SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175 (SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 7, Issue 9(September)2025**

The Complexities of European Representation of Africa as a Theme in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Dr. V. Kavitha
Assistant Professor,Department of English, Shift II,Anna Adarsh College for Women, Chennai.,T1, Aquarius Block, VGN Zodiac Ville,62, Devadoss Street, Mogappair West,

Article Received: 03/08/2025
Article Accepted: 05/09/2025
Published Online: 05/09/2025
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.09.136

Abstract:
This research article explores the complexities of the representation of Africa in European literature, with reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2006 novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It particularly explores the limitations the Europeans face in writing about the continent with authenticity, through the experience of one of the key characters, Richard Churchill, a British expatriate. Richard Churchill, an aspiring writer, moves to Nigeria with the intention of writing about the country's culture, in particular, the Igbo-ukwu roped pots of the Igbo tribes. As he engages himself with Nigeria, he grows emotionally attached to the country and its people. However, when the Biafran War begins, Churchill attempts to document the conflict but gets discouraged by both the natives and his people back home. His efforts to represent the country are invalidated by the expectations of the British media, skepticism from his African friends, and his own feelings of alienation. The article delves into Churchill's ultimate realization that, as an outsider, he lacks the rightfulness to represent the experiences of the Biafran people in an honest and meaningful way. The study highlights the broader debate over the ability of European writers to accurately portray Africa, its diverse peoples, and complex histories in literature.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, European literature and Africa, Nigeria-Biafra War, European media, British expatriate in Africa

Introduction

The European writers' representation of Africa in Literature is a highly debated subject. It is questioned quite often whether the Europeans are truly qualified to write about Africa, with their seemingly narrow perspective of the African people, the continent's many different landscapes, countries, economic and social conditions, and cultures. Africa is seen as one entity by most Europeans. On the other hand, there are also accounts of genuine attempts by the western writers to represent Africa in writing that gets thwarted and discouraged. This research article explores the complexity of the issue by studying the experiences of a British expatriate and his earnest attempts to write a book on Nigeria in the

novel *Half of a Yellow Sun,* written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in the year 2006. The novel is set in the background of the Biafran war which took place between 1967 and 1970, and the violent struggle between Nigeria and the short-lived nation of Biafra. One key character of the novel is a British expatriate, Richard Churchill, who moves to Nigeria to write about the fascinating Igbo-ukwu roped pots of the ancient Igbo tribes. He eventually falls in love with the country and tries to create a sense of belonging. When the Biafran war begins, he tries to write about the war as a citizen of Biafra. However, his attempts to write fall flat for a myriad of reasons. Caught between the expectations of the British media to portray Africa in a certain way, the skepticism of his own African friends on his ability to represent the Biafran war with authenticity, and his own persistent feeling of being an outsider, Richard Churchill decides that he does not deserve to represent Africa and the lives of the native people in writing.

The efforts of the European world to represent life in Africa has often been surrounded by a cloud of doubts and skepticism. This idea is clearly presented in works like *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* published by John Coetzee in the year 1988. This book is a collection of seven essays that addresses the European way of expressing South Africa. It is a discourse on the confrontation between European thoughts and language, and the African life and landscape. In the introduction, Coetzee states, "I have two concerns in this book: with certain ideas, the great intellectual schemas, through which South Africa has been thought by Europe; and the land itself, South Africa as landscape and landed property (10)." Stereotyping Africa has remained a matter of great concern constantly fought against by representations from inside the African countries. In a talk about how Africa needs proper representation, Adichie says "...To create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become" (Adichie 9:17). She insists that the continent's rich stories need to be told by its people themselves.
In the popular satirical essay "How to Write about Africa" published in 2006, Binyavanga Wainaina sums up how the writers of the west stereotype Africa with a shallow understanding of the massive continent consisting of different countries, tribes, religions, languages, landscapes and cultures. Africa is seen as a land to be explored by writers looking for exotic and sensational elements that would appeal to the white readers.

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular. (Wainaina)

This cynicism is justified considering the history of colonisation. The Europeans, at different stages of colonisation, have used literature as a tool to justify their attempts to colonise, and to tame the land and its people. Literature was used to establish an empire in

Africa by creating convenient narratives of the land. According to Edward Said (1994), this body of literary works creates "'structures of feeling' that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire" (14).

This distrust and fear has overshadowed some sincere efforts of the European writers on numerous occasions. There are works which are meant to appreciate the richness of Africa in its culture, ancient knowledge and natural resources. Some of their writings show a visible sense of awe inspired by the land. However, it is rarely agreed that a European has accurately represented the lives of the people of Africa and their stories even if it is through close observation and their sojourn in the land for a considerable period of time. For the people of Africa, the European writers are best seen as outsiders not belonging enough to tell their stories.

Earnest Intentions of Richard Churchill

In *Half of a Yellow Sun,* Richard Churchill was a British expatriate who was in awe of the Igbo-ukwu roped pots and travels to Nigeria to write a book on the roped pots. From the start, it is visible that he has a great regard for the culture, preference for the local food over his, and he makes efforts to associate with the Nigerian people and adopt the culture as his own. When a part of the Nigerians begin their fight for the cause of independent Biafra, he feels for the cause and involves himself. When Biafra was formed, he believes he can finally identify himself as a Biafran since he took part in the struggle and he was there at the time of its birth.

Unfortunately, his small attempts to identify himself as a Nigerian, and as a Biafran in the course of time, get constantly discouraged. He is put back inside his European boundaries by the fellow Africans who prefer to look up at him as a British who comes from a land of exquisite and sophisticated culture. Even his household help, Harrison, puts in a great deal of effort to learn and cook 'European food' for him. He desperately tries to imitate European culture with his 'sherry trifle' or 'stuffed garden eggs'. He takes pride in doing so and feels it close to inappropriate when Richard enjoys a local dish. He is truly disappointed when Richard pronounces that he has hated his childhood food, and says, "Nigerian food is quite alright, Harrison" (73). It is understood that Harrison himself thought poorly of the Nigerian food being not suitable for a man like Richard and he put in extra efforts to keep the food British. This results in creating an invisible bubble around him while he constantly tries to break free from it.

Cynicism of Richard's Nigerian Colleagues and Acquaintances

It is also observed that he feels insecure around the fellow Africans of calibre and rank. They keep reminding him that they had better emotional access to each other than him, even in the case of his girlfriend of long time, Kainene. Madu, her friend from childhood, seemed to be sharing an easier bond and understanding with Kainene. Richard feels thrown off balance whenever Madu is around. He feels suffocated by the very presence of Madu. The strong presence of Madu "made him feel inconsequential" (136). Madu lost no opportunity to make it clear that Richard was an outsider. He would talk to Richard only in English even though his Igbo sounded fluent; "..since Richard's Igbo had become near-

fluent, Madu insistently responded to it in English so that Richard felt forced to revert to English" (136). He finds it impossible to become a part of the land even after learning near fluent Igbo and being in a relationship with a black Igbo woman. He could practice his Igbo only with Kainene's stewards because only they were expressionless and didn't react to his strange accent .

In addition, his intentions for Nigeria and his genuine admiration for the native knowledge and ethnicity is never trusted. When Richard tries to explain how his book was inspired by Igbo-Ukwu art, saying about the 'marvellous complexities', Professor Okeoma asks if he was surprised. "You sound surprised, as if you never imagined these people capable of such things" (111). It is seen as a reflection of the white people's way of looking at everything African as either exotic or uncivilised. Richard thinks he sees in the eyes of Okeoma "a disdainful distrust that made him think of reading somewhere that the African and European would always be irreconcilable (112)" . He is just seen as a representative of the Englishmen "who did not give the African people the benefit of an equal intelligence" (112). He ends up feeling hurt, but helpless, by their animosity.

He is met with the same amount of distrust when he reveals his ambition of writing a book to his fellow expats. When he tries to tell them that he wants to write about the Igbo-Ukwu art, they say that it does not have a market yet. They express sentiments that are in contrast with his respect for the land. He is advised that "the people were bloody beggars, be prepared for their bloody odours and the way they will stand and stare at you on the roads, never believe a hard-luck story, never show weakness to a domestic staff" (54). He is not impressed by their jokes on Africa or how the African people smell. Caught between the opinion of the Africans that he cannot be earnest about writing on the Igbo-Ukwu arts, and the stereotyped opinion of the Europeans on the African people and their lives, he struggles to find a solid ground to succeed as a writer. After a point, he stops telling people what he was writing about. In due course, he starts feeling that his writings are irrelevant.

He went to his study and spread his manuscript pages out on the floor and looked at them: a few pages of a small-town novel, one chapter of the archaeologist novel, a few pages of rapturous descriptions of the bronzes. He started to crumple them, page by page, until he had a jagged pile next to his dustbin, and then he got up and went to bed with the sensation of warm blood in his ears (112).

His Failed attempts to be a Biafran

However, when the Republic of Biafra is formed, he finally feels like he belongs to the land. He was there during the birth of Biafra, known its struggle and shared a close affinity with the political movement that created the Republic of Biafra. He was friends with the visionaries and activists who fought for the cause of Biafra. He has finally made the connection with the land and feels like a citizen of the newborn country. "He would be Biafran in a way he would never have been a Nigerian – he was here at the beginning; he had shared in the birth. He would belong" (168). He decides that he would rather write on the war rather than the roped pots.

Yet, his sense of belonging starts fading away as he slowly realises that he is indeed an outsider in the struggle for Biafra and immune to the consequences that followed. He sets out to write a genuine account of the Nigerian war waged on Biafra and the factual accounts of the happenings of the war and sends it over to *The Herald* back home. But all he receives in response is a comment stating that the magazine is saturated with the accounts of the war and the violence which has started to lose its flavour. They, instead, are looking for something sensational and engaging, "..but perhaps Richard could do a piece on the human angle? Did they mutter any tribal incantations while they did the killings, for example? Did they eat body parts like they did in the Congo? Was there a way of trying truly to understand the minds of these people?"(167).

Incidents that unravel thereafter only confirm his status as an outsider. When he encounters an incident of bombing from close quarters and when people he interacted with a few minutes ago die, he is truly shaken. He strikes up a conversation with Nnaemeka, the bartender, at the airport lounge and gets to know the real parts of the young boy and his life, dreams and hopes. Moments later, the boy dies a daunting death in front of his eyes. However, when he tries to write about the incident, he fails. He remembers every detail of the incident and tries to give a detailed description of the smell of liquor mixed with blood freshly spilt, but he couldn't do justice to it. He realises that it sounds like just another reporting article rather than the narration of his experience. He found that his words were sounding unrealistic. "They were too melodramatic. They sounded just like the articles in the foreign press, as if these killings had not happened and, even if they had, as if they had not quite happened that way." (168). He feels disappointed when he realises that in spite of the volatile situation around, he is and has always been safe. He always has the choice of leaving the country any minute he wants to. The situation is not the same for Kainene. He realises that he is only a watcher, and never once feared of being killed for being a citizen of Biafra. "He had not feared for his own life, so the massacres became external, outside of him; he had watched them through the detached lens of knowing he was safe" (168).

He began to write about Nnaemeka and the astringent scent of liquor mixing with fresh blood in that airport lounge where the bartender lay with a blown-up face, but he stopped because the sentences were risible. The echo of unreality weighed each word down; he clearly remembered what had happened at that airport, but to write about it he would have to reimagine it, and he was not sure if he could (168).

In spite of the many changes and displacements he and his girlfriend undergo, the idea of writing on the war still lurks in him. He gets his inspiration for the title of the book unexpectedly when he accompanies two journalists from his country on a tour of Biafra and its camps where the victims of the war stayed. He finds them indifferent to reality and they seem to have preconceived notions of the war. Richard feels frustrated about the stereotypical way in which his people look at the cause of the Biafrans. "'Do you usually decide what answers you will believe before you do an interview?' Richard asked mildly" (370). The

indifference of the journalists towards the suffering of Biafra, its ground reality of hunger and insecurity, and the way they looked down upon Biafra inspired the title for his book. Later, after they had been driven hurriedly to the tarmac and dashed into the planes and the planes took off in the on-again, off-again lighting, 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 (374).

When he proposes the title of his book to Kainene, with an amused expression, she says, "We? The world was silent when we died?" (374). It occurs to him that he is still a foreigner to Kainene, even after the years of commitment and loyalty, and facing hardships together. It slowly dawns upon him that he would forever remain a European who can never really own the fight for Biafra or feel the native peoples constant threat for life or the threat of oppression. He loses his will to continue writing about the war on which he had started to write. Rather he feels impressed on reading the account of a war incident written by a boy named Ugwu, whose family and acquaintances have been in the middle of the war and suffered, unlike Richard. Ugwu, the houseboy of Odenigbo and Olanna, Richard's close acquaintances, has learnt English passionately and shown interest in the political developments since he moved into the Professor's home from his rural village. He grows up to become a soldier and experiences the horrors of the war firsthand. He then returns to the Professor's house with trauma and a damaged psyche. Richard decides that the boy deserves more to write about the war than him. The boy is impressed by the title 'The world was silent when we died' when Richard mentions it. We later come to understand that the boy publishes his war narrative with the title.

Conclusion

Richard remains a foreigner till the end in spite of his efforts to identify himself proudly as a His identity remains unsettled till the end as is the case of the other expatriates who try to make the colony their own home. "The war isn't my story to tell, really" (425). In spite of his experience as a journalist, being a native speaker of English and his resources to publish the book, he decides that the Nigerian boy is more entitled to tell the story of Africa. This novel of Adichie's reflects her own remark on how the stories and representations should come from inside Africa.

References

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. Half of a Yellow Sun. London, Fourth Estate, March 2017.
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of the Single Story." TED Global, July 2009.
Coetzee, J.M. White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa. Yale University Press, 1988.
Derrick, Jonathan. Biafra in the News. London, Oxford University Press, June 2022.
Evans, Jon. "Why Shouldn't I Write About Africa?" The Guardian, 21 Aug. 2019,
Forsyth, Frederick. "Buried for 50 Years: Britain's Shameful Role in the Biafran War." The Guardian, 22 Jan. 2020,
Said, Edward W. Culture and Imperialism. New York :Vintage Books, 1994.
Wainaina, Binyavanga. "How to Write About Africa." Granta, no. 92, 2005, pp. 10-15.