Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XIV-No. 15 April 2016 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-27

Serena Guarracino

Tales of War for the 'Third Generation': Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Abstract I: Di recente emersa come autrice principale della 'terza generazione' di scrittori nigeriani (Adesanmi & Dunton 2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie è approdata alla notorietà internazionale nel 2007, quando il suo romanzo *Half of a Yellow Sun* vinse l'Orange Prize for Fiction. Questo articolo analizza come la trattazione del tema della guerra nella scrittura di Adichie offra una nuova prospettiva sul ruolo dell'intellettuale impegnato in contesti postcoloniali e globali. Adichie sceglie di raccontare il conflitto attraverso diversi livelli di ri-narrazione, rifiutando in questo modo di porsi come portavoce di un'identità nazionale (nigeriana e/o biafrana), etnica (Igbo), o sociale tra le diverse posizionalità a cui il romanzo dà voce. Di conseguenza, *Half of a Yellow Sun* intende sostenere una cultura di pace per una generazione di nigeriani cosmopoliti, nati almeno una decade dopo la tragica fine del conflitto, invocando il diritto delle nuove generazioni ad una memoria senza ritorsioni.

Abstract II: As leading figure of a burgeoning 'third generation' of Nigerian writers (Adesanmi & Dunton 2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie raised to international fame in 2007 after winning the Orange Prize for Fiction with her novel on the Biafra war, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This paper aims at investigating how the way Adichie's fiction deals with the subject of war offers new insights in the role of the *engagé* writer in a postcolonial and global context. Adichie chooses to narrate the conflict through multiplying layers of re-telling, and hence refuses to cast herself as the spokesperson of either a national identity (Nigeria and/or Biafra), an ethnic group (Igbo), or a social class among those featured in the novel. Hence, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is meant to foster a culture of peace for a generation of cosmopolitan Igbo Nigerians born at least a decade after the war's bitter end, advocating the new generations' right to memory without retaliation.

On May 30, 2015, *The New York Times* published a story by Nigerian-American writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, titled "My Father's Kidnapping". As the title immediately

makes clear the story, told in the first person, recounts the kidnapping and eventual release of the writer's father; since it appeared under the 'opinion' feature, readers immediately know this terrible thing happened to Adichie herself, and not to a fictional first person narrator. Indeed, one of the affective triggers of this piece of writing – one the story somewhat problematically capitalizes upon – is the very familiarity of Adichie's public persona to a wide public, due to the international visibility she has achieved in recent years. The writer's popularity is even mentioned in the piece as one of the possible causes of her father's kidnapping:

> I constantly straddled panic; I was sleepless, unfocused, jumpy, fearful that something else had gone wrong. And there was my own sad guilt: He was targeted because of me. 'Ask your daughter the writer to bring the money', the kidnappers told him [her father], because to appear in newspapers in Nigeria, to be known, is to be assumed wealthy (Adichie 2015: n.p.).

This passage exemplifies one of the main stylistic features of the piece, i.e. the constant shifting between an informative register where the writer is offering information on Nigerian society ('because to appear in newspapers in Nigeria, to be known, is to be assumed wealthy') and what Derek Attridge would call a 'performed emotion', that is, the written depiction of feelings through either vivid word choices such as the immediate 'panic', or by building a crescendo such as 'sleepless, unfocused, jumpy, fearful', or again via the use of the possessive in 'my own sad guilt', thrown at the reader via a sparse and syncopated syntactic structure.

Attridge writes of 'performed emotion' in his analysis of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* in his 2015 *The Work of Literature*, where he further develops the concept of 'literature' as event[1]. According to him, one of the ways the literary text 'happens' to its readers is indeed by 'performing' emotions, that is, in his own words: "as literature, [the language of a work] *performs* hurting, encouraging, teaching, and so on, relying on the effectiveness of the *as if* to provide an experience that replicates modes of thinking and feeling in the non-literary domain" (Attridge 2015: 266). The non-literary domain, in this case, is the current security crisis in Nigeria: a crisis into which Adichie means to immerse the reader by channelling it through her own feelings and experience. Hence the piece goes from the writer's first and traumatic knowledge of her father's kidnapping through the events leading to his liberation after the family pays a substantial ransom, celebrating the affective ties supporting Adichie's family against what is described as "a dance of disappointment with the authorities" (Adichie 2015: n.p.): Nigerian officials are reported as either unable or unwilling to be of any help both during the kidnapping and

[1] For earlier conceptualizations of literature as event see Attridge 2004 and 2005; I have elsewhere discussed Attridge's previous work in relation to Edward Said's idea of contrapuntal reading (Guarracino 2014a).

afterwards, when they ask the family to pay for the equipment necessary to track down the kidnappers. Eventually, the crime goes unpunished, and the helplessness of civilians is embodied by Adichie's parents relocating (maybe temporarily, maybe not) in the US: "The next day, my parents were on a flight to the United States, away from the tainted blur that Nigeria had become" (Adichie 2015: n.p.).

This piece of writing, part reportage part short story, sheds a new light on Adichie's previous production and on her commitment to literature as a way to foster a culture of peace in present-day Nigeria. In recent years Adichie has emerged as a conspicuous public figure, a web star whose TED lectures score more than one million views on YouTube[2] and who is regularly asked for informed opinions on Nigerian society[3]. In her interviews and non-fictional pieces regarding Nigerian politics and the security crisis in the country, she has consistently supported Nigeria against Western intervention[4]; yet she has also investigated both the present and past of Nigeria to offer readers new narratives on her and their own country and exposing what, in a well-known lecture, she named "the dangers of a single story" (Adichie 2009).

Partially thanks to her notoriety, Adichie is also the headliner of the third generation of Nigerian writers (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005: 16), a group of intellectuals – also including Teju Cole, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, Chika Unigwe and Helen Oyeyemi – who operate in a global literary market still mostly located in the West and driven by Western economic forces[5], but also where "Nigerian readers [number] in the millions" (Griswold 2000: 4), both in Nigeria and abroad. The very definition 'third generation Nigerian writers', as Hamish Dalley poignantly notes, actually opens to questions such as "what it means for literature to belong to a generation, and to a nation" (Dalley 2013: 17); *Half of a Yellow Sun* answers to that question by claiming the difficult legacy of the Nigeria-Biafra war for a younger generation of Nigerians.

[2] Probably the most well-known of Adichie's lectures is the TEDxEuston lecture titled "We Should All Be Feminists" (2013), which was sampled in Beyoncé's single "***Flawless" and eventually published as a pamphlet (Adichie 2014a).

[3] An example can be found in the BBC talkshow *Hardtalk* where Adichie was interviewed by Stephen Sackur on *Half of a Yellow Sun* and its representation of Nigeria's current and past history (BBC World News 2014).

[4] For example, Adichie notoriously declared "We can solve our own damn problems" at the 2014 Hay Festival for Literature and Arts in Wales referring to US and French interventions following the kidnapping of 276 girls from a school in Chibok by Boko Haram: this statement received large attention and was amply referred to by commentaries in the general media (see for example The Herald 2014).

[5] It must be remembered that *Half of a Yellow Sun* was awarded the Orange Prize for Fiction (now Baileys'), a UK-based prize devoted to increase the visibility of women writers and which has during the years scouted many postcolonial talents – before Adichie, Andrea Levy and Zadie Smith were awarded the prize (Bailey's Prize for Fiction n.d.).

For these often cosmopolitan Nigerians, this "seminal event in Nigeria's modern history" remains a "shadow"[6], not taught in schools, and only obliquely referred to by family and friends – even in families such as Adichie's, whose grandfathers both died in refugee camps. The Nigeria-Biafra War, also called the Nigerian Civil War in an effort to efface the however brief existence of Biafra, originated in the separation of South-East Nigeria from the central government on May 30, 1967, and was preceded by two military coups in 1966 which saw Igbo and Hausa militants fighting for supremacy in the country, culminating in the anti-Igbo pogrom of September 1966. The secession of Biafra apparently put an end to the unrest by separating Northern (and mainly Muslim) Hausa from Southern (and mostly Christian) Igbo; but contention over control of oil-rich territories led to war on July 6, 1967, with Nigeria supported (among others) by former colonizing power Britain due to Shell-BP's interests in the area. The war ended in 1970 with the incorporation of former Biafran territory in the state of Nigeria, but not before the humanitarian crisis of 1968 impacted the global imaginary by flooding Western news with the still proverbial Biafran starving children[7].

Half of a Yellow Sun, whose title describes the flag of the short-lived Republic of Biafra, narrates this repressed history through the lives of three fictional characters, who tell their stories in a third person point of view narration; yet in the closing Author's Note to the novel, it is stated that many events are actually based on Adichie's own family history, a statement that creates a strong relationship between the writer's life and the fictional stories from the novel, thus making them 'authentic' in an emotional, if not factual, sense. As in the later story about her father's kidnapping, the writer asserts her presence in the events narrated, thus foregrounding her affective investment and exciting the same from the reader:

> I could not have written this book without my parents. My wise and wonderful father, Professor Nwoye James Adichie […] and my defending and devoted mother, Mrs Ifeoma Grace Adichie, have always wanted me to know, I think, that what matters is not what they went through but that they survived. I am grateful to them for their stories and for so much more (Adichie 2009; position 406).

It is through the authenticity of this appeal for emotional engagement, more than through the proposal of any social or political settlement, that *Half of a Yellow Sun* works as a model for a peace-making process in Nigeria.

Adichie's account of the war eschews the authoritativeness of History, of great events and historical figures, an exception among the many novels on the Biafran war by

[6] Adichie herself defined the war in this way as recently as 2014, writing in relation to the stalling of the distribution in Nigeria of the film based on the novel (Adichie 2014b).
[7] For a thorough history of the conflict see Gould 2011.

Nigerian writers: as Jane Bryce notes, "though the 'Biafran novel' has been something of a rite of passage for Nigerian writers of the two previous generations, Adichie is the first to approach it entirely as *historical* fiction" (Bryce 2008: 61; italics in the text). The specificity of the novel lies in this interweaving of the 'historical', with its accuracy for events and locations, and fiction as a literary device, hence as a device for performing emotion. As Attridge states in his discussion of Kate Grenville's *Sarah Thornhill*, historical detail may be part of the enjoyment in experiencing literature; however, "[this novel] works as literature not by imparting knowledge but by enabling the reader to feel, for a few hours (and then in memory), the intensity of a consciousness exposed to the particular passions, marvels and horrors of this time and place" (Attridge 2015: 8).

Adichie's novel performs this by focusing on the personal lives of three characters: Olanna, a young Igbo woman who is just back from the UK and is involved with Odenigbo, a professor working at the university of Nsukka; Richard, a British journalist who is in a relationship with Olanna's twin sister Kainene; and Ugwu, a home-schooled servant to Odenigbo. The relationships of love, lust, care and betrayal among these characters form the core matter of the novel; yet the war does not work as a mere backdrop, but as a counterpoint to their stories, constantly challenging the characters' physical and emotional survival: the 1966 anti-Igbo pogrom, for example, represents both a historical and personal watershed: it triggers the secession, but it also haunts the memory of Olanna, who witnesses the slaughter of part of her family. As the proclamation of the secession is met with joyous celebrations throughout the university campus in Nsukka, she cannot but recall the traumatic memories of the carnage she has witnessed, which in its turn becomes a dark foreboding for the future of the Republic of Biafra: "Odenigbo raised his arm as he spoke, and Olanna thought how awkwardly twisted Aunty Ifeka's arm had looked, as she lay on the ground, how her blood had pooled so thick that it looked like glue, not red but close to black. Perhaps Aunty Ifeka could see this rally now, and all the people here, or perhaps not, if death was a silent opaqueness" (Adichie 2009: position 154).

Indeed, it is the stormy relationship between Olanna and Odenigbo that especially mirrors the emotional trajectory of the Biafra state itself, alternating between moments of enthusiasm and dejection, everyday happiness and hair-breadth rescues, as when bombings disrupt the two characters' wedding in Umuahia, the capital of Biafra at this time in the war. Here harsh living conditions emerge from even the smallest details of the ceremony, such as the plastic bouquet Olanna refuses to hold: "But nobody grows flowers in Umuahia. People here grow what they can eat", retorts another character (Adichie 2009: position 192). Most significantly, as the bombing starts Olanna's white dress, that over-signified element of any wedding ceremony, becomes not a source of joy but of danger to the bride and the people around her:

> [The planes] spurted hundreds of scattered bullets before dark balls rolled out from underneath, as if the planes were laying large eggs. […] A woman from the opposite house tugged at Olanna's dress. "Remove it! Remove that white dress! They will see it and target us!" (Adichie 2009: position 193).

The scene also symbolically entangles the public and private tragedies of the main characters: in particular the cruel mimicry of life the narrator Ugwu sees in the egg-laying planes also evokes Olanna's own inability to have children and the painful love she cherishes for Baby, the child that she is rearing but (as the reader will discover in the following pages) is actually her husband's daughter from an extramarital affair in the time before the war. Hence the material elements of war also become objective correlatives of the characters' own private dramas, preventing the reader from separating the grand narrative of history from the emotional struggles of the individual characters' lives.

Their stories are also framed in a metanarrative structure, in which the flow of narration by the three aforementioned characters is interrupted by bits of another story: the story of 'the book'. These chapters are also written in the third person, and tell of the writing of a book titled "The World Was Silent When We Died". The writer, as the reader understands from the first lines, is male, and recounts episodes from different parts of the novel. The first instalment, for example, opens with the following lines:

> For the prologue, he recounts the story of the woman with the calabash. She sat on the floor of a train squashed between crying people, shouting people, praying people. She was silent, caressing the covered calabash on her lap in a gentle rhythm until they crossed the Niger, and then she lifted the lid and asked Olanna and others close by to look inside (Adichie 2009: position 76).

At this point, readers still don't know the story of the woman with the calabash; the characters, part of the intellectual elite in the relatively young state of Nigeria, are still at peace. Hence this insertion creates a sense of foreboding, anticipating a very traumatic event experienced by Olanna after eight more chapters, as she is fleeing from afore-mentioned 1966 anti-Igbo pogrom (Adichie 2009: position 139). Subsequently, the reader is offered seven more instalments of the story of the book, which sometimes take the story a step forward in time, but also include some information on the historical background of what is happening: hence the second instalment tells about British colonization in the region and the upturning of Igbo's "small republican communities" (Adichie 2009: position 109) by the appointment of warrant chiefs who ruled indirectly for the colonial government. Subsequently readers are told about post-independence Nigeria and British influence on local politics in order to preserve the unity of the country: "at Independence in 1960, Nigeria was a collection of fragments held in a fragile clasp" (Adichie 2009: position 146). Thus the story of the book offers the historical and social contextualization

that the novel's main narratives purposefully lack; it also carefully avoids blaming either side of the conflict, identifying the causes of the war in foreign intervention and the corruption of the elites more than in the clash among the different ethnic groups constituting the young state of Nigeria.

Early on, the reader is led to identify the writer of the book within the book with Richard, the British journalist who, as the novel proceeds, is actually planning to write a book: first it is meant to be a book about the Igbo-Ugwu bronze castings – a sort of archaeological and anthropological account of Igbo culture before British colonization; then, as the conflict explodes, it becomes a book about the war. The title comes to him as he is quarrelling with two foreign journalists who have come to cover the war: "the title of the book came to Richard: 'The World Was Silent When We Died'. He would write it after the war, a narrative of Biafra's difficult victory, an indictment of the world". Yet his partner Kainene immediately retorts: "'We? The world was silent when *we* died?'". To which Richard humorously replies: "I'll make sure to note that the Nigerian bombs carefully avoided anybody with a British passport" (Adichie 2009: position 349).

This exchange actually anticipates that Richard will not be the one to write *The World Was Silent When We Died*: in the last chapters, readers discover that it has been Ugwu, and not Richard, who has been writing "The World Was Silent When We Died", as he dedicates it to his (former) master Odenigbo: "Ugwu writes his dedication last: *For Master, my good man*" (Adichie 2009: position 404; italics in the text). A village boy educated by his master, Ugwu follows Odenigbo and Olanna in their many trials, until he is kidnapped and enrolled in the Biafran army during the war's last and more violent phase. Here he goes through some very traumatic experiences, including making use of drugs and being involved in gang rape: having barely survived the war, he comes out of it as a virtuous combination of village culture and university education, conjoined with a caring ability that is shared by very few other characters in the novel.

It is to this character that Adichie confers the privilege and responsibility of narration: Adichie, the daughter of a well-to-do Nigerian family, chooses low-born Ugwu as proxy writer, thus creating a multiple distance in the metanarrative: "this device allows Adichie gracefully to relinquish her position as narrative authority, in favor of a spokesman for the voiceless – which she does not claim to be" (Bryce 2008: 62). This distance is conspicuously missing in "My Father's Kidnapping", which also narrates traumatic events related to the Adichie's family, but is written in a time when the writer's public persona has perhaps become too pervasive to be dismissed. Yet while differing on a narratological level, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and the more recent short story both capitalize on the affective impact of personal experience, either individual or communal, as a shared platform for negotiating the present.

This emerges for example in the BBC World Book Club on the novel (BBC World 2013). Comments and questions from the audience and from the Internet feature a

substantial Nigerian audience across the generations: readers who have lived the war praise the novel for giving voice to their experience (both the painful and the joyous moments of it), while younger readers share Adichie's need to remember what has been a founding moment of Nigerian history ("we are the generation that will change Nigeria", the writer states at one point). This collective endorsement of Adichie's writing is consistent with comments to "My Father's Kidnapping" on *The New York Times* website, where readers express their sympathy. Here too comments feature a significant and quite vocal Nigerian and more generally what we could call a 'postcolonial' readership: some share their own experience with the kidnapping of civilians, and many others urge Adichie to use her popularity to denounce the state of things in Nigeria. One comment, for example, reads:

> Thank you for sharing your story. Many have experienced [the] same and are too afraid, far too drained from the experience to share their story. This is the power of the pen, to bring out these negative actions that seem to eat into the Nigerian society and the response of our leadership. In speaking out you have shared the pain of many and given it more visibility (Adichie 2015, comment section).

These reader responses show the very complex context of production and reception in which *Half of a Yellow Sun* – and most of contemporary postcolonial fiction – participates. Adichie's works are clearly embedded in what Sandra Ponzanesi has called the "postcolonial cultural industry" (Ponzanesi 2014; see also Guarracino 2014b); yet they do it with a contrapuntal attitude, exploiting the inherent ambivalence of the industry as a "both enabling and constraining" environment for creativity in cultural production (Hesmondhalgh 2012: 70). It is in this context that Adichie exploits her visibility in global media to address sensitive political issues, but also soliciting a responsible readership especially in Nigeria and other African countries, including the African diaspora worldwide – a context that is crucial if one intends to open a discussion on postcolonial literature's contribution to a culture of peace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adesanmi, Pius and Dunton Chris. 2005. Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations. *English in Africa*, 32.1: 7–19.
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2009 [2006]. *Half of A Yellow Sun*. London: Fourth Estate (digital edition).
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2009. The Danger of a Single Story. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg (last accessed 17 November 2015).
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2014a. *We Should All Be Feminists*. London: Fourth Estate.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2014b. Hiding from Our Past. *The New Yorker*. May 1. http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/hiding-from-our-past (last accessed 17 November 2015).
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2015. My Father's Kidnapping. *The New York Times*. May 30. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/31/opinion/sunday/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-my-fathers-kidnapping.html?_r=0 (last accessed 17 November 2015).
Attridge, Derek. 2004. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge.
Attridge, Derek. 2005. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press.
Attridge, Derek. 2015. *The Work of Literature*. Oxford-London: Oxford University Press.
Bailey's Price for Fiction. n.d. Archive. http://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/archive (last accessed 17 November 2015).
BBC World. 2013. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Half of a Yellow Sun. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01b9nqd (last accessed 17 November 2015).
BBC World News. 2014. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsWfm0_xgkc (last accessed 17 November 2015).
Bryce, Jane. 2008. 'Half and Half Children': Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel. *Research in African Literatures*, 39.2: 49-67.
Dalley Hamish. 2013. The Idea of 'Third Generation Nigerian Literature': Conceptualizing Historical Change and Territorial Affiliation in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel. *Research in African Literatures*, 44.4: 15-34.
Gould, Michael. 2011. *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria: The Biafran War, 1967-1970*. London: I. B. Tauris.
Griswold, Wendy. 2000. *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Guarracino, Serena. 2014a. Said's Contrapuntal Reading and the Event of Postcolonial Literature. *Le Simplegadi*, 12: 11-26.
Guarracino, Serena. 2014b. Writing 'so raw and true': Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. *Between*, 4.8: 1-27.
Hesmondhalgh David. 2012. *The Cultural Industries*. London: Sage.
Ponzanesi, Sandra. 2014. *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry. Icons, Markets, Mythologies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
The Herald. 2014. Boko Haram: "We can solve on our own damn problems" – Chimamanda Adichie slams foreign intervention, 1 June 2014 (last accessed 17 November 2015).

Serena Guarracino received her PhD from the University of Naples "L'Orientale" in 2005, and subsequently authored *La primadonna all'opera. Scrittura e performance nel mondo*

anglofono (Tangram 2010), and *Donne di passioni. Personaggi della lirica tra differenza sessuale, classe e razza* (Editoria & Spettacolo 2011), which deals with contemporary rewritings of Carmen and Madama Butterfly from a postcolonial perspective. She also edited with Marina Vitale a double issue for the journal AION Anglistica titled *Voicings: Musica across Borders* (2009). More recently, she has published a series of articles on the role of the postcolonial writer in the public arena, featuring as case studies Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, Caryl Phillips and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She is currently teaching 18th and 19th century English Literature at the University of Naples "L'Orientale".
serena.guarracino@gmail.com