

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Alfred Knopf, United States, 2006, 412 pages

reviewed by Christine Njane

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a renowned African author from Nigeria. Her formidable talent was first seen in her book, *Purple Hibiscus*, which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book in 2005. The book *Half of a Yellow Sun* takes the setting of the Biafran War which lasted for three years between 1967 – 1970 in Eastern Nigeria. Due to the massacre of the Igbo people in the predominantly Hausa community in the north, the Igbos in the South sought to establish a separate state, Biafra. Unwilling to let them secede, the Nigerian government, therefore, declared war against Biafra. The war is well wrapped in a story of love, resilience, hope, and compassion on one hand, and violence, grief, and betrayal on the other. Adichie's powerful focus on war's impact on civilian life puts a face to struggles facing people in ordinary family setups. Interestingly, the same issues face the family even during peacetime.

The novel begins in the early 1960s. The author effortlessly captures the story through the lives of her characters. Among the protagonists of the novel are Odenigbo, a radical professor of Mathematics at the University of Nsukka. Olanna, Odenigbo's wife, hails from the Nigerian elite but takes a different course as a sociology teacher and constantly tries to keep her family afloat during the war. Ugwu is a curious thirteen-year old boy taken in by Odenigbo to serve as his houseboy, but later enrolled at the university staff school. Olanna's twin sister, Kainene, runs her father's business. Richard, Kainene's shy English boyfriend, is a writer who constantly tries to fit in as Biafran. The once perfect 'family' is first disrupted when both Odenigbo and Richard cheat on their lovers. Kainene is most affected by the infidelity because it is her twin sister Olanna that Richard slept with. Things have never been smooth for the twin sisters, but the rift between them deepens and is only bridged at the end of the novel.

The author weaves together different perspectives of the war: horrific scenes of indiscriminate killings, vultures feasting on dumped bodies, multiple air raids, rape, famine, displacement, sickness, malnutrition in children, and the image of a burnt body of a child whose features were beyond recognition. Yet, during the same war, there are acts of profound love, forgiveness, and generosity. The story highlights various aspects embedded in our history, like ethnicity, racial profiling, cultural attitudes, and social classes. Interestingly, Chimamanda sides with neither the perpetrator of the war, nor the Nigerian state, nor the victim Biafran state. All the seemingly virtuous characters bear certain unimaginable faults, making them relatable. For instance, after Ugwu was conscripted into the army, he raped a girl. It came to haunt him later on when he found out that his sister had been raped by the soldiers during the war.

Chimamanda grants special importance to loyalty and betrayal. When Odenigbo sleeps with his servant girl Amala, Olanna feels deeply betrayed and moves out of their house. Father Damian talks to her and advises her to forgive Odenigbo. He says, "Don't see it as forgiving him. See it as allowing yourself to be happy. What will you do with the misery you have chosen? Will you eat misery?" (217) Later Olanna forgives him, and even when Amala falls pregnant, and fails to acknowledge the baby, Olanna, out of love and generosity, made the decision to adopt her as her own. Olanna also betrays her sister, Kainene, and although their relationship was severely strained, Kainene forgave her eventually.

Through this novel, Chimamanda explains how love plays an important role in our lives as individuals, more so in family relationships. The actions of the characters give a true picture of real-life situations. Families are characterized by a lot of love and affection, which often transcends betrayal. Despite experiencing betrayal from people who are considered very close, the shared love overpowers other vices such as betrayal. This would probably explain why Olanna not only chose to forgive Odenigbo but also adopted Odenigbo's baby and raised her as her own. Throughout the novel, we also see how Olanna is protective of the baby and even risks her life to ensure that baby is safe throughout the war. Olanna is a true representation of a mother's love that is tender, pure, protective, and unconditional.

The issue of unfaithfulness in the novel depicts the pervasiveness of promiscuity in our society today. Olanna's weak emotional state, after learning about Odenigbo's betrayal led her to lie down with Richard. Odenigbo, although he claimed to have been under his mother's spell, did not resist the temptation to lie down with Alama when Olanna was away. It speaks to how weak human beings are and how easily they fall into temptations.

The clear-cut social classes between the refined 'modern' mannerisms of the protagonists and the cultural beliefs of the people from the countryside form an important part of the book. Odenigbo's mother thinks that Olanna is a witch because she cannot conceive a child. As a result, she sends a girl from the village to lie with Odenigbo in the name of saving his posterity. Ugwu, the village boy represents the emancipation of the African child. The novel depicts a curious boy who felt proud of speaking English and even mimicked Olanna's accent. Although he missed his family back in the village, he preferred staying at his 'Master's' place to learn from him and the guests who often visited to discuss 'pan-Africanism' before the war began.

However, it is interesting to see that once ethnic strife and civil war broke out, the classes of people and the worries of the elite did not matter. They were all united by a common desire to live an extra day, the fear of loss, and hope for a restored peace. Olanna endured the drastic change into one-room squalor, hunger, long queues for food aid, and air raids without self-pity. Even Odenigbo, the revolutionary thinker, was among the most affected by the civil war. After the death of his mother towards the end of the story, he drowned himself in drinking and despair. The novel gives special importance to the place of loved ones in one's life. When all is said and done, what matters is the welfare of our loved ones, as opposed to success, wealth, and standards of living among others. For Odenigbo, despite his revolutionary thinking and societal influence he brought to the people at the time, it all dissipated the moment he lost his mother. Through this, the author shows the central role that a parent plays in a person's life.

The novel gives special significance to the institution of the family. From the lives of the characters in the book, the impact of a stable state in the family life cannot be downplayed. The novel depicts every character as playing an essential role in the family. In the face of war, food and clothing are only but a luxury, and what restores peace of mind is the safety and life of a loved one. The novel has great lessons on forbearance in the face of adversity. *Half of a Yellow Sun* clearly shows what it means to be human, to deal with hard questions on one's morality, fighting for a cause and value for human connection during hard times.

