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Constructing Identity in Post-Colonial Nigeria: A Study of Self-Perception and Cultural Conflict in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

K.B. Shalini
Assistant Professor, Department of English
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

Abstract

This paper explores the construction of identity in post-colonial society as portrayed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun (2006). It focuses on two key concepts: "Us versus the Others" and how characters shape their identities by aligning with or demonizing other groups to define themselves. The paper argues that the identities formed around these concepts are often contradictory, as they overlook the complex realities that define post-colonial Nigeria and its people. Instead, many characters gravitate toward simplistic notions like ethnicity in their search for identity. The analysis also draws on simplified versions of Homi Bhabha's concepts, including Hybridity, Ambivalence, and Mimicry, to explore the process of identity formation in a colonial society. Bhabha's framework offers a deeper understanding of how identity is asserted in post-colonial societies and how both colonial and indigenous influences shape this process. Ultimately, the paper reveals that the identities expressed by several characters are contradictory: although they identify strongly with specific groups in 1960s Nigeria, their actions often contradict their self-perceptions. Additionally, this paper examines the link between hybrid identities in post-colonial societies and the anxiety that characters experience in relation to their native cultures.

This paper explores the concept of identity, focusing on how the ideas of "Us" and "the Others" are portrayed and shaped by the characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). Defining what constitutes "Us" often involves aligning one's behavior with those perceived as peers, while simultaneously contrasting this group with those seen as "the Others." A recurring question in discussions of identity formation is whether it is influenced more by our environment or by our genetic makeup. While the theory of *tabula rasa* (blank slate) is not frequently mentioned, it's widely acknowledged that our surroundings—such as family, culture, traditions, and social or economic conditions—play a significant role in shaping who we become.

However, the concepts of "Us" and "the Others" become particularly complex in post-colonial contexts, where diverse ethnicities, traditions, languages, and colonial experiences intersect. This complexity calls

for a deeper analysis of how characters' identities are constructed, especially since they face pressures from multiple directions, complicating the binary use of "Us" and "the Others." To enrich this discussion, the essay will apply Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theories of ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity as analytical tools. Bhabha argues that identities in colonial and post-colonial societies are not strictly oppositional but are instead products of a dynamic interplay between native and colonial cultures.

By using Bhabha's framework, this paper will examine how the characters' identities are shaped, while the notions of "Us" and "the Others" will highlight how the characters themselves define their sense of self. Additionally, the post-colonial backdrop introduces an intriguing dimension, as individuals raised in such environments often grapple with the belief that their own culture is inferior to that of the colonizers. Beyond analyzing how these concepts influence identity, the essay will also argue that while some characters claim to feel connected to certain customs, traditions, or cultural practices, their actions often reveal contradictions, challenging the authenticity of these claims.

In Adichie's novel, the narrative is primarily set in Nigeria and Biafra, with the West frequently mentioned in relation to the conflict. However, there is a notable absence of direct involvement from the colonial powers. By absence, I mean that there is little to no support from the West, whether in terms of military or humanitarian aid, or any condemnation of the conflict by Western governments. Instead, the West is represented in the novel through specific characters, dialogue, the consumption of certain goods, and cultural influence. To explore this, let's begin with a discussion of Richard Churchill and Susan.

Richard, an Englishman, moves to Nigeria after reading about an excavated collection of Nigerian roped pots in a magazine and feels compelled to explore them further. His last name carries the weight of being associated with one of Britain's most renowned politicians, a connection he initially uses as an icebreaker. However, he is not portrayed as a representative of colonial powers in the novel. Instead, Richard embodies the concept of a Westerner "going native"—a term used to describe Westerners who adopt local customs, partake in indigenous ceremonies, and attempt to assimilate into native cultures (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 106). Early in the story, Richard is in a relationship with Susan, another Britain, who is less enamoured with Nigeria than her boyfriend. Although Nigeria has gained independence recently, the lingering effects of colonization are still evident, as Susan remarks that the club where they socialize with other wealthy Brits has only recently allowed Africans in: "…But you would not believe how many come now, and they show such little appreciation, really" (236). Susan clearly reflects a colonial mindset, implying that Nigerians should be grateful for being allowed entry into a club in their own country. She isn't the only white character with such views—Richard stands out as an exception among the white characters, with two British men overheard discussing how Nigerians are not yet ready to govern themselves when the club is introduced in the narrative.

Richard's experience mirrors that of Ugwu in terms of mimicry, as he is fascinated by Nigeria's culture and actively seeks to learn about its traditions. Initially, Richard acts as an observer, as seen when he visits Ugwu's village to witness a traditional festival. However, over time, he adapts his habits to the point where he begins to regard himself almost as a native Igbo. When first invited into Odenigbo's home for drinks and discussions, many of the African guests are skeptical due to the color of his skin, yet Olanna finds herself unexpectedly drawn to him: "Perhaps it was because he did not have that familiar superiority of English people who thought they understood Africans better than Africans understood themselves" (36). Although Richard doesn't claim to understand the Igbos better than they understand themselves, he gradually begins to see himself as their equal, particularly because he learns their language and participates in their traditions. His

pride in speaking Igbo impresses the locals, and he increasingly considers himself part of their culture. Starting as a timid Englishman, Richard's perception shifts from viewing his homeland to identifying more closely with the Igbos of Nigeria. However, just as a colonized subject's efforts at mimicry result in a distorted reflection of their masters, Richard's attempt to adopt an Igbo identity is ultimately problematic, as he can never truly become a native.

Among the four main characters in Adichie's novel, three are Igbo. While they each express their cultural heritage differently, they share a common ancestry. Richard, however, is a wealthy white Brit, privileged to travel and study freely throughout his life. A significant portion of the novel focuses on Richard's attempt to write a book called *The World Was Silent When We Died*, which aims to cover the atrocities committed against the Igbos during the war. Just as Ugwu uses "we" to identify with the Nigerian middle class in his conversation with his mother, Richard adopts the same term to express his connection with the Igbos of Biafra. Yet, Ugwu is an Igbo, as are Odenigbo and Olanna, who share a common language and experiences despite different upbringings. While Richard learns Igbo and participates in certain customs, his safety during the war is guaranteed by one simple, yet crucial factor: the color of his skin.

In a particularly harrowing chapter after the war has erupted, Richard finds himself at the airport, where he impresses the ticket clerk with his ability to speak Igbo. However, the situation soon turns grim when the airport is raided by Hausa soldiers. The soldiers force everyone to shout "Allahu Akbar" to identify who is Hausa and who is not based on their dialect. The Igbo man with whom Richard had been conversing is immediately killed when he is unable to pronounce the words without revealing his accent, while Richard is not asked to perform the task at all (152-153). The soldiers, unable to distinguish between the ethnic groups by appearance alone, make everyone speak, but Richard is exempt because his whiteness makes it clear he is not Igbo. This traumatic event forces Richard to confront his true position in the Biafran war:

> Life was not the same for people who had witnessed the massacres. Then he felt more frightened at the thought that perhaps he had been nothing more than a voyeur. He had not feared for his own life, so the massacre became external, outside of him; he had watched them through the detached lens of knowing he was safe (168)

Just like the discussions held in Odenigbo's home, some beliefs are often taken for granted and accepted without much challenge. It isn't until Richard witnesses an Igbo man being killed right beside him because of his ethnicity that he starts to realize his perception of "Us" may not align with the harsh realities of the situation. However, Richard is not the only one with a misguided view of "Us."

Odenigbo represents a particularly complex case of hybrid identity, as he seems to be in denial about how strongly his lifestyle and habits are shaped by Western influences. Before delving into Odenigbo's actions, it's important to understand his own concept of "Us." In the discussions at Odenigbo's home, international politics—particularly issues involving colonial powers—are often heated topics that typically end in criticism of the West for its role in various conflicts. During one of these conversations, a participant argues for a pan-African response to the mistreatment of Black people in the American South. However, before the point can be fully made, Odenigbo interrupts, claiming that pan-Africanism is essentially a European idea with no real basis. In his view, the concept of uniting all Africans under one banner is a colonial construct, one that only emphasizes their shared blackness in contrast to the European "whiteness." The ensuing discussion reveals a fascinating perspective on how Odenigbo perceives himself:

> "Of course we are all alike, we all have white oppression in common,' Miss Adebayo said dryly. 'Pan-Africanism is simply the most sensible response.' 'Of course, of course, but my point is that the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe,' Master said.' I am Nigerian because

> the white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man created black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came." (20)

Clearly, Odenigbo views his Igbo heritage as the central aspect of his identity, a defining feature from which everything else stems. However, what does he truly mean when he asserts that he is Igbo? To explore this, a comparison with Ugwu is useful. Ugwu, being Igbo himself, grew up in an Igbo village and is deeply familiar with the traditions and customs of his people. When Odenigbo and Ugwu first meet, Odenigbo impresses Ugwu with his polished manners, but his behavior seems at odds with Ugwu's own experiences of Igbo men. Odenigbo's Igbo dialect strikes Ugwu as unusual, "coloured by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English often" (4). Additionally, Odenigbo's feet appear feminine, clean, and obviously belonging to someone who regularly wears shoes (6), and his bathrobe resembles a female coat (9). While these observations only reflect Ugwu's views on Odenigbo's lifestyle, they highlight a broader discrepancy: in 1960, 85% of Nigeria's population was estimated to live in rural areas (World Bank). Not all of the remaining 15% identified as Igbo, meaning Odenigbo does not represent the average Igbo experience in 1960s Nigeria.

Despite arguing for international policies from an Igbo perspective, Odenigbo cannot be viewed as a true representation of the Igbo people, especially considering his lifestyle. He claims that the only authentic identity is tied to one's tribe, but throughout the novel, he does not participate in any cultural or traditional Igbo events. His definition of "Us" is narrow and problematic, as it focuses solely on ethnicity, ignoring the fact that his hybrid identity is too complex to be reduced to Igbo alone. Odenigbo's habits diverge significantly from the average Igbo person, who typically lives in rural areas and lacks formal university or political education.

One of Odenigbo's few interactions with rural Igbos before the Biafran war occurs when he visits Ugwu's village. During this short visit, Odenigbo declines both food and drink offered by Ugwu's father, notably refusing the kola nut (89). While this may seem trivial, the kola nut holds immense significance in Igbo culture as a symbol of good faith and friendship. Odenigbo himself regularly offers kola nuts to his own guests. In his article about the cultural importance of the kola nut among the Igbos, Duru explains:

> "In Igboland, the kola nut is foremost an item that initiates, promotes, and sustains social interaction. At any social occasion, whether a visit of friends, marriage, child dedication, burial, or even some business transactions, the kola nut is present. It has become so etched in the social conscience of the people that any refreshment offered a guest as an act of welcome is called Oji (kola nut). It thus intervenes regularly in social intercourse. It both embodies and acts as a unifying force among Igbos." (205)

While there is no indication that Ugwu's father or any member of the village is offended by Odenigbo's refusal of the kola nut, the importance of this gesture in Igbo culture cannot be overlooked. Odenigbo previously claimed that the tribe is the most crucial aspect of his identity, so his choice to decline such a significant and simple token of hospitality is, at the very least, peculiar. The visit itself is brief, as they need to get Ugwu's mother to the hospital, and Odenigbo is expecting guests later in the evening for drinks and political discussions, at which point kola nuts are offered to all the attendees (91).

As someone who considers his tribal identity to be central to who he is and who often critiques the West, Odenigbo paradoxically consumes a great deal of Western products. In Beaudoin's article on hybrid identities in post-colonial societies, he argues that the origins of certain cultural traits may not always be clear. When colonizers introduce new concepts, some are resisted, some are negotiated into hybrid forms, and others resemble pre-colonial traditions enough to be reinterpreted as such

(46). Among the cultural traits introduced by the colonizers are universities, modern inventions like the radio and refrigerator, and alcoholic drinks such as gin and brandy. These products, while introduced by Western powers, could be viewed as part of the broader modernization process, as they improved the lives of average Nigerians, not necessarily representing Western oppression. However, there are other items in the novel that are harder to detach from their Western origins, such as the soft drinks consumed by Odenigbo and his guests during their discussions. Fanta and Coca-Cola, two beverages closely associated with the US, a nation symbolizing capitalism, are a staple in Odenigbo's fridge.

The war forces the characters to reevaluate their perception of "Us," and this pressure exposes cracks in their self-image. Olanna and Odenigbo's view of the conflict can be described as naïve, as they fail to grasp its true severity until the soldiers are nearly on their doorstep. This sudden realization shocks Olanna: "She did not know that things had come to this; in Nsukka, life was insular, and the news was unreal, functioning only as fodder for the evening talk, for Odenigbo's rants and impassioned articles" (133). In their discussions among friends, the demonization of the Other, the critique of the West, and Odenigbo's dismissal of pan-African identity seemed casual and almost playful. But suddenly, Olanna, Odenigbo, and Ugwu are forced to flee, finding refuge in a cramped, one-room apartment that feels stifling compared to the spaciousness of Odenigbo's house.

Shortly before the war broke out, a new character enters their lives: Baby, who is never given a name but is always referred to simply as "Baby." Despite being the product of Odenigbo's affair with a village girl brought to their home by his mother, Olanna cares for Baby as her own. It is through Olanna's determination to give Baby a good childhood in the midst of a chaotic warzone that her underlying disdain for rural Igbos truly emerges. Olanna's earlier attitudes toward her rural relatives show that while she desires to connect with their customs, she is repelled by the dirt and squalor of their huts. But even when cleanliness is not an issue, Olanna still feels uncomfortable with other aspects of rural Igbo life. Even though the family is now considered refugees, living in close quarters with other Igbos, Olanna is determined that Baby should not adopt the habits of the village children he plays with, such as their accent or belief in spirits (331; 327). This creates a strange contradiction in Olanna's behavior: she wants to align herself with her rural relatives, yet she refuses to let Baby interact with people she deems inferior.

During one of the many times they are forced to move during the war, they hope to be provided with housing by one of Odenigbo's academic friends. Olanna expresses her desire for their new home to be close to other university-educated people, so that Baby will have the "right kind" of children to play with (186). To Olanna, the "right kind" of people are not from Igbo tribes but are university-educated, Westernized individuals. Despite the shame she feels for not wanting refugee camp children near Baby (128), she cannot deny her growing aversion to the poor. Instead of embracing Nigerian culture, Olanna envisions Baby being raised in a Western manner, speaking English from an early age.

Though Olanna speaks Igbo and is familiar with the culture, when she bathes Baby, she sings "London Bridge," a classic English nursery rhyme (122). While Odenigbo strives to avoid Western influences, their child is ultimately raised not according to Igbo culture, but in a hybrid fashion. As I've mentioned earlier, children often play a central role in novels by Nigerian writers of Adichie's generation when addressing the Biafran war. Baby, raised as a hybrid with an innocent perspective on the conflict, could represent a post-war generation of Nigerians capable of moving beyond ethnic divisions and building a truly unified nation. The primary focus of this paper has been to explore how identities are constructed in Adichie's novel, particularly in relation to the concepts of "Us" and "the Other," with Homi Bhabha's post-colonial theories providing a

theoretical framework. Throughout this investigation, it is clearly demonstrated that a clear division exists between how certain characters perceive themselves and how their actions reflect these perceptions. Odenigbo claims to prioritize his Igbo identity, yet he appears to embody a Western hybrid more closely than the rural Igbos with whom he has little in common. Olanna, too, aspires to connect with her rural relatives' tribal society, but she struggles to feel at ease with the unsanitary conditions and indigenous customs she encounters. While Ugwu does not exhibit this division as clearly, his understanding of "Us" evolves throughout the novel in a manner similar to Richard's transformation.

Additionally, the link between hybrid identities and the anxiety these characters feel about their native cultural heritage is explored. Both Ugwu and Olanna experience recurring shame related to their tribal origins, and this discomfort is not easily resolved, as they place greater value on a modern Nigerian lifestyle than on the rural one. Regarding the concepts of "Us" and "the Other," the novel reveals that these categories are often easy to construct and rally around, particularly when there is no opposing force challenging their validity. However, when tested, these distinctions seem to falter. Furthermore, these categories tend to be skewed, as they fail to account for hybridity and frequently lead to one-sided definitions.

As a final point, it is acknowledged that other factors, such as the trauma of war, influence the formation of hybrid identities. Adichie's novel contains a wealth of examples that could have supported this analysis, some of which were omitted. While I believe I have made my intended argument, there is still much more research to be done on *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a primary text.

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