



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS STAND IN THE WAY OF HUMAN LOVE AND RELATIONSHIP WITH REFERENCE TO THE NOVEL HALF OF A YELLOW SUN.

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ABSTRACT

It is a universal phenomenon that every human being is concerned with the satisfaction of deeply felt needs and assuaging of pain. Famous spiritual movements and their development spring from this universal longing (Albert Einstein 1930 pp 1-4). Homoeopathic magic played its part in the earlier days in assuaging the fear and pain of the people. Unsatisfied with the result of sorcerers, the ancient people surrendered to the monks and priests for magical power and guidance to lead a better life without physical and mental suffering.

This priestly caste created illusory beings for the common men to offer sacrifices to propitiate gods (Sir James George Frazer 1922). In the modern arena, the political leaders and the priestly caste are misusing religion for their interest. This article tries to focus on how human love and relationship got strangled and muddled up by the religious beliefs in the contemporary society portrayed in the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Though the primary purpose of the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* is to remind the world about the starvation, the anguish, the massacres, and the mass killing that took place during the Nigerian civil war or Biafra war as called by the writer and it also portrays how the human love and relationships undergo drastic transformation at the time of the war. In fact, the theme of human love and relationship undermines and pushes back other themes of the novel. The writer has given much colour and intensity to intertwining the relationship between different characters in order to make the novel universal.

Religion plays a subtle role in the novel infusing conflict in the relationship between the different ethnic groups. However at the time of war, it takes its toll in the form of hatred and violence let loose by the rulers and the religious chauvinists. As the war is fought between the Igbo Christians in the Southwest and the Hausa Muslims in the North, the religious card further aggravates the intensity of the civil war in Nigeria. Hence it is necessary to know the historical background and the causes of the war to understand how the religious beliefs of Igbo Christians and the Hausa Muslims stood in the way of their love and relationship.

Key Words: Igbo Christians, Hausa Muslims, Biafra, Human love, Civil war

NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR- A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Nigerian Civil War, known as the Nigerian - Biafra War was began on July 6, 1967 and lasted until January 15, 1970. Nigeria was an artificial demarcation first made by the colonial powers. They disregarded

the religious, the linguistic, and the ethnic differences existing there. There were numerous attempts from the southeastern provinces of Nigeria to disaffiliate and form the Republic of Biafra. One of the causes for the civil war is the involvement of the British, Dutch,

French and Italian oil companies' battle for the rich Nigerian oilfields.

Religious differences endorse the strong divide between different regions of Nigeria. Nigeria has hundreds of different ethnic factions; the three predominant factions were the Igbo in the southeast between 60 - 70% of population and they were by and large Catholic Christians; the Hausa - Fulani in the northern part about 65% of the population were mostly Muslims and the Yoruba in the southwestern about 75% of population belonged to the different sects of Christianity and Islam. The semi-feudal and Islamic Hausa-Fulani in the North were traditionally ruled by a despotic, conservative Islamic hierarchy of Emirs. The Hausa also excelled in the military field and made up most of the colony's military forces (Alexander Madiebo 1980). In contrast the Igbo in the southeast lived in mostly self-ruling, and democratically organized communities.

These tradition- derived differences were perpetuated and enhanced by the British system of colonial rule in Nigeria. In the North, British found it convenient to rule indirectly through Emirs. At the time of independence, the North was the most underdeveloped area in Nigeria with the literacy rate of 2% as compared to 19.2% in the East. By 1960s Igbo political culture was more unified and the region relatively prosperous, with tradesmen and literate elites were active throughout Nigeria. The British colonial ideology that divided Nigeria into three regions intensified the already existing economic, political and social differences among different ethnic groups. It has been described as a deliberate ethnic and religious gerrymander to keep the nation weak, unstable and open to the plunder of its vast oil reserves by the UK companies, led by British Petroleum.

During 1940s and 1950s the Igbo and Yoruba parties united to fight for independence from Britain. They also wanted an independent Nigeria to be organized into several small states so that the conservative North could not dominate the other regions of the country. However, the northern leaders who were afraid that independence would mean political and economic domination by the more westernized elites

in the South preferred the continuation of the British rule. As a condition of accepting independence, they demanded that the country continued to be divided into three regions with the North having clear majority. Igbo and Yoruba leaders, anxious to attain an independent country at all cost accepted the Northern demands.

Coup and Counter Coup by Military Officers

On 15 January 1966, Major Kaduna Nzeogwu and other junior Army officers attempted a coup. It was generally speculated that the coup had been initiated by the Igbo army officers and for their own benefit, because of the ethnicity of those that were killed. Claims of electoral fraud was one of the reasons given by the coup plotters. This coup resulted in General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo and the head of the army who becoming the President and the first military head of the state in Nigeria. The coup itself failed, as Ironsi rallied the military against the plotters. He then instituted military rule, by subverting the constitutional succession and alleging that the democratic institutions had failed. There was a lot of suspicion about the cause of the coup to benefit the Igbo people; however, the real reason for the coup has never been made clear.

The mistrust and disagreement relating to the coup and the military rule by Ironsi paved the way for another coup by the Northern army officers on 29 July 1966. This coup was led by Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon. He was chosen as a compromise candidate. He was a Northerner, a Christian, from a minority tribe, and had a good status within the army. Ethnic tensions due to the coup and counter-coup increased. Mass pogrom in May 1966 repeated later the same year in July and September is known as the large scale massacres of Christians Igbo living in the Muslim north.

The Breakaway and the Civil War

The military governor of the Igbo-dominated southeast, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu declared publicly in the southern parliament the secession of the southeastern region from Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra, an independent nation on 30 May 1967. Although the very young nation had an unceasing shortage of weapons to go to war, it determined to defend itself. There was much sympathy in Europe and

elsewhere, yet only a few countries recognized the new republic.

Ojukwu managed at Aburi to get accord for a confederation of Nigeria rather than a federation. The Aburi agreement was soon nullified by the military government led by Yakuba Gowon. Hence Ojukwu started to plan for the war. The eastern region was very well prepared for war, outmanned and outgunned by the Nigerians. Their advantage included fighting in their homeland, support of the most easterners' determination and use of limited resources. The British and Soviet Union supported the Nigerian government while Canada and France helped the Biafrans. The United States seemed to be on the fence but helped the Biafrans through the Red Cross.

The Nigerian government launched a police action to retake the secessionist territory. The war began on 6 July 1967 when Nigerian Federal troops advanced in two lines into Biafra. After facing unexpectedly fierce resistance and casualties, they advanced onto the town of Nsukka. The Biafrans responded with an offensive of their own. The Biafran assault was led by Lt. Col. Banjo, a Yoruba. General Gowon assigned four divisions of Infantry. They easily recaptured many of their territories, but later with the help of foreign mercenaries Nigerians retook most of the towns.

From 1968 onwards, the war fell into a form of impasse with the Nigerian forces were unable to make significant advances into the remaining areas of Biafran control due to stiff resistance. But Nigeria began to close the ring around the Biafrans creating blockade of the surrounded Biafra. This led to a humanitarian disaster as there was widespread hunger and starvation in the besieged Igbo area. The Biafra government claimed that Nigeria was using hunger and genocide to win the war. It has been argued that by prolonging the war the Biafra relief effort contributed to the deaths of as many as 180,000 civilians. In response to the Nigerian government using foreigners to lead some advances, the Biafra government also began hiring foreign mercenaries to prolong the war. Even the volunteers, the doctors and the health workers were subjected to attacks by the Nigerian army and witnessed civilians being slaughtered and starved by the Nigerian military.

With the increased British support, the Nigerian federal forces launched their final assault named Operation Tail-Wind. The Biafra town of Owerri fell on 9 January, and Uli fell on 11 January. Only a few days earlier, Ojukwu escaped into exile by flying by plane to the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire, leaving his second-in-command Philip Effiong to handle the details of the surrender to the General Yakubu Gowon of the federal army on 13 January 1970. The war finally ended a few days later with the Nigerian forces advancing into the remaining Biafra held territories with little resistance.

Aftermath of the Civil War

The civil war cost the Igbo people a great deal in terms of lives, money and infrastructure. It has been estimated that up to three million people might have been killed due to the conflict, mostly of hunger and disease. Reconstruction, helped by the oil money, was swift; however, the old ethnic and religious tensions remained a constant element of Nigerian politics. Laws were passed mandating that political parties could not be ethnically or tribally based; however, it has been hard to make this work in practice. Igbo people who run for their lives during the pogrom and war returned to find their positions had been taken over; and when the war was over the government did not feel any need to restore them, preferring to regard them as having resigned. This reasoning was also extended to Igbo owned properties and houses. People from other regions were quick enough to take over any house owned by an Igbo. The Nigerian government justified this by terming such properties as abandoned. These led to the feeling of discrimination and were seen as further economically disabling the Igbo people even long after the war.

Plot of the novel

The story of the novel is spun around three main characters. Odenigbo is introduced as the protagonist of the novel. He is from the Igbo community and works as professor of a university in Nsukka town. He lives with Olanna in relation before marriage. They constantly quarrel and nag each other. Their relation gets sprained when Odenigbo's mother brings a village girl Mala to their apartment and helps Odenigbo to sleep with Amala. This affair has brought Olanna great distress. She takes revenge on him by sleeping with an

English journalist and her twin sister Kainene's lover Richard. Another important character introduced in the plot is the thirteen year old village boy, Ugwu. He is also from the Igbo ethnicity. He has been brought to the town by an old maid who was helping Odenigbo people. He becomes the trusted assistant and help to Odenigbo after the trial period in the house doing domestic work. He is also liked by Olanna and the Baby later. He becomes matured when he was forced to enroll the army during the war. He takes up writing after the war. He writes about the cruelty of war on the innocent people.

Olanna and Kainene were the twin sisters of the minister family. However they disliked the pompous style of their parents. Both followed their own way of leading a romantic life. They underwent lot of hardship even before the civil war begun. They were all due to the internal conflicts in their relation to each other. There was no such loss of life due to the conflict in their relation. The ensuing civil war between the Biafran army and Nigerian united army changed their entire life circle into complete disarray. After the British left Nigeria, the lives of main characters drastically changed and were torn apart by the ensuing civil war and decisions in their personal life. The novel jumps between events that took place during the early 1960 and the late 1960s, when the war took place. In the early 1960s, the main characters are introduced. Jumping four years ahead, trouble is brewing between the Hausa and the Igbo people and hundreds of people die in the massacres, including Olanna's beloved aunty and uncle. A new republic called Biafra is created by the Igbo. As a result of the conflict, Olanna, Odenigbo, their daughter Baby and Ugwu are forced to flee Nsukka, the University town and the major intellectual hub of the new nation. They finally end up in the refugee town of Umuahia, where they suffer as a result of food shortage and the constant air raids and paranoid atmosphere. There are also allusions to a conflict between Olanna and Kainene, Richard and Kainene and Olanna and Odenigbo.

When the novel jumps back to the early 1960s, we learn that Odenigbo slept with a village girl, who then had his baby. Olanna is furious at his betrayal, and

sleeps with Richard in a moment of weakness. She goes back to Odenigbo and they take in his daughter, when her mother refused to take care of her Baby. Back during the war, Olanna, Odenigbo, Baby and Ugwu are living with Kainene and Richard where Kainene is running a refugee camp. The situation is hapless as they have no food or medicine. Kainene decided to trade across enemy lines, but does not return even after the end of the war a few weeks later. The book ends ambiguously with the reader not knowing if Kainene still lives.

Impact of Religious Conflict on Human Love and Relationship

Adichie was born seven years after the war ended; however, her imaginative recreation of the events seems to suggest that the war has perhaps permanently affected the identity of generations of Igbo people in Nigeria. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is set before and during the Biafra war, is told from the perspective of the relation between two couples namely Odenigbo and Olanna and Kainene and Richard. The novel raises political questions as well as many challenging gender, race, class related issues. It provides a sensitive portrayal of the characters and of their relationships with each other. The relationship portrayed between different characters is not smooth even before the element of conflict is introduced in the novel. For example, there is a crisis between Odenigbo, his lover Olanna who lives with him without marrying him, and Amala a village girl who has been used as bait by Odenigbo's mother to avenge Olanna. The relation between Kainene the twin sister of Olanna is either strong as the lover of Kainene Richard, the British journalist has slept with Olanna. She does this affair as revenge against her live in partner Odenigbo for having an affair with Amala. Since all these characters are from Igbo Christians, except Richard who also is a Christian, they have learnt to tolerate and have adjusted themselves for a life together in spite of their illicit relationships.

The relationship between Mohammed and Olanna is quite strong before the war. However, there arises a rift in the smooth friendships due to their different affiliation of religions. Olanna reminds him always about her ethnicity and religious identity whenever

she gets a chance. Mohammed was left helpless at the massacre of her relations including her aunty Arize. Though he helps Olanna escape from the violent mob, she does not trust him as he belongs to the other religion. She rejects his love saying she was a Biafran first.

The friendship that existed between Abdulmalik, a Hausa Muslim, and the Mbaezi, a Christian family is very strong and they live as cordial neighbors before the civil war.

'Well done,' Abdulmalik said. He opened his bag and brought out a pair of slippers and held them out to her, his narrow face ceased in a smile... She took the slippers with both hands. 'Thank you, Abdulmalik (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, 40).

However, everything changes drastically and tragedy befalls the Mbaezi's family. The strong friendship did not last long when there was unrest due to the civil war. The brutality and bestiality displayed by Abdulmalik towards Uncle Mbaezi's family shows how the religious difference strips the human values of love and friendship once and forever.

... We finished the whole family. It was Allah's will... The man was familiar. It was Abdulmalik (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, 147).

The universal inhumanity unleashed is vividly captured in the mindless butchery of Nnaemeka and other Igbo people at Kano airport. Richard was astonished to witness such a bestiality of man towards their fellow men just because they belong to a different religion or ethnicity.

... The soldier walked over to him, 'Say Allahu Akbar!' ... He would not say Allahu Akbar because his accent would give him away. Richard willed him to say the words, anyway, to try; he willed something, anything to happen in the stifling silence and as if in answer to his thoughts, the rifle went off and Nnaemeka's chest blew open, a splattering red mass, and Richard dropped the note in his hand... (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, 152-153).

Not all the Muslims in Nigeria were against the Igbo people. There is a dividing line between the Mohammeds and the Abumaliks of the war (Sophia Ogwude). When he witnessed the massacres, he fumed at them saying, '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.' (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, 150).

All the main characters share some patriotism for their new homeland. But as the horrors of war mounts, they must fight to keep their relationship together, as their world and their ideals are torn apart. There is mature relationship between strong men and women comfortable in their individual roles within relationships and they are actually enjoying themselves. There is a liberated Olanna who actually turns down marriage proposals from her long term lover because she is enjoying refreshing relationship. Adichie makes the point eloquently that 'we are the sum of our experiences.' Adichie exposes the hypocrisy and the self righteousness of those who convinced the populace to go to a war who had no business in fight. War is war, full of broken limbs, bloody calabashes filled with decapitated heads and broken dreams. Everything is scarce during war; joy, food, sex. Even the thickest relationship is lost. Kainene is lost forever. No one knows the whereabouts of her. She went in search of dry food for the baby at the enemy line. Olanna and her husband are separated. Ogwu has been picked by the Biafra army. Kainene's lover is back in England. The journey of relationship is stranded during the civil war.

CONCLUSION

Religious conflict is not the only reason for the civil war in Nigeria but the vein of its effect runs so deeply in the minds and hearts of the people. The Christian elites in the country always took pride in their education and amassed wealth and almost became the ruling class in Nigeria. It should have played the card at the back of the mind of the mass of uneducated Hausa Muslim population a deep rooted envy that was spontaneously outraged at the time of civil war. Secondly, survival becomes the ultimate goal for each individual in the face of adversity. So, they go to any extent to eliminate others in their effort to survive. The politicians and the ruling class have mattered this technique to meet their personal ends. This is all the more clear in the 2002 riot in Gujarat. It was always said that the riot against the innocent Muslims was a spontaneous reaction of the Hindus to

the killing of fifty nine Hindus on a train in Godhra (Markandey Katju). Another point to be noted is that the ethnic groups are evenly divided in following different faiths. The Hausa people are all Muslims and they owe their respect to the Emirs and Sultans. On the other hand, the Igbo people are all Catholic Christians who owe their allegiance to the papacy. The civil war was over in 1970 but the rift between these two ethnic groups is as strong as it was before. It is due to their religious difference that they are not able to patch up their difference and work towards a united Nigeria.

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