debate shows gender

21 Adichie, 375.

22 Taiwo Bello, "Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War," Canadian Journal of African Studies 51, no. 2 (2017):



inequality. Many academics are currently demystifying this repression.

Adichie brings women into the forefront through characters as Olanna and Kainene, reflecting women's solidity during war. During the war, these women sought better conditions for themselves and their communities. This novel reveals that ethnic minorities in Biafra have no place. The exclusion of minority groups in Biafra should be examined because separatist groups have emerged from former Eastern Nigeria. As Eastern minority oppression lasts for too long, there have been many separatist parties in the area. According to Meredith Coffey:

In the context of this inclusive vision, the novels' cautious approach to dealing with ethnic minority characters is particularly striking. [...] *Sunset at Dawn* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* each explicitly raise the question of eastern minorities' inclusion without ever resolving it comfortably<sup>23</sup>.

Coffey's statement gives us an insight why many minorities now fight for a sovereign state in the imagined Biafra. Adichie follows Achebe, who effectively crossed racial and political boundaries in order to support his Biafra story. In the post- period, the Biafra story turned totally into an uprising of Igbo. That's because ethnic minorities in the East have been marginalized and other separatist movements have arisen in the former Biafra among the minorities. The new emergence of Biafra's indigenous peoples, which is pro-Igbo, indicates that after years of repression Biafra disintegrated.

Adichie focuses on this idea of positionality by introducing three characters who are all marginalized, but each has a different position, which affects their viewpoint. All three views are unified in that they are all marginalized by dominant power, albeit varied by their particularities. Hall describes this process when he speaks about the two forms of cultural identity:

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common<sup>24</sup>.

Adichie portrays the two forms of cultural identity discussed by Hall: common history and a specific and different state of being. The various states of being that Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard have encountered intersect at a point of similarity. Everyone is in a subordinate position. Adichie describes the Igbo as a group that the Hausa-controlled Nigerian government puts pressure on. Through the characters of Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard, Adichie illustrates the Igbo people's suffering and persecution during post-independence years. Furthermore, what Adichie seems to have done is to reveal the continuing effects of colonization even after independence.

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324-325.

23 Meredith. Coffey, "Ethnic Minorities and the Biafran National Imaginary in Chukwemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Meredith Coffey," in *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2016), 477-485.

24 Stuart Hall "Cultural identity and diaspora" in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990) 222-37.

Literary text is viewed by new historicists as inseparable from the society and culture in which it is constructed. Based on the most recent Geertz 'theories on history, new historicists consider literary texts as cultural artefacts. Likewise, all the characters in the novel are the products of society and culture in which they live and tell the events according to their own experience. For example, Ugwu starts the novel as a subordinate on several levels. He doesn't appear to have any claim whether he is Odenigbo's houseboy or not. Ugwu's aunty tells him that "While she was sweeping the corridor in the mathematics department a week ago, she heard Master say that he needed a houseboy to do his cleaning, and she immediately said she could help<sup>25</sup>". The subordination in this sentence is clearly visible, since both Ugwu and his aunty seem to have a lesser status than Master. Starting with aunty's physical cleaning act, we already see a potential class distinction between her and Master, who we later know is Odenigbo.

Odenigbo, as characteristic of Adichie's fiction, is a vigorous character whose position as Master is confusing. Odenigbo illustrates British colonialism's much further-reaching effects. His British education possibly contributed to his Professor title. The paradox was that without his British education, Odenigbo would probably not have attained this degree of social status. However, it is the British, on the other hand, that Odenigbo condemns for the Nigerian oppressive regime. Odenigbo proves to be Ugwu's generous employer, offering him education and help when Ugwu's mother gets sick. Ugwu thinks how well he has been treated compared to other houseboys. "The houseboy at the end of the street... did not decide what would be cooked, he cooked whatever he was ordered to. And they did not have masters or madams who gave them books<sup>26</sup>"

While Ugwu has a more comfortable place than other houseboys, he still plays a role of being a subaltern within the boundaries of class system. Ugwu has different roles in different parts of the novel. He is a houseboy, a soldier, a rape perpetrator. But none of these roles is his choice. He is acting according to the orders given to him. Adichie seems to use Ugwu as a representation of the Igbo people's different states during war years. He starts the novel with a purity and innocence that suggests the Igbo people's dream of creating Biafra. Adichie underlines the connection between Ugwu's optimistic expectations and the Igbo people's patriotic hope.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* reveals a combination of several different stories and narrators. narration is central to the novel. Adichie explores the crossroads of history and literature in this novel. Adichie also deals with Richard and Ugwu's literary position. Adichie uses Ugwu to give some historical references. Adichie also starts a debate about how the history is written. This novel incorporates the theoretical discussion of history with the analysis of trauma theory in relation to a postcolonial context. The novel focusses on portraying Adichie's own trauma which is inherited from her parents Ugwu is one of the novel's most interesting protagonists, while at the beginning of the book he has no other responsibility but to follow the duties of his master at home, the transformation he undergoes in the novel is important. Ugwu is a 13-year-old boy at the beginning of the novel, while he is an adult

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25 Adichie, 4.

26 Adichie, 21

man at the end of the novel. An important element in his development is his education under the guidance of Odenigbo. He gave books to Ugwu and even sent him to school to get a good education. Over time, Ugwu became a member of Odenigbo's family. The time Ugwu spent in Odenigbo's house influenced his personality. In the novel education is always highlighted and Odenigbo is highly supportive about it: "Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tools to understand exploitation?<sup>27</sup>". It is interesting to note that in the novel Ugwu, who has no scholarly experience, has been given the opportunity to write on Nigeria's history. The author deliberately gives the task of telling the history to Ugwu because history has always been the history of the strong people. At this point, it can be said that Adichie opposes traditional historical narratives.

Ugwu also continued to write his book on the war front. In this sense, it can be concluded that Ugwu conveys his experiences of war in the first person. Ugwu's position as a history narrator differs from Richard. It was the war experiences that shaped Ugwu's identity and life perspective. He became a completely different person after the war. His experiences in the war made him a writer. At this point, Adichie problematizes the historian's position in the narration. Adichie also explores the issue of colonial exploitation in this book. She views the post-colonial period from a particular point of view, one where political and economic history is more relevant. By creating Ugwu the true owner and writer of the Novel, Adichie reinforces a clear African heritage.

### Conclusion

The experience of Biafran war provides the impression of a war, not just in the historical context but also in the present. Adichie reveals the entire picture of colonial Nigeria. Adichie is still trying to keep the heritage of Nigerian authors of the third generation. The conflict that also challenged brutality and how people were oppressed contributed to the debate on the dynamics of majority/minority and the fictionalized portrayal of Nigerian culture.

In a new historicist analysis of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the new historicist idea that a work of literature was influenced by the context and culture in which it was written became the main focus for this analysis. In view of Adichie's own life and the imperialist culture which shaped the novel, it was examined how much Adichie's experiences influenced *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In other words, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, is a book that incorporates many parallels from Adichie's life experience.

In the new historicist reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is seen that Adichie was seeking to create a connection of past and present. This is important, as it is only by this connection that she has stayed in touch with the past to reconstruct the future.

The military subversion of political power was also an important characteristic of this novel. *Half of a Yellow Sun* tells the story of creating a nation's past with its collapsed political structure. New historicism tells the history of the 'unseen' and the 'other' and opposes the traditional historical system of 'power' in narratives. In this context, the novel can be evaluated in a new historicist context, as it reveals the 'facts of the third world' that traditional history ignores. What the author intended to do here is to rewrite history.

However, she writes this history from the perspective of many different people.

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