

Rethinking Nationalism: A Discourse on Ethno-political Strife in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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| 1. Ms. Faryal Gohar | (Corresponding Author)
Visiting Lecturer English, Government College Women University
Faisalabad Email: fary123gcw@gmail.com |
| 2. Ms. Iqra Iqbal | Lecturer English, University of Education Lahore, (Faisalabad
Campus) Email: iqraiqbal455@gmail.com |
| 3. Ms. Afia Shahid | Assistant Professor English, Government College Women University
Faisalabad Email: afiashahid1@hotmail.com |

Abstract



*A number of African writers have written about African history but rarely we do find the boldness and explicit details as presented in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) which depicts the recently independent state of Nigeria unveiling the problems of once colonized countries mainly focusing the issue of postcolonial identity; a torn between ethnocentrism and nationalism. This paper aims to investigate the factors for the emergence of ethno-nationalism to counter state nationalism; an issue which exists in many postcolonial African and Asian countries where ethnicity is given privilege over modern European concept of nationalism. In the light of Fanon's concepts of national consciousness and decolonization, this article aims to understand the struggle of the marginalized people to re-claim their autonomous identity and their unwillingness to merge in the so-called nationalist socio-political milieu after "decolonization" because of the injustices on the part of ruling elite which has led to the Ethno-political strife in multi-ethnic society of Nigeria resulting in the world's worst civil war called Biafran War. This paper delineates the complex correlation between status quo and native intelligentsia and the problems of postcolonial third world countries especially the issue of peaceful coexistence of multiple ethnicities within a state.*

Keywords: Nationalism, Ethnocentrism, Politics, War.

Introduction

This paper aims to highlight the various components which exacerbate ethnic conflicts and depreciate nationalism leading to interstate war. By case studying postcolonial Nigeria this paper focuses on the reasons which provoke a fierce clash between national sentiments and ethnic loyalties in postcolonial countries. It aims to analyse Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* in order to investigate the factors responsible to invoke in the marginalized people of Nigerian society the sentiments of ethnocentrism which cause them to struggle to gain liberation from the elitist domination and neo-colonial regime. Moreover, it also criticizes the repercussions of implementing the naïve European notion of nationalism in postcolonial African societies like Nigeria. To understand the contemporary crisis of nationalism and ethnicity in postcolonial countries, the acknowledgement of the pre-colonial and colonial history plays a major role. Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) clarify the concept of postcolonialism according to which postcolonialism is not just the time after colonialism cease to exist or the time when a country gains political independence from another state, it is rather, an engagement with, a contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies...(p.2). For a long time the colonized people have been made to accept anthropological theories crafted by colonizers to justify and legitimize the colonial rule. Postcolonial literature is basically a kind of national literature of an independent country in a broader sense. It does not merely involve the criticism on colonial masters and racism but it also encompasses the present situation of postcolonial societies to criticize not only the outside masters but also the self-proclaimed masters inside the society which creates an imbalance of power and resources resulting in the rebellion from the marginalized strata of society and hence threatens the so-called national identity of newly independent state. Fanon (2004) writes "...The current leaders of the regime did not explain to

the people...the party objectives, national policy and international issues” (p.71). This study highlights the components which exacerbate ethnic conflicts and depreciate nationalism leading to inter-state war.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002) posit four models of postcolonial literature. First is ‘national’ or regional model, which emphasizes the distinctive features of the particular national or regional culture; second is race-based, which identifies certain shared characteristics across various national literatures, such as the common racial inheritance in literatures of the African diaspora addressed by the ‘Black writing’; third is comparative model of varying complexity which seeks to account for particular linguistic, historical, and cultural features across two or more post-colonial literatures; fourth is wider comparative model which argues for features such as hybridity and syncretism as constitutive elements of all post-colonial literatures (syncretism is the process by which previously distinct linguistic categories, and, by extension, cultural formations, merge into a single new form). Now in modern countries of Africa we find that there are multiple ethnicities living in a single country. There is of course the production of national literature but there is also the literature produced by people or writers belonging to a particular region within a country who try to maintain their separate identity while living in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic milieu. The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be categorized in the model of national and regional literature especially regional literature because it is related to the people of Southern east region of Nigeria called Igbo people. These people have their own Igbo identity and they are in majority in the Southern part of Nigeria but often they are refused the access to the mainstream society of Nigeria. This paper is a contribution in the field of postcolonial literature as it deals with the contemporary issue of nationalism and ethnicity prevalent in postcolonial societies. This study signifies the historical and current basis of the conflict of ethnic and national identification.

Adichie exposes the irresponsible attitude of Nigerian government to the minorities after independence which leads to the civil war in Nigeria and it results in an independent state of Biafra for the people of South Eastern Region. Adichie by recapturing this event of the creation and downfall of Biafra unravels the internal issues of Nigeria and, in general, of Africa. There are still existing repercussions of implementing the troublesome European concept of nationalism on multi-ethnic Africa because Africa has its own societal mechanisms that give African continent its own unique identity. As Chinyere Nwahunanya points out that “the historical novelist combines the techniques of the historian (documentation) and that of the novelist (imaginative re-creation of the events) in the fictional evocation of the past” (as cited in Mey p.23). Adichie also talks about the never-ending consequences of the hasty withdrawal of colonizers from the colonized territories. King Leopold II of Belgium once proclaimed “We must obtain a slice of this magnifique gâteau africain” (qtd. in Reader 525 as cited in Coffey, 2012, p.3). So the colonizers took Africa as a cake and divided its slices among themselves. They didn’t care about African people and their interests. As a result, “the territorial boundaries, legal identities, and often even the names of states” were purely “contrivances of colonial rule” (Jackson and Rosberg 14 as cited in Coffey, 2012 p.4). This is why complete decolonization using the European notion of nationalism is almost an impossible task in African societies.

Historicizing Postcolonial Nationalism:

Postcolonialism clearly challenges the modern European concept of nationalism as Fanon (2004) delineates the problematic process of the formation of postcolonial national culture and identity in his work. Fanon criticizes the naive idea of nationalism in postcolonial societies as the newly independent states cannot comprehend the concept of nationalism. The concept of nationalism however has been used by African societies to gain liberation from colonizers though it remains evident that in multi-ethnic societies nationalism is very difficult to implement. They are somehow unable to associate themselves with the European notion of nationalism. The collective liberation struggles of colonized societies from colonizers turn into nationalist struggle and nationalism emerges which creates a new kind of consciousness. A process of construction of nation and national culture starts. Personal interests now change into collective interests. But a danger is always present in this project, as ignoring the wider perspective. Narrow-minded nationalism leads to a dead end because it just results in the replacement of one human species by another. This kind of nationalism with no revolutionary spirit ends in nothingness. For instead of uniting the nation it divides the nation because of the lack of

homogeneity of purpose. When the nationalist ideology of any state does not care to assimilate all portions of society in its formation, rebellion breaks out.

National consciousness is nothing but a crude, empty fragile shell. The cracks in it explain how easy it is for young independent countries to switch back from nation to ethnic group and from state to tribe—a regression which is so terribly detrimental and prejudicial to the development of nation and national unity. (Fanon, 2004, p.97).

Nationalism can be disintegrated into ethnocentrism very easily because people especially minorities face a constant identity conflict and this fear of being ostracized and not getting due representation leads to power struggle between comprador elites and natives. This is why the so-called nation states are termed as *Imagined communities* by Anderson (2006). Fanon further explores the pitfalls of national consciousness. The problem with the national bourgeoisie is that “it has the psychology of a businessman” (p.98). All the claims of this bourgeoisie class are abstract and they are unable to deliver or to make future projects. Afraid to lose its power, the national bourgeoisie assumes the role of former European settler. In order to maintain their authority they takeover all the “business and firms previously held by colonialists” (p.100). Since they cannot provide for the needs of the nation they try to conceal themselves “behind the masks of neocolonialism” (p.101). One class tries to hold all powers and financial resources to raise their status and the urban proletariat or lower classes are merely accepting the attitude of national bourgeoisie. As a result we move “from nationalism to ultranationalism, chauvinism and racism (p.103). This kind of racism can be further disrupted into tribalism and ethnocentrism. As a result of weak infrastructure and corruption of elite class, different ethnicities start developing the feelings of deprivation and ultimately demand separation which results in war and loss. Erikson (1991) in his article brings into focus the apparatuses used by government or people in power to maintain status quo. Erikson writes that “where nationalism fails to convince, the state may use violence or the threat of violence to prevent fission”. (P.267)

Nodia (1992) establishes the relationship between nationalism and democracy as a “complicated marriage”. Democracy generally means government elected by the people who consider themselves united by a fabric of national sovereignty but when the democratic government turns its back on these very people who are trying to participate in the process of nation-construction and creates conflict between people by bestowing unnecessary favours on a particular group, it ruptures the social and national integrity. Every nation does have a right of self-determination. (as cited in Cozic, 1994,p.35)

Half of a Yellow Sun:

Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* creates a parallel between politics and individual lives. In this text of considerable length Adichie is able to grasp an important period of African or more specifically of Nigerian history. By depicting the staff of the University of Nsukka and their point of views Adichie constructs the whole situation of upcoming Biafra war. Here we are confronted with the aftermaths of colonialism which snatched from black people their identity and constructed the false identity for them. The whites are the creators of Nigeria. They forcefully combined the territories which were utterly different in culture, religion, ethnicity and language. The colonizer masters merged these different ethnicities into a single political system for their ease. And so they created Nigeria which gained independence in 1960 from colonial rule. But it did not really work as a national state because the European notion of nationalism upon which Nigeria was constructed is not applicable for the African continent which has many ethnicities that claim to be an autonomous identity. Adichie (2007) makes Odenigbo the spokesperson of native intelligentsia who arguing with his university colleagues about the identity of African people says that the “...only authentic identity for the African is the tribe” (p.20). Odenigbo fantasizes about pre-colonial history but apparently he forgets that complete “decolonization” is difficult to achieve. Miss Adebayo in response to Odenigbo says that “...the problem is that Odenigbo is a hopeless tribalist” (p.21)

It is difficult to cultivate national sentiments in people who do not have cultural homogeneity and who are unable to relate themselves to the new idea of nationalism which the colonialists have brought with them because for centuries different ethnicities have been living in their own territories with their own ethnic lines of demarcation between them. But suddenly

these colonialists want them to forget their long-held ethnic identities and become a homogenous nation. They force colonized people to adopt western European political and social systems of governance which these people do not comprehend and it results in complete chaos in postcolonial societies. Fanon (2004) claims that the colonialist is writing history of his empire but actually he is writing "... the history of his own nation's looting, raping and starving to death". (p.15) Odenigbo says that "I am Nigerian because white man created Nigeria...I am black because white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came" (Adichie, 2007, p.20). As Fanon (2008) writes that "...the European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro...Black soul is a white man's artifact" (p.6).

The awareness of this tribal identity emerged with colonialism. Before colonialism all ethnicities were living together having their own administrators and their own staff and their own systems of working. However, after colonialism every ethnicity was in fear of being robbed of their culture, heritage and identity and developed hostility for other ethnicities who were favoured by colonialists. The biased attitude of colonialists escalated the feelings of deprivation among other ethnicities. White men created their own standards by giving the impression that certain black people are somewhat civilized than other black people. British from the very beginning when they created Nigeria by combining North and South territories around river Niger, were more inclined towards North. Adichie (2007) writes "...the British preferred North...the Hausa-Fulani were narrow featured and therefore superior to negroid Southerners...and therefore as civilized as one could get for natives...and therefore perfect for indirect rule" (p.115).

Strehle (2011) addresses the issue of nationalism from a diasporic lens. Through the discussion between the faculty members of Nsukka University, Adichie highlights that the main character Odenigbo positions his tribal identity above national identity because he thinks that Nigerian identity is not native but a product of colonialism. Then after the massacre of Igbo people in northern part of Nigeria, these feelings of deprivation among Igbo further mount up leading to civil war. The fictional characters, their relationships and identities go through ups and downs which is common issue of diasporic people. Like diasporic people, these characters move from one place to another and their relationships often end in diasporic distances. In the end of the novel when the main characters return to Nigeria after the fall of Biafra, they feel detached from both nations. They feel homelessness. The painful memories of the creation and fall of Biafra still haunt them. Though Igbo people live together with other ethnicities in Nigeria as a nation but they always feel outsiders and alienated because they are in minority and are deprived of their representation and rights in the larger socio-political milieu. They have developed a kind of double consciousness. Adichie depicts the failure of British colonizers to establish the stable state of Nigeria.

Ayatse and Iorhen (2013) write that the political and economic forceful union of ethnicities generated feelings of social and cultural enmity among the people of Nigeria. When colonizers allowed Nigerian people to form political parties, then different ethnicities developed their own political parties. For example: the Egbe Omo Oduduwa which was a Yoruba organization suddenly changed into a political party named Action Group (AG). The Hausa/Fulani ethnic organization with the name of Jamyyan Mutanen Arewa transformed into a political party known as the Northern People's Congress (NPC). In the East Region of Nigeria, the Igbo ethnic Union which was administered by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was transformed into a political party for the Eastern region, known as (National Council for Nigeria and Citizens NCNC). In 1959 when the federal government under the supervision of colonial masters conducted elections, there were these three political parties that took part in elections and all these parties were basically formed on ethnic lines to safeguard their interests.

After independence the clash between Northerners and Southern Igbo starts from trivial things but ends in bigger affairs. There are meetings held in South "...the meetings where irritated men and women talked about northern schools not admitting Igbo children" (Adichie, 2007, p.38). The Igbo are made aware of their lower status. "My people! We will raise our money and build our own schools" (Adichie, 2007, p.38). But Olanna is aware that it would be difficult because of the poor economic conditions of the Igbo people. Fanon (2004) claims that

in “colonies the economic infrastructure is also superstructure” (p.5). And this economic structure after the departure of colonialists is now owned by the elite class of Nigerian society which is northerners. Anderson (2006) indicating the complex and problematic relationship between Marxism and Nationalism, refers to Marx’s presumption that the proletariat class of any country should first settle the matters with the national bourgeoisie of the country (p.3-4). The northerners of Nigeria represent this bourgeois class which got busy in hijacking all the businesses and positions left by colonialists and the political leaders failed to inject nationalism among the people as they all became busy in establishing their own relations with the imperialists. The problems of nationalism and inter-state conflict arise because the national “...shrewd intellectuals whose behaviour and thinking, picked up from their shoulders with the colonialist bourgeoisie...” (Fanon, 2004, p.12) are not worthy to become the leaders of the country because they can never understand what the true revolutionaries or the peasant or the proletariat class wants after independence from colonial rule. So, when the nationalist parties are just focusing on the progress of the one section of society, others feel alienated and there emerges the social unrest in the interior. (Fanon, 2004, p.69). Fanon claims that this unrest is not dealt with rationality by nationalist parties. There is no constructive talk between different strata of the society. The rural masses are repressed both before and after independence. And as a result, “incomprehension exacerbated” (p.71) and ultimately there is decisive irruption by these people for their recognition as a nation. Adichie (2007) shows that a coup led by Igbo army officers occurs:

The constitution is suspended and the regional government and elected assemblies are hereby dissolved. My dear countrymen, the aim of revolutionary council is to establish a nation free from corruption and internal strife. Our enemies are political profiteers. (p.123)

The internal strife becomes so strong that it results in the overthrow of government by military. Many northern officers are killed including prime minister. People are calling it an Igbo coup. But soon after Igbo coup there are rumours about the second coup. “...the second coup happened a week later” (Adichie 2007, p.137). This second coup is done mainly by Northern officers to regain their power and they succeed in doing that and Gowon becomes the leader of state which is an intolerable leadership for Eastern Region. And the Northerners take revenge of first coup from Igbo people. The killing of Igbo becomes a national obligation of other ethnicities. The rift continues and Igbo people are gathered to reclaim their lost identity by confronting the oppressors (North). Fanon (2004) outlines this line of action when the intellectuals realize the colonial reality and start to criticize the lack of ideological vacuum of national party. These intellectuals question nationalism? Independence? Moreover, there are those cadres who go on hunger strikes and are arrested, tortured but all this increased their determination (p.76-77). And as a result revolt occurs to jeopardize colonial regime (p.82). In case of Biafra the revolt has emerged to jeopardize neocolonial regime of the northerners.

Igbo consider themselves a nation and start to work practically for their sovereignty. The Gowon government itself has sown the seeds of this rebellion and now Igbo people begin to see Ojukwu as their leader. Gowon has lost his power over the interior and Biafra is the only destination that can give peace, safety and sovereignty to the Igbo people. Soon succession is announced with the voice that says “Fellow countrymen and women, you the people of Eastern Nigeria...determined to dissolve all political and other ties between you and the former Republic of Nigeria... I do hereby solemnly proclaim...The Republic of Biafra” (Adichie, 2007, p.161-162). Now the situation is totally changed as Fanon (2004) argues that at this stage the enemy launches the fighting tactics to deal with this insurrection but it is not easy. “The group...refuses to pull back and to beat a retreat is out question. Loses are considerable...community endures the attack as a crucial test.”

Biafrans are ready to face any difficulty that comes in their way and there is no space of reconciliation with Nigerian government. They know that nothing will now change their resolution. A new form of politics is discovered and the people struggle to create a national leadership. Biafrans are ready to fight with arms. Nigeria has launched the attack. Before the declaration of Biafra state, the Nigerian government used police force to turn down the revolution but now it is the army which is fighting. It is official war. Nigerian soldiers are

killing people and using all means to recapture the territory and bring it under their control. In the same way, Biafra reprisal attacks happen to kill northerners living in Biafra but Ojukwu, the leader of Biafra, sends northerners back to Nigeria to stop these attacks. But the thing is that this newly made state of Biafra lacks the economy which is important to fight the war and also, they lack the army and so every civilian is forcefully taken by the soldier to the front to fight. The whole towns and villages are transformed into a kind of academy. People gather and learn about war, nationalism and support each other. Adichie shows that intellectual characters are performing their duties like Olanna and Odenigbo are both involved in this cause of national integrity and they are participating in every procession held by Ojukwu. As Fanon claims, it is mostly the intellectual people who make the other people aware of their position and status so they begin to say that “We are a county of geniuses” (Adichie, 2007, p.198). No doubt that it is the native intelligentsia which makes the foundation of a nation. But wars cannot be fought by raising voices. There must be practical approach. But the practicability of schemes depends on resources. The one evil plot that is used by colonialists and in case of Biafra by the Nigerian government is to pressurize the newly independent state economically by cutting off all connections and isolating them. There is shortage of everything. Nigeria takes control of the oil. They have surrounded Biafra and do not let anyone help them. After besieging the territory, they brutally bombed them. “Gowon sent them to bomb Agwa Market in the middle of afternoon while women and children were buying and selling. He has refused to let the Red Cross bring us food...” Nigerian inhuman weapon of starvation succeeds and they take Biafra back. Nigerian soldiers mocked at condition of Biafran people. Nigerian soldiers laughed at the girls saying “come marry me now, I give you rice and beans.” (Adichie, 2007, p.412). Afzal (2016) argues that *Half of a Yellow Sun* is evocative novel which deals with many inter-related issues. Biafra can be used as synonym for hunger, famine, starvation and diseases like “kwashiorkor”. The characters experience war and this experience reshapes their identity many times.

The leader of Biafra, Ojukwu, goes abroad in search of peace for Biafra because the situation gets out of hands now. Ojukwu in the last speech claims that his people used arms as a self-defence which is probably what Fanon has claimed while talking about violence as necessary for the sovereignty of nation.

Throughout history, injured people have had to resort to arms in their self-defence where peaceful negotiations fail. We are no exception. We took up arms because of the sense of insecurity generated in our people by the massacre. We have fought in defence of that cause. (Adichie, 2007, p.411).

Fanon (2004) says that national consciousness is a fragile shell (p.97). In case of Biafra it is made fragile by the dominant political powers of the world. Moreover, their leader Ojukwu was unable to handle the consequences of war because it was not planned logically. Nigeria from its very independence is a destabilize country because of ethnic politics. Since its independence democracy is a failed phenomenon in Nigeria. And military ruled Nigeria for twenty-one years in which there were five coups. All this is because their politics is based on ethnocentrism. The very first coup in 1960 which resulted in Biafra war was also a consequence of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism emerges when there is a tug of war among different ethnicities to become the powerful ethnicity in order to dominate others. Ethnic loyalty reaches to a point where communities try to assert their dominance over others by hook or by crook and it drastically affects the national dream of having democracy in the country. (Salawa, Hassan, 2011, p.32)

Ethno-political strife occurs when there is politics of confrontation. This confrontation is based on the feelings of ethnic chauvinism in order to suppress others. This feeling of superiority blinds people from rational argumentation and so things start to fall apart. The centre gets disturbed and the people who are relegated to periphery start to develop their own national identity in order to retain their autonomous existence. Another reason for ethnocentrism is that the past experiences like world wars have shown people that if they do not assert themselves they will be dominated and most probably be made to extinct in the name of ethnic cleansing. So it is very important in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria to deal with this issue of ethnocentrism at both macro and micro level. At macro-level the social and political larger milieu must try to encompass all the concerning authorities from different regions of the country and give proper

representation to all people of the country irrespective of their culture, ethnicity, race in the various sectors of the country so as to urge them to work collectively with the shared interest for the development of the country and nation. At micro-level the authorities must try to develop feelings of brotherhood on interpersonal level so that the feelings of chauvinism can be eradicated from the minds of the people.

Conclusion:

The research urges the need to revise nationalist ideologies by analysing Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a political allegory for the case study of Nigeria. In this ever-evolving world we need to re-historicize the idea of nationalism to address the issues of postcolonial societies as Fanon deconstructs the superficial illusion of nationalism as a definite theory to get freedom from colonialism because after independence this very state nationalism disintegrates into ethno-nationalism in multi-ethnic societies because of the various injustices on the part of the ruling elite of a certain ethnicity. By highlighting the pitfalls of nationalism Fanon challenges the true practicality of this theory in colonial societies and demystifies it. This research not only challenges the various discourses on nationalism but also highlights the non-applicability of these theories as it leads to the distortion of national movements and ultimately leads to civil wars thus damaging the cause of decolonization. Revision of nationalist ideologies is pertinent in order to dismantle the hegemonic discourses which try to legitimize the rule of a particular ethnicity over minorities. The world cannot afford the resurgence of fascist national ideologies like Nazism and World Wars again and so it is necessary to merge and consolidate all sections of society into a whole. The elite discourse does not take into account the struggle of the subaltern while writing the history of the nation. When these people of periphery demand their rights of self-determination it is considered rebellion just like what happens with the Biafrans. These are the factors which create and exacerbate the feelings of inequality and alienation among people resulting in internal displacements of people and they are dislocated within the nation. The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* is an open criticism on the political and economic status-quo of Nigeria. This case study of Nigeria can be generalized on all postcolonial third world countries.

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