

## **Realistic Approach to Fiction: an Investigation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun***

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### **Abstract**

*Fiction is an imaginative story rather than a documentation of any historical fact. However, fiction, as a branch of literature, reflects the author's society. This is why fiction is believed to be a mirror through which a society is seen. Since fiction is something that mirrors society, historical facts are always the writer's source of inspiration. This work thus studies Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's approach to fiction as regards the juxtaposition of facts and imagination in her novel. This paper appraises the realistic and sociological dimensions as well as historical facts blended in the novel. It is no longer a new thing that facts and imagination are blended in a work of art, the question is, how well has the author done so? This is one of the key issues Adichie has addressed in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, using the sociological approach. The researcher finds out that derives its material from historical and realistic facts not only entertains the reader but also educates him. *Half of a Yellow Sun* aptly educates the reader as it delights him.*

**Keywords:** Fiction, Historical reality, facts and imagination, realistic facts

### **INTRODUCTION**

Abrams (2005) is of the view that fiction should include realistic facts. This is why he has classified fiction into two: an inclusive sense and a narrower sense. In an inclusive sense, Abrams states that fiction is any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that actually happened. In a narrower sense, fiction he says, denotes only narratives that are written in prose (the novel and short story), and sometimes it is used simply as a synonym for the novel. He goes further to state that "literary prose narratives in which the fiction is to a prominent degree, based on biographical, historical, or contemporary facts are often referred to by compound names such as fictional biography, the historical novel, and the non-fiction novel.

Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* aptly falls under the category referred to as historical fiction. Historical fiction is the type in which the story is set in a time or place in the past other than the present, with marked attention to historical accuracy. In this kind of fiction, the author usually attempts to recreate a faithful picture of daily life during the period. Iguanre (2010) states that a literary artist is in constant consonance with his environment and the symbiotic relationship between him and the society is incontestable. According to him, "The raw material he uses for his work is naturally derived from the society and the end product also ends up in the society thereby completing the cycle." In the novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie dwells so much on the Igbo society in the recent historical past and based on this, the study considers it wise to use the sociological approach in the analysis of the novel. The sociological criticism is defined as criticism that focuses on the social context that

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literature is created in; it analyses social issues and uses the literature as social commentary. Sociological approach prescribes that literature is an expression of society for it originates in society. Literature, this approach maintains, represents life which is a social reality. In this approach, happenings in a particular society constitute the story of the novel. This approach affirms that culture and tradition of a society are what a particular literature mirrors.

In this regard, Nnolim (2010), states, "*Half of a Yellow Sun* is a weeping novel, a novel about what happened to the Igbo of Nigeria at a certain point in their history. The world created by Adichie is one of betrayal, death, conflict and loss. The Igbo were victims, also of the residual shenanigans and scheming of British imperial policy in Nigeria. Nnolim's statement immediately reveals to the reader that *Half of a Yellow Sun* chronicles the pathetic experiences of the Igbos of Nigeria in the historical past as witnessed in the events of the Civil War.

### **Fiction as a Blend of Facts and Imagination**

*Half of a Yellow Sun* vividly foregrounds the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of 1967 – 1970. In mirroring the historical fact, Adichie uses real and existing locations in Nigeria. Woolley (1997), gives credit to Adichie for superbly blending facts and imagination in her novel. Adichie tells her story from the vintage point of one who was born and bred in Nsukka where her parents were domicile for long. This offered Adichie the opportunity of being conversant with many places in Nsukka which she generously deploys in her novel. Adichie argues that war is futility and thus uses the novel to advice against any form of war again in Nigeria. Adichie did not only recreate identifiable locations, she also invented historical and realistic characters. Such names as Ugwu and Ugwuanyi are very popular names in Nsukka.

Ugwu, one of the major characters comes from Opi. Opi is a very popular place in Nsukka and just like it is stated in the novel, Ugwu is short form of Ugwuanyi which is one of the commonest names in Opi and its premises.

Apart from the fact that identifiable places in Nigeria and beyond constitute Adichie's setting, one major area that Adichie's narrative interfaces fact with fiction has to do with the historical facts of the Biafra conflict which is the major subject of her fiction. In the text, Adichie carefully traces the fact about the civil war, aptly documents the duration the war lasts as well as graphically simulates the pathetic experiences of the Igbo during the war. Against this backdrop, the theme of the "futility of war" which the novel focuses upon is fully conveyed.

Adichie's plot begins with the introduction of the major characters in a gregarious Igbo society. Before the outbreak of the civil war, the people had lived peacefully together and Odenigbo's house in Odim Street used to be a meeting place where other lecturers of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka always gathered to chat. Nnolim states that the idyllic environment created by the University of Nigeria Nsukka gathered intellectuals around a tranquil world of parties, tennis and cocktails. The narrative commences with respective families having enjoyable and tranquil moments before the interruption of the war and the scattering that follows. Following the end of the war, characters are forced to pick up the pieces of what was left of their lives. It is said that after a war, it is no longer who was *right* but who was *left*. Adichie, like other literary artists, through her fiction, contributes her own quota towards making the society a better place to live in. The events and narrative curve of the novel, convey Adichie's admonition against war which she believes is devastating. That is why

she invents characters of average status with credible attributes; men and women who are well educated and who have been doing well without any rancour until the outbreak of the civil war. The world Adichie creates, as viewed by Nnolim, is one of robust life-style, robust sexuality, and robust human relationships often frustrated by historical forces far larger than individuals could cope with. Through Ugwu's reminiscences, the reader sees the ideal society that had existed, the plethora of people from diverse geographical areas and tribes who always come to Odenigbo's house as friends and none has ever been discriminated until the Nzeogwu coup of 1966 that shattered the dreams of the people. Adichie vividly fictionalises the pathetic factual and historical experiences of the Igbo during the civil war, in order to demonstrate the futility of war and the need to embrace peace. On the blurb of the novel, Chinua Achebe applauds Adichie when he says that Adichie "knows what is at stake, and what to do about it. She is fearless, or would not have taken on the intimidating horror of Nigeria's civil war".

### **Historical Facts**

Through her invented characters, Adichie aptly referred to historical facts so that the reader draws valuable lessons and historical facts about events that have occurred in the past. The truths about real facts are told through Adichie's fictional characters. Adichie's characters are mainly rounded; their actions and speeches credible and true-to-life. For instance, Odenigbo says to Ugwu, 'You know who really killed Lumumba?' Master said, looking up from the magazine. "It was the Americans and the Belgians. It had nothing to do with Katanga.' (10)

He goes further to tell him that 'Lumumba was prime minister of Congo. Do you know where Congo is?' Ugwu said he doesn't. Master gets into his study and comes back in a moment with a paper which he

unfolds on the table. With the paper, he begins to teach Ugwu. 'This is our world, although the people who drew this map decided to put their own land on top of ours. There is no top or bottom, you see.' Master picked up the paper and folded it, so that one edge touched the other, leaving a hollow between. 'Our world is round; it never ends (10).

Further, on page 11, as Odenigbo still interacts with Ugwu, we see how Adichie got a lot of facts integrated into her fiction. Odenigbo has promised to send Ugwu to school with the fundamental premise that 'Education is a priority!' Odenigbo tries to equip Ugwu well before he eventually goes to school to join others. At the process, Odenigbo says to him, 'They will teach you that a white man called Mongo Park discovered River Niger. That is rubbish. Our people fished in the Niger long before Mongo Park's grandfather was born. But in your exam, write that it was Mongo Park (11). The story of the discovery of the River Niger by Mongo Park is a historical fact known everywhere in Africa, especially in Nigeria. Pupils in Primary Schools in Nigeria are taught this in General Knowledge courses. Adichie so aptly incorporates this historical fact in her plot and the story flows so naturally that an unwary reader would think the characters were invented. It is a known fact that if the plot of any fiction is faulty, it negatively affects the entire elements of fiction. The apt manner Adichie integrates the fact into the fiction and still maintains credibility and plausibility of the plot is commendable.

### ***Half of a Yellow Sun* as an Ethnographic Portrait of the Igbo**

Chinua Achebe in both *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart* chronicles the true fact of the Igbo culture in such a way that any non-Igbo reading the novels will comprehend the way of life of the Igbo. Similarly, Adichie

aptly depicts how, among the Igbo of Nigeria, kola nut is venerated. Basden (1982), has noted that it is a fact that kola nut is highly venerated by Igbos who use it variously including for welcoming visitors and strangers. A typical Igbo man must present kola nut to his guests to show that he wholeheartedly welcomes them to his house (p.267). Although many of Odenigbo's guests are non-Igbo, he never fails to present kola nuts to them. He would go further, as it is the case in real life, to remind his guests that kola nut is only blessed in the Igbo language. He says to Dr. Petal, a foreigner among them;

*'Dr., you know the kola nut does not understand English', before going on to bless the kola nut in Igbo.... (18)*

So many years ago in Igbo societies, there used to be chauvinistic hegemony as only very few women were educated. Women's voice was not to be heard. Then, the society believed that the only responsibilities of women were childbearing and the preparation of food for the family. When a woman failed in any of her responsibilities, she was always indicted and beaten. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, he presents a graphic picture of the fate of women in those days. Okonkwo, the major character of the text, beats his third wife, Ojiugo, during the week of peace simply because Ojiugo had cut a few banana leaves to cover her cooking pot. Side by side this situation, few educated women could no longer sit on the fence and allow the rights of women to be denied or their stories neglected. The concerned women believed that it was through writing that they could protest against male chauvinism. Flora Nwapa was a pioneer female writer in Africa and her novels and those of other women who came after her vigorously protested against all forms of negligence, intimidation and other forms of maltreatment given to women. Today, things have changed tremendously, women are now educated and are well equipped to challenge

their male counterparts if the need be. Nnolim (2010), writes about this trend observing that Adichie began her novel by leaving behind us the preoccupation of African women writers in the twentieth century: feminism. On many occasions in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna and her twin sister challenge and disagree with their respective fiancés; Odenigbo and Richard. The women she creates were no longer there to carry foo-foo and soup to men discussing 'important matters'. They had been empowered by education so that at Odenigbo's parties, they held their own among world-class intellectuals, like Odenigbo, Dr. Patel, Professor Ezeaka, and Professor Lehman. The two female characters, Olanna and Kainene had been educated abroad and Lara Adebayo was no push over (146).

### **Adichie's Use of Historical and Popular Figures**

Thrall and Addison (1936), are of the view that historical novel often uses real people who actually lived and real places as part of its characterization and setting. Adichie has done exactly that in the text. For example, in Chapter 2 of the novel, she talks about Rex Lawson's dreamy rhythms. Rex Lawson was a popular Nigerian highlife musician and was well known in Nigeria and other African countries. Severally, Adichie uses historical figures with glaring examples including General Yakubu Gowon, Major Odumegwu Emeka Ojukwu, General Aguiyi Ironsi and a number of others. These historical figures played prominent roles in the Biafra war. According to Uwechue (2004), it may be helpful perhaps to mention the fact that Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu who was then in charge of the 5th battalion of the Nigerian army stationed in Kano, played a decisive role in ensuring the collapse of the coup. He refused to cooperate with Major Nzeogwu who was then in Kaduna and instead gave his support to General Ironsi in the latter's

opposition to the *January Boys*. A grateful Ironsi soon afterwards, appointed him Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria.

The historical facts as presented by Uwechue are not contrary to those presented by Adichie in her fiction. Though Adichie's is a work of imagination, she calls the historical figures by their real names as well as chronicling their contributions and portfolios in Nigeria. This style of Adichie goes to consolidate her work as a paradigm of the historical novel. Not only does *Half of a Yellow Sun* get the reader abreast of historical figures, but in addition, it describes real places in Nigeria as part of its fictional setting. For instance, Adichie writes that "when they drove across the narrow roads that ran through Milliken Hill, with a deep gully on one side and steep hill on the other, she didn't tell him that he was driving a little fast" (26).

This style of Adichie makes the novel more realistic and easily appreciated, especially by the readers who are familiar with the existing places mentioned in the novel. Again, we have been told by Adichie in the novel that Olanna hails from Umunnachi. Also a vivid description of the existing village, Umunnachi is provided. Adichie's vivid description of Umunnachi in the fiction is enough to make a stranger locate the physical Umunnachi of Anambra State of Nigeria.

### **The Quest for Early Marriage and Superstition among the Igbo**

The notion that a girl's time expires, vivified by the Igbo proverb that a girl outgrows whose daughter to whose wife she is, is well presented by Adichie when Olanna visits Uncle Mbaezi and his family in Kano. While chatting with Arize, her cousin, Arize believes that time is eluding her and so, she is so desperate to have a husband. We have so many of Arize's type around us; women who

would do everything possible to get married. Arize is amazed that Olanna says that her problem is not that of marriage yet. She wonders why she would not quickly accept to marry Odenigbo. In her bewilderment, Arize says, 'It is only women that know too much Book like you who can say that, sister. If people like me who don't know Book wait too long, we will expire.... I want a husband today and tomorrow, oh! My mates have all left me and gone to their husbands' houses' (41).

In Arize, we see a typical Igbo village girl akin to Flora Nwapa's major characters. When Olanna tells her that she is still very young and should not begin to worry herself about having a husband but to mind her sewing business, for now, she becomes amazed and thus retorts, 'is it sewing that will give me a child?' (41).

Certain superstitious beliefs in Igbo society, which constitute part of the tradition, are systematically appraised by Adichie in the novel. As a little boy, Ugwu had lived with his parents in Opi Nsukka and so has mastered the way of life as well as the superstitions of the Opi people. In Odenigbo's house, as Olanna rearranges the photos on the wall, a wall gecko emerges from behind the wood-framed photo of Odenigbo and Ugwu shouts at Olanna not to kill it. Olanna is amazed and she looks astonishingly at Ugwu. Ugwu understands her predicament and thus begins to explain to her that 'If you kill it you will get a stomachache' (48). He goes on to tell her that his sister, Anulika had suffered a terrible stomachache after killing a gecko. An oral interview that the researcher had with one Mr. Chukwuma Ugwu, a native of Opi confirms this superstitious view about the wall gecko as true (2015).

### **Adichie's narrative and Meeting points with the Experiences of some African Nations**

Through the conversation of the invented characters, Adichie delved into the history of South Africa. One major historical fact that influenced South African fiction is racism. Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy* is a typical example of South African fiction inspired by the intense racial segregation in the South Africa of the Apartheid period. Scores of South African writers wrote about the racial segregation and the plight of blacks in South Africa in a way that prompts Lewis Nkosi, himself, a South African, to observe in his article, "Fiction by Black South Africans" that Black South African writers lack talent, rather, they simply like journalists, tell stories about things they observe. Nkosi asserts that what Peter Abrahams and other South African writers do is to simply tell stories about racial segregation which was the in-thing in South Africa before Nelson Mandela became the President. Adichie's reference to the history of South Africa is factual. Proceeding further, the narrative avers, 'Nkrumah really wanted to lord it over all of Africa, it was arrogant of America to insist that the Soviets take their missiles out of Cuba while theirs remained in Turkey, Sharpeville was only a dramatic example of the hundreds of blacks killed by the South African state every day' (51),

### **Adichie's Aspect of Satire**

Adichie is aware that in Nigeria, many unqualified people are in the business of governance. Such people have virtually nothing positive to contribute to the progress of the nation. They are just there because they are wealthy and had bribed their ways through. Emeka Nwabueze's *The Parliament of Vultures* and Uche Nnyagu's *To Unknown Destination* satirized them in their respective texts. In her *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie equally, satirizes the ills going on perpetually

in Nigeria with particular reference to the 1962 foiled census. Odenigbo says that the census was a mess, everybody forged figures. The corruption in Nigeria has not stopped. Uche Ogbuagu, a popular Igbo comedian from Imo State, satirizes the so-called 1991 censuses conducted in Nigeria where he says that figures were manipulated and people were not counted. As Achebe has pointed out, Adichie is fearless. She goes as far as saying that 'Not that Balewa will not do anything about it, because he is as complicit as they all are. But we must speak' (89).

Richard has embarked on writing his book which centres on the Nigerian-Biafra civil war. Richard gives the title of the book as *The World Was Silent When We Died*. The title is symbolic denoting that while Nigerians killed the people of Biafra, the world sat on the fence instead of coming to their rescue. The book contains so many historical facts about Nigeria and the war. Richard in the book traced the history of Nigeria with respect to how the British soldier-merchant Taubman Goldie coerced, cajoled and killed in order to gain control of the palm oil trade in Nigeria. The book also mirrors how, at the Berlin Conference of 1884, where the European powers divided Africa according to their greed and wishes. The book equally makes vivid, how Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo communities were colonized variously. Among the three groups, the Igbo area was not easy to be governed by the Europeans because the Igbo had in place a complicated social and political structure. The British consequently created "warrant chiefs" to help in governing the Igbo protectorate. The book also brings to bear how missionaries helped to tame and educate the African "pagans" and the eventual amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern protectorates in 1914, by Lord Lugard, thus birthing the country called Nigeria.

Pathetic historical facts about how the Igbo were humiliated by Hausa and Yoruba ethnic groups are focused upon by Adichie, using invented characters. In one instance in the narrative, Olanna watches a man in a yellow singlet standing at the centre while two men slapped him, one after the other, methodical, leathery-sounding slaps. 'Why now? Why are you denying'. The man stared at them, blank, bending his neck slightly after each slap. In order to be saved, Igbo people disguise as Hausas and Yorubas since Igbo people are hunted like games. At a particular point in the novel, somebody from the crowd called out. 'We are counting the Igbo people, Oya, come and identify yourself. You are Igbo?' In order to be saved, **Arize** and Olanna have disguised as the Yoruba, Arize muttered under her breath, 'Ikwuna Okwu', as if Olanna was thinking of saying anything, and then shook her head and started to speak fluent, loud Yoruba.... Another man in a safari suit was being slapped on the back of the head. 'You are Igbo man! Don't deny it.

*....Arize shrugged. 'We hear rumours that they have been doing this in Kaduna and Zaria since the coup; they go out in the streets and start to harass Igbo people because they said the coup was an Igbo coup (132).*

Igbo people who are yet to recover from the shock occasioned by the first coup, witness the second coup with the announcement on the radio that 'Northern officers have taken over.'

As she is being driven out, Olanna sees many Igbo people being slaughtered like goats by the jubilating Hausa men. Mohammed cautions Olanna not to raise her head so as not to be seen. Even innocent children are not spared as long as they are Igbo. This fictionalized version of the wanton killing of Igbo people by Hausa people in Adichie's narrative mirrors the reality and events of the

Civil War. The wanton killing of Igbo people is still the in-thing in the contemporary Nigerian society, now baptized "Boko Haram." Adichie uses humour to tell the bitter truth of the gory experiences of Igbo people who have no place to hide. At the Kano Airport, Richard meets Nnaemeka, a young custom officer who is a native of Obosi in the present Anambra State of Nigeria. Richard chats with him and Nnaemeka is full of admiration that Richard, a European speaks the Igbo language. At the end of their discussion, as Nnaemeka turns to leave and Richard picks his briefcase to leave too, three men run out from an entrance. They are wearing green army uniforms, an indication that they are soldiers. The first soldier waves his gun around in search of the Igbo people. 'I nanyamiri! Where are the Igbo people? Who is Igbo here? Where are the infidels?'... 'You are Igbo,' the second soldier said to Nnaemeka who denied being an Igbo.

Not convinced that Nnaemeka is Hausa as he claims to be, the soldier walks over to him, looks at him and says to him, 'Say Allahu Akbar!' He wants Nnaemeka to say the words so that through his intonation, his identity could be ascertained. Nnaemeka refrains from saying the words because his accent would give him away. Subsequently, Nnaemeka and other Igbo passengers are killed in the presence of Richard who could do nothing to stop them.

Historical heroes of the civil war like Colonel Ojukwu and General Gowon and their respective roles are simply documented by Adichie in the fiction. Adichie, authorially intrudes the narrative, stating that Olanna 'knew that the university women's association was organizing food donations for the refugees, that the markets and railway stations and tin mines in the North were said to be empty now that the Igbo had fled, that Colonel Ojukwu was now seen as the leader of the Igbo....'(158) Again, remarkable speeches of

memorable figures are vividly recounted in Adichie's fictional work. Professor Ezeka for instance, says, 'Didn't you hear what Zik said the other day? Eastern Nigeria seethes, seethes, and will continue to seethe until the federal government addresses the masses.'

Adichie depicts in the novel that corruption is not new phenomenon in Nigeria, especially in the Igbo milieu. She explores the perennial and trans-generational issue and fact about the indiscriminate production of fake drugs and other products. From one of the characters in the novel, Mrs Muokelu, we get this revelation. In response to Olanna who needs to buy antibiotics for her ailing daughter, she cautions: 'Anybody can sell medicine, but you don't know who is mixing chalk in his backyard and calling it Nivaquine.'

Stories abound about how young men were conscripted during the Biafran war. Virtually all families in all parts of Igbo communities had one or two of their sons conscripted. Adichie makes this point clearly in *Half of a Yellow Sun* showing the number of young men, even underage boys that are recurrently conscripted. In some cases, the soldiers collect bribes to allow any conscripted person to go back home to his people. The first time Ugwu is conscripted, Olanna offers a bribe and he is set free. Also, hunger and starvation experienced during the war gave rise to the high rate of kwashiorkor which was very common during the period. In addition to this, Adichie states that Gowon has continued to send his men to bomb the remaining Igbo people. The way Adichie gets the historical fact well integrated into her fiction is worth noting.

Adichie herself, affirms that some characters in her novel actually lived. She says in the "author's note" at the blurb of the novel that Christopher Okigbo's own life and *Labyrinths* (Okigbo's poem) inspired the character of

Okeoma while the fictional character, Madu is the historical figure of Alexander Madiebo, the author of *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*. For Adichie to have said thus, shows that she deliberately decides to present history as fiction and by so doing, one can read the novel as being variously a work of fiction as well as a historical document. In addition, Adichie further foregrounds the high rate of charlatanism among the clergy which is common even in the contemporary Nigerian society. Because the people are docile and long for miracles, many charlatans self-ordained themselves, priests, to get the unwary ones permanently swindled. This accounts for the gross proliferation of churches in Nigeria. Wole Soyinka's classic comic play *The Trials of Brother Jero* unapologetically satirizes this aberration; Also, Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* satirizes fake prophets and pastors, those who always lure married women to bed promising to help them become pregnant. We equally see many of such charlatans in Uche Nnyagu's *Second Trial*. Chioma who pretends to be born again and the HOD of English, and a pastor is in every sense, also a charlatan. In Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Father Marcel impregnates a small girl, Urenwa. Kainene is highly exasperated that she says 'Apparently I've been blind; she's not the only one. He fucks most of them before he gives them the crayfish that I slave to get here!' (398).

## CONCLUSION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a mirror through which the historical past of the Igbo people's experience of the civil war is seen. Even then this article, has analyzed the novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, so that it demonstrates, the subtle manner by which Adichie has blended the historical reality of the Civil War with an intriguing and captivating story in her novel. The novel form, as it is generally known, is a product of fiction but this fiction, as always, must be

mediated and presented in a plausible manner so that it can effectively 'mirror' the society paying attention to realistic frames that readers can ordinarily relate to. Within the ambit of literature it is acknowledged that fiction draws its resources essentially from the reality around the writer who customarily and methodically deploys literary elements to create stories and narratives. Ultimately, therefore, to aptly mirror the society in a work of art, the writer has to blend fact creatively with the literary and aesthetic resources at his or her disposal. Adichie has indeed, proved her mettle not as a neophyte but as a writer of note who as Achebe has pointed out, started writing almost fully made. She has successfully fictionalized the historical Nigeria-Biafra civil war in a very credible manner. Though her work is by all standards, fictional, the historical facts blended in the fiction are in line with what actually transpired in the historical span of the nation called Nigeria. The dates cited in the novel and the historical heroes that characterize its scope aptly cohere. Overall, the reader of Adichie's novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, achieves two major things: one, literary entertainment and two, knowledge about historical facts and events.

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