

Half of a Yellow Sun as a Post-colonial Bildungsroman  
Half of a Yellow Sun as a Post-colonial Bildungsroman

By

Aisha O. Al-Harbi

Associate Professor of English literature  
English Department – College of Languages & Translation – University of  
Jeddah - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Email: aalharbe@uj.edu.sa

**ABSTRACT**

The current study aims at examining how the classical tradition of the bildungsroman is reconfigured by the postcolonial African novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) as an act of anti-colonial resistance on the one hand and to revive the memory of national struggle of her people on the other. The study illuminates how the moral growth of the individual protagonist is parallel to the collective development of his nation to highlight a distinctive feature of the African postcolonial bildungsroman. The development of Ugwu as a national icon is tied to the emergence and struggle of the Igbo community. The study, also, investigates other characteristics of the postcolonial bildungsroman through showcasing how the severe and turbulent socio-economic and political conditions of post-independence Africa are detrimental to a perfect self-formation of the protagonist found in its western counterpart. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ugwu's coming of age from a marginalized naive village child to an ambitious but a disillusioned adult is largely affected by the traumatic consequences of the war.

**Key Words:** *postcolonial bildungsroman, Half of a Yellow Sun, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. African novel.*

**Introduction:**

The paper aims at examining how the classical tradition of the bildungsroman is appropriated and reconfigured by the postcolonial African novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) as an act of anti-colonial resistance on the one hand and to revive the memory of national struggle of her people on the other. The study illuminates how the moral growth of the individual protagonist is parallel to the collective development of his nation to highlight a distinctive feature of the African postcolonial bildungsroman. The development of Ugwu as a national icon is tied to the emergence and struggle of the Igbo community. The study, also, investigates other characteristics of the postcolonial bildungsroman through showcasing how the severe and turbulent socio-economic and political conditions of post-independence Africa are detrimental to a perfect self-formation of the protagonist found in its western counterpart. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ugwu's coming of age from a marginalized naive village child to an ambitious and a disillusioned adult is largely affected by the traumatic consequences of the war.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977) is a highly creative and leading figure in postcolonial literature. Her intellectual impact is globally acknowledged since she has been listed by *Time magazine* as one of the world's 100 most influential people in 2015. Her postcolonial stance is manifested in her overt denunciation of the western hegemony in dictating African history as she declares the danger of believing in "a single story". In an attempt to dismantle the negative influence of colonial discourse, Adichie narrates, in *Half of Yellow Sun*, the heroic struggle of Igbo people in resisting neo-colonial humiliation and injustice. Her interest in writing the history of her people has aligned her to Chinua Achebe as she admits "I like to think of Achebe as the writer whose work gave me permission to write my own stories" (Adichie, 2008, p.,42). Her engagement with

Half of a Yellow Sun as a Post-colonial Bildungsroman

---

the history of her nation stems from her belief in the dynamic role of literature in society as she claims " I grew up in the shadow of Biafra" [and] "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" (Adichie, 2012). In *Half of Yellow Sun*, she affirms the functional role of literature as she opines: "I do wish that literature can be strong enough to help. But help in what way? If literature can affect the way one person thinks, then perhaps it has helped. [ ... ] I have always hoped for the opportunity to reach higher with each successive book" ( Adebani, p. 2,4). She has accumulated the historical data of her fiction orally from her parents and grandparents and manipulated these recollections to create her fictional world of Biafra war "not only to honor [her] grandfathers but also to honor the collective memory of an entire nation" (Adichie, 2012 ).

The emergence of the bildungsroman as a literary form has dated back to the publication of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in 1795. The term, bildungsroman, is German in origin consisting of two words: *Bildung* meaning "formation or education" and "roman" meaning "novel". Hence, the term refers to the novel of formation or education. Thomas Carlyle's translation of Goethe's novel into English has inspired many British writers to use the same style in their novels such as Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ..etc. The Bildungsroman is defined as "a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character" (The Merriam-Webster dictionary, 2009). M. H. Abrams, in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999), opines that the Bildungsroman illustrates "the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences - and often through a spiritual crisis - into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world" (p. 255). In

his *Season of Youth*, Jerome Buckley (1974) states the main defining characteristics of the Bildungsroman which include: "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (p. 18). According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), a true Bildungsroman presents "the image of man in the process of becoming" (p. 21), which is referred to as "the novel of human emergence" with an "assimilation of real historical time" (p. 21). In his essay, "The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism" (1986), Bakhtin also maintains that "this kind of novel of emergence typically depicts the world and life as experience, as a school, through which every person must pass and derive one and the same result: one becomes more sober, experiencing some degree of resignation" (p. 22). Both Buckley and Bakhtin highlight the conflict between the individual and his society which finally ends with the character's harmonious reconciliation and integration as the ultimate happy ending of the Bildungsroman in its classical western form. Similarly, Tobias Boes (2006) argues that the Bildungsroman "relates characters to their community by chronicling their voyages of socialization that lead to the inside of the community's signifying structures" (p. 231). Therefore, the ultimate goal of the bildungsroman is the attainment of the protagonist's maturity after a serious conflict with the values of society.

However, Postcolonial bildungsroman transcends the bounds of traditional European bildungsroman and asserts its own identity in the literary canon. Postcolonial creative writers delineate characters whose existence is deeply affected by the severe contemporary socio- economic and political conditions of their communities caused by the oppressive neo-colonial system of subjugation and humiliation. Therefore, the postcolonial protagonist is in constant conflict with the oppressive structure which tries to mute and suppress his attempt to narrate his story

Half of a Yellow Sun as a Post-colonial Bildungsroman

---

of attaining self-development and national glory. From the lens of postcolonial criticism, a postcolonial bildungsroman is perceived as the subversion of the rules of the classical Western bildungsroman by a group of marginalized writers to express their resistance against the hegemonic power of colonial culture. In a sense, postcolonial bildungsroman has immensely contributed to the field of postcolonial literature due to its tendency to challenge established colonial rules of construction. Besides its power of emancipation, the postcolonial bildungsroman carries some allegorical cultural significance for the life stories that it fictionally delineates. Thus, the growth of the individual is an integral part of the formation and emergence of the nation. Distinguished from its western counterpart, the post-colonial bildungsroman enhances collective self-development. Firmly tied to nation-building, it is used as a strategy to criticize the pitfalls and corruption of postcolonial society that failed to fulfill people's expectations of independence (Austen, 2015, p., 216). Therefore, some post-colonial bildungsromane evoke a sense of national commitment. Highlighting the allegorical nature of postcolonial bildungsroman, Ogaga Okuyade (2009) maintains that “the personal experiences of the protagonists serve as an index to the larger cultural, socio-historical conditions and thus the protagonists’ personal Bildung becomes inseparable from the political agenda of their nations” (p., 7). Harping on the same issue, Maxwell Okolie (1998) claims that:

This privilege phase of growing up is often used as intimate, passion-. packed subject matter in fiction; to render poetically, its complex vision was once the yearning of some African novelists who consider it essentially not only to the understanding of African personality... but also to the remaking of Africa (p., 29)

Boes (2006) clarifies the difference between the two genres as he claims: “whereas traditional novels of formation

figure society as a normative construct," the postcolonial bildungsroman "portrays a dialogical process...the hero no longer merely changes with the world; instead, the world also changes with and through him" (p., 240). Therefore, the African coming of age novel asserts the incomplete identity formation of the protagonist and his failure to attain harmonious integration with society because it reflects "a variety of forces that inhibit or prevent the protagonist from achieving self-realization. These forces include exile or dislocation, problems of transcultural interaction, war, violence, poverty, and the difficulties of preserving personal, familial, and cultural memories" (Okuyade , 2013,p., 12).

African writers create experiences of disillusionment and anxiety of characters who are in constant struggle to attain individual and national freedom from the shackles of postcolonial humiliation and subjugation. Some examples of African post colonial bildungsromane include C. Achebe' *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and the list is endless. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the topic of this study, traces the protagonist's journey of collective and self formation in postcolonial Africa.

Since the structure of postcolonial bildungsroman entails a register of the socio-political condition to create a correspondence between the growth of the individual and the nation, an examination of the historical background of *Half of Yellow Sun* is of a paramount significance. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Biafra war, a critical period in Nigerian history. It spans the period after Nigerian independence in the 1960s till the end of the Biafra War in 1970.

During colonization, the British government has used a "divide and rule" strategy dividing the country into many regional governments populated by different ethnic and religious groups to increase political tensions. Commenting on the colonial policy of the government, Ugwu has stated:

The British preferred the North. The heat there was pleasantly dry; the Hausa-Fulani were narrow-featured and therefore superior to negroid Southerners, Muslim and therefore as civilized as one could get for natives, feudal and therefore perfect for indirect rule . . . . The humid South, on the other hand, was full of mosquitoes and animists and disparate tribes. The Yoruba were the largest in the Southwest. In the Southeast, the Igbo lived in small republican communities. were non-docile and worryingly ambitious. ( *HYS*, 2006,p. 115)

After independence, Nigerian politics is run by a group of officials from the North who filled the country with all sorts of corruption. In *Half of Yellow Sun*, Professor Ezeka claims “It was mostly Northerners who were in government”( *HYS*, 2006, p.,125).

Unfortunately, people's efforts to gain independence from British rule in 1960 have only succeeded in creating neo-colonial exploitation, nepotism and moral corruption by a group of native elite, privileged politicians and businessmen who have looted the masses' bread (Uche, 2008, p.,115,16). The failure of the central government in the north to establish equality and stability among a multi-ethnic and religious nation inflames feelings of resentment and antagonism. Suffering from humiliation and injustice, Igbo people decide to unite against their oppressive government and secede from Nigeria constituting their Republic of Biafra in 1967. Two weeks later, the government in the north, after receiving weapon supplies from many western countries, has waged a violent war against Biafra which has lasted for three years causing more than million deaths on the Biafran side (Falola and Heaton, 2008,p., 158).

*Half of a Yellow Sun* traces the development of a Biafran child, Ugwu, under the political upheavals caused by the war where he moves from his belief in private responsibility to a more collective understanding of national engagement. In his

journey of coming of age, Ugwu has been influenced by two experiences: firstly his life with his master before the war in which he enjoyed peace and security of family life and secondly, his traumatic experience during the war that marks the stage of maturity.

He is presented at the beginning of the novel as a child of thirteen years coming from an indigenous rural area to work as a houseboy for a westernized radical intellectual elite of Biafra, Odenigbo who has a dynamic role in the formation of the character of Ugwu. Generous and gracious, Odenigbo provides Ugwu security, self-confidence, peaceful family life, and education. Ugwu boasts about the privileged life he enjoyed with his master compared to his peers: "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..." (*HYS*, 2006, p. 21). Although Ugwu works as a servant, Odenigbo insists on educating him:

"Why did you stop school?" "My father's crops failed, sah." The master nodded slowly. "Why didn't your father find somebody to lend him your school fees?" "Sah?" "Your father should have borrowed!" Master snapped, and then, in English, "Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tools to understand exploitation?" (*HYS*, 2006, p.,11)

To enhance Ugwu's feelings of self-confidence and pride, Odenigbo treated the village boy as an equal and young brother. He sometimes introduces him to his guest by saying: "Ugwu helps me around the house very clever boy." (*HYS*, 2006, p., 18 ). Odenigbo's intellectual knowledge and supreme skill in conducting debates about colonialism and racism with his colleagues inspire Ugwu's desire to be like his master. As an intelligent young observer :

Ugwu would sit on the same chair and imagine himself speaking swift English, talking to rapt imaginary guests,

Half of a Yellow Sun as a Post-colonial Bildungsroman 

---

 using words like decolonize and pan- African, molding his voice after Master's, and he would shift and shift until he too was on the edge of the chair. ( *HYS*, 2006. p., 20)

Olana, his master's wife, nourishes Ugwu with positive feelings of care, compassion, and love. She does not hesitate to sacrifice all her money to keep Ugwu from being forcefully taken into conscription during the war. To encourage and affirm Ugwu's vital role in the project of the national building at the time of war, she assigns to him the role of a teacher. She and Ugwu bravely take the responsibility of educating the young generation of Igbo people to be proud of their cultural heritage. The healthy atmosphere of Ugwu's upbringing at Odenigbo's house promotes the bildung of a free-spirited and optimistic innocent individual carrying the dreams of a prosperous future for Biafra. In the early sixties, Ugwu's optimistic bildung goes in a parallel line with the hope of national freedom as the Igbo people have succeeded in establishing Biafra as an independent republic to get rid of all forms of humiliation and suppression by the federal government. Describing the mood of happiness and joy that fills people's hearts when the news of the first coup is announced at one of Odenigbo's dinner parties, the guests' "voices were urgent and excited, each person barely waiting for the last to finish speaking" indicating their hope of a Nigeria free from British influence--as they feel that the North Nigerian government are puppets of Britain (*HYS*, 2006, p., 158).

However, the outbreak of the civil war has violently shattered both Ugwu and Biafra's dreams of an optimistic future of freedom, justice, and equality. Ugwu's sense of security and peace are threatened by the brutality and violence of war. Despite the violence of the sociopolitical condition of his country, Ugwu's resourcefulness enables him to survive the war with his host family. He accompanies Odenigbo and Olana in searching for another secure place. The protagonist is indulged in another journey to escape the brutality of the war that hinders the

fulfillment of his personal and national dreams marking his stage of disappointment. The war has ruined people's lives as they suffer from all sorts of deprivation and humiliation. Adichie has painstakingly reflected awful images caused by the war. A woman carrying in a basket the severed head of her daughter and children dying out of starvation and disease are examples of the tragic scenes of the civil war. Schools are turned into refugee camps in which Ugwu listens to stories of pain and suffering in a way to relieve the agony of his native people. Moreover, listening to these stories help in constructing his own story at the end of the novel. In this respect, Ugwu is like his creator, Adichie who admits listening to the stories of war from her parents and other relatives to establish the background of *Half of Yellow Sun*.

Due to his national commitment, Ugwu decides to join the army fighting for the right cause of his people. At this stage of his life, Ugwu tries to live up to the social responsibilities and expectations of his youth. His accidental conscription into the Biafran army has marked a turning point in his life journey which has severely affected his moral and psychological formation. His foolish involvement in the brutal rape of the bar girl to satisfy a lustful moment turns him into "an empty shell of a person whose innocence and intellectual curiosity are perverted by war. Likewise, the will of Biafra becomes "corrupted by desperation and loss of hope"( Martin, 2015, p., 33). Commenting on Ugwu's moral deterioration, Lance (2019) opines: "in an ever-changing world comprised of chaos, depravity, and lack of basic values even Ugwu ... can be tainted, compromised, or implicated in degradation"( p.,9). In a world that suffers from severe moral decay, Ugwu's degraded action, according to Adichie (2018), can be justified as she pinpoints the negative influence of war on him: "I still come away from Half of a Yellow Sun thinking that Ugwu is a good person. Had Ugwu not been in a war, I don't think he would be a person who commits rape".

At this stage, the national hope for dignified and victorious Biafra has fallen apart. The national war is lost since its "soldiers whose claim for fighting ... is anchored on liberation of their people are the ones subjecting them to all sorts of unimaginable torture and harassments" (Uwasomba, 2012, p., 39). As a punishment, Ugwu's sister is raped in the same manner and his lover Eberichi is killed. Consequently, Ugwu has undergone a severe traumatic emotional crisis. He is morally dead as he "luxuriated...in the mud" and "touched his own skin and thought of its decay" (HYS, 2006, p., 458). When he is injured on the battlefield and he is about to die, the idea of death has terrified him since his moral death will not permit him to "visualize a heaven" (HYS, 2006, p., 493). His stay in the hospital, pondering on his moral debauch, allows him to evaluate his situation. Therefore, he realizes that he is given a chance to redeem his previous sin of moral depravity:

In that gray space between dreaming and daydreaming, where he controlled most of what he imagined, he saw the bar, smelled the alcohol, and heard the soldiers saying "Target Destroyer," but it was not the bar girl that lay with her back on the floor, it was Eberichi. He woke up hating the image and hating himself. He would give himself time to atone for what he had done. Then he would go and look for Eberichi. (HYS, 2006, p., 497)

Ugwu's resurrection from the drastic war is unexpected by his people who realize: "He had not disappeared; he was not a ghost. Other people came out to hug him, to rub his body in disbelief as though the sand-pouring had still not proved to them that he was not a ghost" (HYS, 2006, p., 524). Though Ugwu's volunteering in Kainne's camp to help the helpless refugees of war is a step in his path of atonement as he contemplates the view: "...Eberichi would wait for him...her waiting for him was proof of his redemption" (HYS, 2006, p., 497), yet it seems that a complete redemption is only possible after death with his beloved

Eberechi. Later, he finds that writing can provide him with a sort of moral atonement, so he starts to write a book narrating the historical struggle of his nation:

Ugwu murmured the title to himself: *The World Was Silent When We Died*. It haunted him, filled him with shame. It made him think about that girl in the bar, her pinched face and the hate in her eyes as she lay on her back on the dirty floor. (*HYS*, 2006, p.,496)

Though writing the book attests to his intellectual development, yet Ugwu's attempt to revive the history of his country in a book is an indictment of himself as a victimizer "stained and unworthy" (398) haunted by the image of the bar girl which generates in him confused and unstable identity formation. Similarly, the book showcases the arrogance, injustice, ignorance, and indifference of the outside world who witnesses the brutal victimization of a whole nation and remains silent. The ending of *Half of Yellow Sun* is open to express the ambiguity, disillusionment, and suffering that the war perpetuates upon the individual and the nation. Ugwu's failure to attain a sort of atonement with himself is a result of the negative impact of the severe neocolonial condition on the formation of the protagonist's bildung. Similarly, the hope of building a nation is an illusion in Nigeria that is threatened by war and massacre.

To conclude, Adichie, as a postcolonial novelist, has deconstructed and reconfigured the western genre of the bildungsroman to revive the history of the African nation which is devalued and silenced by western hegemonic discourse. This, in a sense, stems from her denunciation of a single story told by a western outsider that aims at stigmatizing the oppressed people of Africa. The study has analyzed *Half of a Yellow Sun* as an example of a postcolonial bildungsroman. Distinguished from the western bildungsroman as a self-culture genre, the postcolonial

Half of a Yellow Sun as a Post-colonial Bildungsroman

bildungsroman emphasizes the view that the development of the individual is integral to the development of the nation. Ugwu's formation as an individual protagonist is tied by the national and cultural change of his country. The turbulent condition of the postcolonial environment has caused a disturbing and confused identity formation of the protagonist and the nation.

**Works Cited:**

Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A glossary of literary terms*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Adebanwi, Wale. "Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." *The Village Square: A Showcase and Critique of Nigeria-related Books and Authors*. Retrieved from: [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/BOOKS/adichie\\_interview.html](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/BOOKS/adichie_interview.html) Accessed Nov. 26, 2006.

Adichie, Chimanda.Ngozi. (2006). *Half of a Yellow Sun*. London: Fourth Estate.

... . (2008) "African "Authenticity" and the Biafran Experience." *Transition*, vol. 99 , p. 42-53. Retrieved from: [muse.jhu.edu/article/251543](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/251543).

... . (2012) "The Story Behind the Book". *Halfofyellowsvn.com*. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,. Retrieved from: <http://www.halfofayellowsun.com/content.php?page= tsbtb&5&f=2>

Austen, R. (2015). Struggling with the African Bildungsroman. *Research in African Literatures*, 46(3), 214-231. doi:10.2979/reseafritelite.46.3.214

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1986) "The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism: Toward a Historical

Typology of the Novel." *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*.  
Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: U of Texas P.

Boes, Tobius. (2006) "Modernist Studies and the  
Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends"  
*Literature Compass* 3/2. 230–243.

Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. (1974) *Season of Youth: The  
Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*. Cambridge, MA:  
Harvard UP.

Falola, Toyin and Matthew M. Heaton. (2008), *A History of  
Nigeria*. Cambridge UP.

Okolie, Maxwell. (1998) "Childhood in African Literature: A  
Literary perspective." *African literature Today*.21. 29-39.

Okuyade, Ogaga. (2009) "The Postcolonial African  
Bildungsroman: Extending the Paradigm." *Afroeuropa* vol. 3.1,  
pp. 1–11.

... . (2013). "Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of  
a Continent: New Voices in the African Novel". *Ariel: A Review  
of International English Literature* 44.1, pp 1–24.

Lance, Anne. (2019). "Exalted and Debased:  
Psychological/Sexual Conflict as Bildungsroman in Half of a  
Yellow Sun" *Scholars Week*. 4. Retrieved from:  
<https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/scholarsweek/Spring2019/Literature/4>

Marchese ., D. (2021), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on What It  
Means to Be a "Feminist Icon" [online] Vulture. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.vulture.com/2018/07/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-in-conversation.html#comments>

- Half of a Yellow Sun as a Post-colonial Bildungsroman
- Martin, Shauna Ferguson. ( 2015). *Redefining the Postcolonial Identity Through the Deconstruction of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Novels* (Master's Thesis, East Carolina University). Retrieved from the Scholarship. <http://hdl.handle.net/10342/5138>.
- Njoku, Teresa. (2001). "The Changing contours of the Bildungsroman in Africa." *Reconstructing the Canon: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Charles Nnolim*. Ed. Augustine Amanze Akpuda. Owerri, .271—287.
- Uche, Chibuike. (2008 ). "Oil, British Interests and the Nigerian Civil War." *The Journal of African History*. 49, 1, pp. 111-135.
- Uwasomba, Chijioke. (2012) "Story as History; History as Story in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*". *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 1 (4), pp 28-45