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**Exploring Narratives:
Gender, Race and Language in the Works of
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1 Conrad, Achebe, Adichie and the Unattainable “Authentic” African Experience.....	4
1.1 Statues and Postcolonial Narratives	4
1.2 A Case Study: <i>Heart of Darkness</i> and <i>Things Fall Apart</i>	8
1.2.1 Kurtz and the Congo of King Leopold.....	11
1.2.2 Inner Darkness	13
1.2.3 Rebels, Enemies, Criminals, Cannibals.....	14
1.2.4 The Gift of the Great.....	16
1.2.5 Falling Apart.....	20
1.2.6 Universalism.....	24
2 “My Name Will Not Be Lost”: Adichie’s Reconstruction of Igboland	26
2.1 Third Generation of Nigerian Writers: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	26
2.2 Writing With and Beyond.....	29
2.3 Mother is Supreme?.....	30
2.4 “The Headstrong Historian”	33
2.5 Women in the Igbo Narrative	36
2.6 Changing Names and Changing the Narrative	40
2.7 Abandoning the Forefathers	41
3 Clash of Cultures, the Right to Speak and the Value of Representation.....	44
3.1 <i>Purple Hibiscus</i> and Infallible Gods.....	44
3.2 Speaking with Our Spirits.....	47
3.3 Freedom and Rebellion.....	50
3.4 Polyvocality and the Right to Narrate in <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>	53
3.5 Women and War	59
3.6 Recounting Trauma	62
3.7 Writing Realist Fiction	64

4	Diglossia, Igbo and English as a World Language.....	66
4.1	Language as a Postcolonial Concern: Moving Beyond Sites of Conflict.....	66
4.2	Linguistic Variance in Adichie.....	70
4.3	Language Varieties: Standard English, British, American and Nigerian English.	75
4.4	Nigerian Languages Today.....	81
	Conclusion.....	83
	Bibliography	87

Introduction

Anglophone literature is deeply influenced by the narratives of African authors. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the most renowned contemporary postcolonial writers and a vocal advocate for feminism and the recognition of multiple African perspectives on a global scale. Indeed, to define her literature, Adichie strongly rejects labels of presumed “authenticity” and universalism as she recognises the restrictions this would impose on the number of subjects and possible interpretations of her writings. By employing a postcolonial, feminist and linguistic approach, this dissertation addresses how the author develops topics related to gender, class, power, race and language. Media sources, mainly The BBC and The Guardian, are included to underscore the reception and interaction of contemporary public discourse with some of the key themes explored. Through a thorough reading of the texts selected, historical, socio-political and linguistic contexts are introduced to provide a better understanding of the author’s message. Ranging from one of Adichie’s first influences to her latest novels, the texts examined have been chosen because of their ability to mirror the realities of a country that, although still scarred by colonialism, defines itself through its own authors and has created its own rich literary legacy.

Adichie was born in Nigeria, but she has studied and worked mainly in the United States. Her multifaceted identity draws from both cultures, but her novels privilege the description of African experiences. She has written fiction and non-fiction, including *Purple Hibiscus* (2003); *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006); the collection of short-stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2004); *Americanah* (2013); a book of essays *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014); *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017); a memoir, *Notes on Grief* (2021); a children's book, *Mama's Sleeping Scarf* (2023); and lastly the novel *Dream Count* (2025). This dissertation focuses on her writing mainly in *Purple Hibiscus*, a story of domestic abuse, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, centred on the years of the Biafran War, *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Americanah*, which deals with themes of racism, identity and language. Moreover, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) are introduced to provide part of the literary framework that informs the work of Adichie and her generation of Nigerian writers.

As Europe has yet to fully come to terms with its colonial history, postcolonial literature and its authors address how the radical changes imposed on their countries in the last century

seem to still permeate several crucial fields, from language to education, art and politics. Considered by many the father of African literature, Chinua Achebe is the writer that initially drove Adichie to write. As she repeatedly stated the crucial influence he had in shaping her idea of literature, the need for agency and appropriation in the postcolonial context become crucial elements to establish a conversation with the legacy of colonisation and ‘write back’ to what used to be considered the centre. Therefore, the first chapter explores the meaning of postcolonial literature through a comparative analysis of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Joseph Conrad’s novella. Even if originally intended as an anti-imperialist account reporting the Belgian expropriation of Congo, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) was highly criticized by Achebe in 1975 with his speech “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”. Indeed, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) offers a different view on Conrad’s topics by foregrounding the voices, the customs, and the rules of the colonized population when the white missionaries arrived in Nigeria at the beginning of the twentieth century. Instead, the darkness conveyed in the novella engulfs all characters, local and non-local, and functions as a mirror to the whole of humanity. Despite this, Conrad’s work has at times been interpreted as representing a pejorative picture of the population of Africa, casting an image of the Continent that further feeds the dichotomy Centre/Margin, Civilization/Savagery, Light/Darkness contested by most postcolonial authors. The chapter illustrates the two author’s contrasting approaches on the description of Africans, their humanity and language and introduces Adichie’s stance on these topics.

After a brief introduction on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the third Generation of Nigerian writers, the second chapter explores how the author decides to confront the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* a full half-century after its publication. The short-story “The Headstrong Historian” is part of the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* and deals with the same precolonial Nigeria of Achebe’s novel, but the narrative centres on female characters and their perspective. The chapter focuses on how the two literary writings differently explore the gender issue in their narratives, while clarifying the importance of distinguishing between a work of history or anthropology to one of literature. Mainly, critical attention is given to the examination of the behaviour of female characters in the two versions and how they interact both within the Igbo patriarchal society and with the arrival of the white missionaries.

By analysing *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the third chapter underscores how Adichie tackles the role of women and the clashing of cultures in a postcolonial country scarred by conflict. While referencing a time frame spanning from the Biafran War to the end

of Twentieth century Nigeria, the characters portrayed have different understandings of femininity and womanhood. Adichie reveals the complexities of her female characters by exploring several subjects, from depicting how religion can be a tool for manipulation and subordination to highlighting the contribution women can make in times of war. Moreover, both novels reflect on the consequences of silence as a response to trauma and analyse crucial questions related to the role of the narrator in influencing perspectives.

Finally, the last chapter explores how Adichie employs English as a world language in *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah*, and the short-story “The Arrangers of Marriage” written in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The novels employ diglossia by interweaving Igbo words with English. By using code-switching and code-mixing, the author often reflects and critiques the ways in which language has been used by the colonisers as a means of power. The decision to introduce local languages and variations of Standard British, American and Pidgin English adds various layers of meaning to the narratives and enriches the complexity of the characters.

1 Conrad, Achebe, Adichie and the Unattainable “Authentic” African Experience

1.1 Statues and Postcolonial Narratives

In 2020 several statues erected in honour of Leopold II, former King of Belgium, were vandalised. One of these monuments was set on fire in the city of Antwerp, while others were covered with red paint in Gent and Ostend. In the same days, statues of other racist historical figures had been vandalised or removed in various cities of the United States and Britain. While these sort of protests against colonial statues are not new, what ignited outrage in 2020 was the killing of an unarmed US black man, George Floyd, while in police custody. The episode initially seemed to mark a watershed moment in public opinion, causing millions of people to raise in solidarity for black people in the United States. More broadly, the event sparked debates and protests in Europe as well, simultaneously generating renewed global attention on the violent colonial history of the Western world (Picheta 2020).

Indeed, during the imperial expansion of Belgium, King Leopold ruled over the former Congo Free State – declared his personal property – from 1885 to 1906, causing the death of more than 10 million Africans in the colony. The current king of Belgium, King Philippe, addressed the issue of colonisation in 2020, writing to President Tshisekedi on the 60th anniversary of Congo’s independence, and again in 2022 in his first visit to Congo. During this trip the monarch acknowledged the colonial past by stating: "This regime was one of unequal relations, unjustifiable in itself, marked by paternalism, discrimination and racism." (Makumeno 2022). In addition, the king spoke of “ deepest regrets for these wounds of the past”. Many commentators observed that the word “apology” was absent from the speech. (Chini 2022). Indeed, the distinction between using the word “regrets” and “apologies” worried the Belgian government as well, to the extent that the Federal MPs failed to reach an agreement on giving formal apologies to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda for the past colonial regime (Chini 2022). Apparently, the choice of word “could open the door to a Congolese demand for (financial) reparations”. In 2020 Belgium had issued a special parliamentary committee to evaluate the colonial past of the country. Despite the declared aim to “create clarity, draw lessons for the future and formulate recommendations for reconciliation and recovery”, the chair of the committee also admitted that “some party chairs and the Royal Palace felt that apologies crossed a red line” (De Vrien in The Brussels Times 2022). Therefore, no compromise was ever reached.

Belgium's Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren was originally built on order of King Leopold to proudly display the spoils of colonialism. In the protests of 2020, an outdoor bust of the monarch was among those covered in red paint while the monuments erected in his honour placed inside the museum can instead benefit from more security (Picheta 2020). It has been noticed that the museum continues to spark controversy for its explanations of the Belgian colonial rule that tend to overlook the cruel past of the country in favour of a narrative centred on the humanitarian civilising mission propelled by the king's propaganda in Africa (Rankin 2024). Consequently, not all visitors of the museum seem to be aware of the atrocities committed by the king, while for decades colonial history itself has been barely taught in Belgian schools (Rannard 2020). Regarding the protests in 2020, the historian David Olusoga explained in *The Guardian* that statues of men of history send a simple message: these men were heroic people. While statues are "literally set in stone" and they cannot adapt (Olusoga 2020, at 1.30-33), history is much more complex and needs contextualisation, the kind that a museum can offer. Essentially, to those who claim that removing a statue is to erase history, Olusoga argues that these statues of colonisers and murderers "are not really good at telling us our history" and the plaques affixed next to them often only give one side of that story (2020, at 1.15-1.25). Indeed, it was only when World War One threatened to destroy Belgium, that Leopold II's nephew King Albert I erected statues to remember the past successes of the country (Rannard 2020) as the former monarch's colonial legacy was not yet deemed problematic by public opinion. Apparently, the lack of knowledge on the history of Belgium in Congo plays a significant role in the attitude the Belgian public still has towards their past (Chini 2020). Despite the debates that these protests led, there was no long-lasting result. All the statues have been restored while some new art projects have been commissioned to temporarily "reinterpret" the equestrian statue of the king in Ostend (Crisp 2024).

In 2021, postcolonial writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was invited to speak at the opening of the Ethnological and Asian Art Museum in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. The Nigerian writer's speech examined what Europe is currently doing to confront its colonial past. Among the examples she made on colonial history, she denounced how Europe "has developed a way of telling its colonial history that ultimately seeks to erase that history" (Adichie 2021, at 5.47-5.50). To further her point, Adichie introduced precisely the case of Belgium, where the exploitation of Congo's resources and its people are not taught. She claims that if students know nothing of these incidents "they will no longer have happened, because the past after all is the past" (Adichie 2021, at 5.29-5.36). Discussing the matter of stolen art and the question of

whether looted pieces should be returned to their countries, the author advanced that “we cannot change our past but we can change our blindness to the past” (Adichie 2021, at 11.44-1.47), decidedly campaigning for restitution. This recovery is asked to European countries who believe in the rule of law and that should consequently live up to the ideals with which they define themselves (at 14.21-29). Adichie finally stressed how “we must confront the issue of power, (...) who is the teller and who is told about” (at 18.16-22) in history, as much as in art and literature. Thus, while statues only tell one side of history – colonial history in this instance – literature – and postcolonial literature in particular – can try to contribute to multiply narratives, contextualise and bring different viewpoints to the fore.

Postcolonial is a term generally related to the historical complexities of the European colonial project and its subsequent economic, social, political and cultural repercussions after its supposed end (Gunning 2013, 6-7). As the public outrage in favour or against the defacement of King Leopold’s statues, among others, has shown – along with Adichie’s consideration on the difficulty of Europe to confront its past – colonialism seems to still ignite debates. This issue foregrounds the postcolonial as a subject relating both to former colonisers and to the former colonised. Among the firsts to explore postcolonial studies and influence the growth of the field is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), which is concerned with the difference between the ‘real’ Orient and the idea of Orient created and conditioned by a dominant European identity that though became pervasive also outside of Europe (Gunning 2013, 8). Looking at “the Other” is one of the main subjects of postcolonialism. As scholar Gunning states, the postcolonial condition is interested in challenging “the social, cultural and intellectual inequalities that were formed within colonial discourse and continue to shape the world today” (2013, 9). Therefore, postcolonial writings seek to stress the difference between the postcolonial society itself, those areas that are of former colonies, and the assumptions that the former imperial centre had been crafting about them. Nonetheless, postcolonial studies deny dogmatic arguments based solely on the contraposition between a civilized and a savaged world, a modern and a primitive one, aiming instead at a more complex interpretation (Bassi 2010, 11). In this context, the former colonised need to become subjects and foreground their own experience through their representation (Bassi 2010, 19). By recounting their own story, by becoming the teller and not those who are told about, the authors of ex-colonies become able to not only resist the dominant European narrative, but to contest it and ultimately create their own without relying on the coloniser’s counterpart, while often still employing the English language.

Indeed, the rise of the English language as a global language and as an academic language is tied to the growth of the colonial enterprise. The seminal work “The Empire Writes Back” (2002) offers insight into the impact of colonisation to postcolonial literature, its works and language. According to its authors, the resulting intrinsic bound between English and the colony has established a correspondence of opposing values in defining the centre of the Empire and its periphery, opposing ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’, ‘home’ and ‘colony’, ‘Europe’ and ‘New World’, ‘Centre’ and ‘Antipodes’. Postcolonial literature comes as a response by the “periphery” in recognising the responsibility of the power that the English language, the English education and its literature had in differentiating the Empire from Britain. The development of independent literatures in the now former colonies has gone through various stages in the nineteenth and twentieth century but the need to challenge, subvert, reject, “write back to a centre” has been the main topic of a large number of first-generation postcolonial writings once the imperial oppression ceased to exercise its power (Ashcroft et al 2002, 5-7). Reclaiming the language and adopting varieties of English helped postcolonial writers in redefining a sense of identity that was formerly destroyed by the Eurocentric culture brought by the conquerors. Indeed, Europeans used to systematically suppress the indigenous, precolonial identity of the populations they invaded. Not only did the imperial expansion have a destabilizing effect on the centre of the empire, but the dichotomies employed in language and in literature to separate the people of the ‘periphery’ from the European world perpetrated stories and erroneous notions of indigenous populations (Ashcroft et al 2002, 12). The colonial process paved the way for a multifaceted vision of reality that demands complex, pluralistic experience to be accounted for.

Postcolonial literature ‘fights’ and is able to allow specific national and regional consciousness of the former empire to acquire their own importance and become the privileged point of view of narration. The ‘post’ of postcolonial stresses both continuity and departure from the colonial power where the language and literature of the Empire become sites of contest for the colonized (Mullaney 2010, 4-5). Therefore, not only reclaiming the past but also being able to look at the future becomes a matter of paramount importance for this literature to develop. However, such process of marking a distance from the colonial past and confronting Eurocentric narratives has been extremely difficult. So much so that by the end of the twentieth century, African literature was still seen as overly concerned with the colonial subject, using literature as a decolonising tool when Africa was already decolonised (Eze 2011, 37). Most scholars agree in considering Chinua Achebe to be one of the first authors to start this tradition. With his *Things Fall Apart*, he is often considered the father of postcolonial literature and he is

one of its most prominent and influential figures. Achebe is here introduced in dialogue with Joseph Conrad's novella as his work still impacts on the contemporary generation of Nigerian writers, as the next chapter shows. Adichie's writings, especially her short stories, touch upon postcolonial matters raised by Achebe that Nigerian literature, up until the third generation to which she belongs, consider necessary to confront. For instance, the next quotation from one of Adichie's short stories reflects some of the matters raised in the previous paragraphs. Here, she describes the difficulty for African literature to separate itself from the English curriculum. She fictionalises through her characters this change of paradigm happening in the 1950s,

Mr Gboyega, a chocolate skinned Nigerian, educated in London, distinguished expert on the history of the British Empire, had resigned in disgust when the East African Examinations Council began talking of adding African history to the curriculum, because he was appalled that African history would even be considered a subject (Adichie 2017, 216).

1.2 A Case Study: *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*

This chapter briefly compares two major literary works, namely *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Firstly, the chapter analyses Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* by exploring its historical meaning and its relationship to the aforementioned – and still discussed – King Leopold II. With more than fifty years separating the work of these two writers, their dialogue through time and space can be relevant from a postcolonial perspective particularly because of the altered socio-political landscape in which Achebe writes. Despite the intention attributed to Conrad's novella of describing a quest for humanity that includes all, in the following decades various other layers of meaning have been taken into consideration by scholars after Achebe's ruthless interpretation. Indeed, Chinua Achebe denounces Conrad's portrayal of the continent by challenging Westerner's assumptions on Africa's past, its identity and its people. Achebe's lecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in February 1975, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" is a key work that helps understanding Achebe's approach to the novella and his literary response with *Things Fall Apart*. Starting from the same time frame, the next chapter instead focuses on Adichie's interpretation of Achebe's novel from a feminist perspective in one of her short-stories. As connections can be made among these three works of fictions, their analysis can offer a framework of reference to investigate key elements that inform Adichie's writing and show the limitations of discussing an "authentic" single African experience.

Heart of Darkness was originally published in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in 1899 and then published in book form in 1902 in *Youth: and Two Other Stories*. The novella gained widespread popularity after the Second World War with its author becoming a representative of The Great Tradition of English novelists (Lösing 2020, 9). Achebe (scornfully) ascribes the novella as part of that “permanent literature –read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics” (Achebe 1977, 253). The Anglo-Polish writer’s work has been primarily analysed as a psychological parable on the exploration of humanity (Lösing 2020, 9). However, Achebe’s lecture in 1975 exposed racist connotations he attributes to the novella because of its African setting and the underlying association made between darkness and savagery in men and the Dark continent. In his speech, the Nigerian author called Conrad “a bloody racist” and explained how in his view “white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking” among English literature scholars, “that its manifestations go completely unremarked” (Achebe 1977, 258). While postcolonial interpretations of Conrad’s works have followed, several critics – notably the writer Adam Hochschild with his bestselling *King Leopold’s Ghost* (1998) – tended to praise Conrad’s novella as an *exposé* of the crimes committed in Congo by King Leopold II during colonialism (Lösing 2020, 16).

If *Heart of Darkness* explored Africa from the white man’s perspective, *Things Fall Apart* shifts the point of view and allows Africans to be main characters in their own land. The novel has been considered a postcolonial novel par excellence (Eze 2011, 39), while Achebe has been often defined as the person “who invented African literature”, despite having important precursor in the scene (Gikandi 2001, 5). When the African scholar Simon Gikandi describes how this novel effected his learning at school in the 1970s, he stated that he realised “literature was about real and familiar words, of culture and human experience (...) re-routed through a language and structure that seemed at odds with the history or geography books we were reading at the time” (Gikandi 2001, 3). The transformative power of this postcolonial novel affected not only African people after the decolonisation. With its wide circulation within institutions of education, the novel came to define who and where these African were outside of their country, managing to reconfigure the African literary tradition (Gikandi 2001, 4,5). Moreover, African critics have stressed the need to recover African views of art, a perspective that according to Achebe should privilege the social function of writing over the European stress on the individual experience (Ashcroft 2002, 125).

In “The Headstrong Historian” by Adichie the character Grace, who received her Anglican name (instead of Afamefuna) by the missionaries, lives in Nigeria in the 1950s. Her

story directly engages with Achebe's novel and the younger author clearly exemplifies the sentiment underlying the relationship between Eurocentric literature and its post-colonial counterpart,

It was Grace who would read about these savages, titillated by their curious and meaningless customs, not connecting them to herself until her teacher, Sister Maureen, told her she could not refer to the call-and-response her grandmother had taught her as poetry because primitive tribes did not have poetry (Adichie 2017, 216).

If the African imagination is shaped solely by the account of the West of what Africans are like, this becomes the only narrative accepted and understood by the Western audience, where "primitive tribes" cannot possibly have poetry and the colonised are mainly savages with "meaningless" customs. Ultimately, the blank spaces on the earth that tickled the imagination of much of colonial writing have always been peopled by natives, they were never 'blank' (Singh 2011, 39). Achebe writes back precisely to this narrative. Indeed, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* depicts the journey of the seaman and "wanderer" (Conrad 1987, 29), Marlow, in Congo where the opposition of light and darkness, tranquillity and frenzy, humanity and savagery come to play a crucial role in the meaning of the novella. Marlow recounts to his new fellow sailors in London the journey he undertook in Congo. The frame narrator is therefore one of the listeners of Marlow's story while the narration is told in first-person by Marlow himself. He is looking for Kurtz, an infamous greedy ivory-trader isolated in the heart of the region whose initial supposed philanthropic attitude towards the region and its population shatters as he surrenders to the forces of darkness of the Continent. This quest offers the seaman opportunities for insight and reflections on the meaning of humanity. While going up the River Congo, Marlow states "we were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil." (HOD 68).

Incidentally, *Heart of Darkness* is highly regarded also for its opacity, therefore, numerous of Conrad's interpretations agree that the political message of the novella is in clear opposition to any instance of racism (Lösing 2020, 20). Conrad truly is one of the firsts to denounce the crimes of imperialism in the area. Adichie defines the novella as a text "essentially about the evils of colonialism" even if lacking "fully human" African characters (Adichie 2008, 47). In addition, Edward Said argues that *Heart of Darkness* encapsulates more visions at once, both "a potentially limited vision with respect to blacks, but the other is a kind of relentlessly

open-ended, aggressively critical inquiry into the mechanisms and presuppositions and situatedness and abuses of imperialism” (Said 2004, 289). For instance, according to the scholar, aside from postcolonial interpretations, “what Conrad wants us to be left with is just that: the way the natives as well as the white men and the half-castes are all part of the same futile procession” (Said 2004, 293). In its exploration of humanity, the novella depicts Africa as a Dark Continent populated by cannibals and rebels that have never known civilisation before the coming of the white man. The wilderness of the continent endows its inhabitants with that status of bare life not yet probed by the light of civilisation. The Europeans travel back in time, “in the night of first ages” (HOD 69). The past of the Thames is the present of the River Congo and the journey itself reveals unsettling truths.

1.2.1 Kurtz and the Congo of King Leopold

Conrad deliberately described the Congo State as much more isolated, chaotic and poorly managed than it really was in the 1890s, apparently so as to better highlight the cruelty of Belgian imperialism (Firchow 1999, 64). Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Congo Free State was controlled by the Belgian King Leopold II, the man whose statues were defaced in 2020. Conrad himself sojourned in Congo in 1890 for six months and witnessed the appalling greedy and cruel acts of colonial exploitations enforced by the Free State Administration (Okafor 1988, 18). However, in the novella there is no mentioning of Congo, nor of the King, nor of Brussels, while late-twentieth-century scholarship has put the story back into its African context (Atkinson 2015, 59). Scholars have also claimed that the main theme of the novella is “the fear of the Victorian English that if whites were to be isolated from their secure environment and its refinement, they would degenerate into abominable savagery and become beasts of unspeakable lust” (Okafor 1988,19). According to Congo reformers –the humanitarian activists’ group who denounced the atrocities King Leopold committed in the colony at the beginning of the twentieth century – *Heart of Darkness* denounces the systematic forced labour and torture committed by the supposedly “Brightest Europe” in Africa (Lösing 2020, 147-8). In this light, Conrad’s work is not simply fiction, but it reports the horrors of colonisation through the character of Kurtz. Moreover, the novella depicts the “crisis of racist representation, identity and culture” and the emergence of “a civilized savagery as a signifier of a profound calamity of Western modernity” (Lösing 2020, 148). Kurtz can be thought of as a fictional character representative of a variety of Europeans who actually worked near Stanley

Falls in the 1880s and 1890s (Firchow 1999, 68). The white Kurtz, of cosmopolitan origin, with half English mother and half French father becomes the embodiment of the worst fears of nineteenth-century Europe, exemplifying European, not just Belgian, imperialism in Africa. Kurtz represents the fear caused by the unknown consequences of blurring the line between 'civilized' superior Europe and the 'savage' stagnation of Africa. This corrosion of cultural distance looms large already at the beginning of the novella, when Marlow marks the connection between the river Thames and the Congo river. According to Marlow, there was a time, when the Romans first arrived in Britannia, when the Thames as well was engulfed in darkness. Marlow imagines "the fascination of the abomination", "the growing regrets", "the powerless disgust" (HOD 31) the Romans must have felt on arriving on the island for the first time. There is here a striking parallel with the kind of feelings Marlow himself will feel on arriving in Congo, penetrating "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (HOD 68). However, the sailor immediately draws a distinction between the brute force, "an accident arising from the weakness of others" (HOD 31) used by the Roman conquerors and the efficiency and "the idea" (HOD 32) colonialism instead bows down to. Therefore, Marlow never condemns the colonisation of Africa, though he objects to the way in which it was wrongfully perpetrated by King Leopold, where the Free State committed "the sin of becoming the other"(Lösing 2020, 156). The turn of the century saw the rise of the aforementioned international Congo reform movement that caused a first disruption of the Western Congo discourse, particularly through the work of Edmund D. Morel (Lösing 2020, 147). Indeed, while Conrad was writing on the matter, reports started emerging about the illegal activities and brutality perpetrated by the government in the area, shedding light on the gap between the colonial discourse and its political enactment. According to Congo reformers, who highly esteemed Conrad's work, King Leopold's fault was that of "obliterating the cultural boundaries between Europe and Africa and going native" (Lösing 2020, 156). Kurtz, who goes mad at the remote Inner Station and loses his "civilized identity" by adopting the customs of the local tribes, is similar to the king who established a "slave state" and betrayed the idea of Western colonisation. Achebe ironically states that the English liberal tradition required "all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or whatever" , a narrative that would allow Marlow to hold "advanced" views (Achebe 1977, 256). Instead, Kurtz is swallowed up by the darkness. The ivory trader envisions everything as his: "my intended, my ivory, my station, my river" (HOD 85). Similarly, the European colonizers claimed the lands they invaded as theirs. Through Kurtz, Conrad seems therefore to report on the power of darkness that hunted the Belgian invaders who literally "take

a high seat among the devils of the land” (HOD 85). Consequently, the Congo reform movement labels the alliance made by Leopold – and Kurtz – with the African savagery as “the horror” (HOD 111). This became not only the last judgment on Africa uttered by the ivory trader before dying, but it also turns into a popular cultural reference to refer to the Congo atrocities (Lösing 2020, 155). Through this narrative, the Victorian beliefs of superiority and resilience crumble as they get contaminated by Dark Africa.

1.2.2 Inner Darkness

One of the most striking considerations Marlow makes in the novella concerns the humanity of the savages that populate the area. Conrad focuses the narration on Marlow’s quest for humanity in the Dark Continent, a quest implicitly centred on white characters who gain perspective or lose sanity when confronting the continent. However, on the River Congo, while pondering on his surroundings, Marlow is startled by the revelation he achieves. He realises that the men that surround him on that piece of unconquered earth “were not inhuman” rather, “that was the worst of it” (HOD 69). The binary opposition of Us/Them, Light/Darkness that grounds the “idea” of colonisation could potentially implode once the colonisers recognise that distant kinship that bounds the white ‘us’ with the black ‘them’. In the novella, the indigenous population

howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrible faces: but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was Ugly enough (...) there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of ages – could comprehend.” (HOD 69).

The indigenous population holds up a mirror to the Europeans and frightens them with their likeness. It is, however, a brief moment of insight. Unsurprisingly, this resemblance never hints at elevating the Africans to the same supposedly superior level of the Europeans, on the contrary, the truth Marlow discovers reveals the ugly core that partakes the nature of all human beings, regardless of their place of birth. Consequently, the inhuman treatment reserved to the population would appear inadequate if these brutes without apparent social system or order truly had something in common to the Europeans. Kurtz’s state leads him to recoil from that darkness he shares with the continent and pleads for the extermination (HOD 87) of those brutes exactly because he feels himself succumbing to their influence. Moreover, when Marlow’s African helmsman dies, his master is unsettled by the last look he gives him, “a claim of distant

kinship affirmed in a supreme moment” (HOD 88). In the essay “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, Achebe states

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is concerned not so much about distant kinship as about someone laying a claim on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad (Achebe 1975, 258).

Achebe’s reading is unapologetically unfavourable towards Conrad’s work. According to the African writer, what upholds the whole novella is the rightful superiority of white Europeans. Therefore, the moment of insight into common humanity in recognising a vague kinship beyond all binary oppositions does not seem enough for Achebe to counterbalance the descriptions of black savages and racism the novella exudes. Nevertheless, *Heart of Darkness* has also been largely deemed successful in unmasking the immoral deeds the Europeans had been capable of. The primeval land with its savages is purposely used as an analogy for the forgotten instincts of the European savage past (Lösing 2020, 149). However, Achebe states that a major failing of the novella is precisely that of questioning the humanity of black people. If the white audience of Conrad celebrates Marlow’s inquiry of the whole of humanity –even the ugly part that inhabits Africa and secretly the heart of Europeans – Achebe underlines for the first time how this kinship fails to account for the autonomy and reality of the indigenous population. Achebe therefore objects to the status that *Heart of Darkness* has acquired in the literary canon, where Africa represents solely the backdrop of a quest of white Europeans to seek the meaning of their humanity. As part of the canon, Achebe worried for “the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude fostered and continues to foster in the world” (Achebe 1977, 258). He is mostly moved by an urgency to show that the African “past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (Achebe 1965, 45 in Ashcroft 1989, 125). Indeed, as the next paragraphs show, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) purposely subverts previous images of Africa by bestowing voice, culture, social system, religion to pre-colonial African, in short, allowing them a humanity they were precluded from in literature.

1.2.3 Rebels, Enemies, Criminals, Cannibals

Achebe’s reading of *Heart of Darkness* brings the issue of race to the fore also when analysing Conrad’s characters. Despite the alleged kinship Marlow finds, the inhabitants of Congo are

variously defined as “rebels”, “enemies”, “criminals”, “workers” and “cannibals” with a mysterious restraint (Atkinson 2015, 66). They are similar to children who need constant supervision, people who are simple and easy to exploit under the threat of the modern gun, esteemed at the same level as a god (Okafor 1988, 21). Indeed, right after Marlow’s consideration on the humanity of the indigenous population, he observes how “the savage who was fireman” – the same one that later dies and inspires distant kinship – could be compared to “a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs”. He was trained and “useful because he had been instructed”, he was someone who “ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall of strange witchcraft” (HOD 79). It is indeed Kurtz who asserts that “we whites” must appear “to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings” with “the might as of a deity” (HOD 86). In the latter quotation, Marlow reads Kurtz’s pamphlet on the indigenous population commissioned by “the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs”, the same text that after “altruistic sentiments”, concluded “like a flash of lightening in a serene sky: Exterminate all the brutes” (HOD 87). Right after, it is Marlow who calls these people “rudimentary souls”. While Kurtz’s insanity seemingly justifies the postscriptum of his pamphlet in the narrative, Marlow’s position can be defined as ambivalent at best. He reinscribes imperialist ideology while exposing and condemning its extremes (Singh 2011, 39). He talks of “regret for a savage who was of no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara” but he is someone whose life Marlow establishes as possibly worthier than the one of the white –deranged –Kurtz. The Africans are one with the forest, they are one with the wilderness and their political reality is not acknowledged by Europe, therefore, it does not exist (Atkinson 2015, 66-67). In a narrative primarily devoted to the uncovering of meaning, humanity is conferred to the indigenous people only briefly. The Africans are separate and marginalized, they are dehumanized by the terms employed to defined them. The outcome is that the Continent is “evil” and ultimately “if it is also European, that is because some white men in the heart of darkness behave like Africans”(Lösing 2020, 13).

In addition, regarding the difference between the African characters of Achebe and Conrad, it is worth noticing the contrasting meaning ascribed to wilderness and the concept of darkness. Marlow is appalled when he finds heads on sticks outside Kurtz’s compound. They represent his excessive brutality and are further proof he has gone mad among the natives, corrupted by a combination of both greed and African customs. Conversely, as Okonkwo, Achebe’s main character, drinks palm wine from the head of his first killing during important celebrations, this

is considered a sign of his strength and is ascribed to the realm of rituals rather than brutality. While the Darkness of the African continent represents fear of the unknown and wilderness through the encounter with the Congolese population, in *Things Fall Apart* darkness does not have a metaphorical meaning. The darkness of the night, when there is no moon and it is difficult to see, provokes fright among the members of the clan themselves, “Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them” and “children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits” (Achebe 2010, 9). Instead, Conrad is far from straightforward in his text, he relies on the unspoken, the implied. As Said argues in one of his last interviews, Conrad’s style has a “reverberative quality: as if everything is an echo or quotation of something else.” (Said 2004, 25), it is unique. The novella is purposely vague in its meaning; therefore, the author can successfully blur the boundaries between civilisation and wilderness and that is ultimately why his commentators can debate on its intentions and draw completely different conclusions, either condemning or aiding the imperialist cause.

Furthermore, Kurtz’s African mistress stands as the female realisation of an “immense wilderness”, she is “the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul” (HOD 101) while she can additionally be seen as symbolizing lust and fecundity (Okafor 1988, 22). In briefly describing her as dominant and steady, Conrad is also highlighting another failure by Kurtz, namely his incompetence in following the rules of imperial masculinity that prescribe strict control over the wilderness. Hence, Marlow perceives him as reduced to a child by the power of that darkness (Lösing 2015, 161). Again the African female character is conjured up simply to reveal something about the white protagonists; on her own, she is not useful to the narrative. As Achebe remarks, “she fulfils a structural requirement”, she is the savage counterpart to the white fiancée (Achebe 256, 197). Lastly, she appears in Marlow’s mind in a flesh, when he meets her white equivalent, the other nameless woman in the novella – the two women sharing the same sorrow and tragedy for the loss of the extraordinary man.

1.2.4 The Gift of the Great

Both Marlow and Kurtz’s Intended define the ivory-trader as a remarkable man, capable of magnificent peroration endowed with such power of speech that he “drew men towards him by what was best in them”, he had, in short, “the gift of the great” (HOD 119). Despite such favourable appreciation, however, Kurtz indeed symbolises the downfall of the propaganda of the coloniser. Kurtz is the embodiment of a voice and Marlow longs for a conversation with

him since he first hears his name. Therefore, when they meet they converse, but the novella also describes how the ivory trader's voice merges with other voices in Marlow's head, causing jabber and implying Kurtz's own "regression to a savage state" (Singh 2011, 43). Conversely, those who are not given the right to speak, who are allowed only "incomprehensible words" are the Africans.

The speech of the African characters is repeatedly described as yelling, babbling, howling. It would be impossible to ask the Europeans to understand their language because the sounds of the savages are apparently not human: "They shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany" (HOD 108-9). The "satanic" serves to reiterate the evil nature of Africans in the binary opposition structured in the novella (Singh 2011, 40). Similarly to the manner in which Adichie's short story has her female protagonist being told in the twentieth century that she "could not refer to the call-and-response her grandmother had taught her as poetry because primitive tribes did not have poetry" (Adichie 2017, 216), Conrad mostly denies logocentric expression to the indigenous people. As Achebe indicates in his essay, they are allowed speech only in two instances, to express cannibalistic desire and to pronounce the death of Kurtz. As the scholar Singh underlines, this speech is cartoon-like pidgin English rather than transactional speech (2011, 37-38). Otherwise, the Africans speak only with the body. When the aforementioned helmsman dies, Marlow feels that the black man might actually "put to us some question in an understandable language" (HOF, 82) but he expires without uttering a word, he only frowns. Consistently, like Kurtz's mistress who is mostly mute or not understandable, the helmsman embodies the muted subject since, as Spivak observes, "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 104 in Singh 2011, 42). Additionally, Conrad may be acknowledging the powerlessness of those who are prevented from rightful representation by the oppressor, so that their silence recognises the impossibility of speech for the Indigenous population in the colonial discourse (Singh 2011 44-45).

Conversely, the postcolonial discourse not only admits but claims back the right to speak for the Indigenous populations. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, conversation is of the main importance among the Igbo people that populate precolonial Nigeria. Early in the novel the narrator relates how "among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 2010, 7). Achebe writes his novel in English; therefore the Western audience inevitably constitutes part of his readership. Nonetheless, the non-Igbo reader is the Other, decentred, while the centre is reserved for "the

nine villages” Okonkwo, the main character, is famous among (TFA 3). The Igbo decision by consensus on matters of social importance and conversation is also employed to communicate with the white Christian missionaries when they arrive on the land. Achebe describes a scene where the man who acts as interpreter for the missionaries speaks Igbo, but not the local dialect. In that instance, the interpreter instead of saying “myself”, he says “my buttocks” (TFA 137) due to the difference among the dialects used in Nigeria. Thus, Achebe subtly draws attention to the complexities of a language that is far from the incoherent primitive “bubbling” of Marlow’s Africans. Moreover, in the same scene where the interpreter is trying to explain the Christian God and the mystery of the holy trinity, the Igbo react with laughter at the foolishness of the white man who overlooked the importance of the heathen’s beliefs. The lack of acknowledgement for the unappeased gods betrays the ignorance of the white man not only of the language, but of the cosmology and theology that the Igbo words convey and thus shows a huge gap of understanding in the communication (Singh, 48, 2011). Indeed, the Nigerian writer subverts the perspective of Conrad’s novel. If Marlow never even tried to understand the Africans, the characters of Achebe ask immediately what were the last words of the white man, the first one they know of in their territories and that has been killed in Abame. The characters comment, “he said something, only they did not understand him (...) He seemed to speak through his nose”, the dying man “repeated over and over again a word that resembled Mbaino. Perhaps he had been going to Mbaino and had lost his way” (Achebe 2010, 130). Obierika and his companion do not question the comprehensibility of the white man’s language, they instead try to recognise some similar word of his to theirs, like that of their village. Later, they cite a proverb to explain the tragic consequences of the killing on the village and how much silence can conceal terrible threats. The use of Igbo proverbs renders “the structure of feeling” of the society (Williams 1958, 38 in Singh 2011, 46). In another scene, *Things Fall Apart* provides a description of the handling of a case in Umuofia where masked men, the *egwugwu*, conduct their argument with dialogic speech and with final concessions made on both sides. In marked contrast from the superstitious, barbarous community Marlow encounters, Singh observes how Achebe carefully portrays the Igbo as an oral society acting with restraint and rationality, endowed with logic (2011, 50).

In the society of *Things Fall Apart*, the one woman who is allowed power through her speech is Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. When she does not represent the oracle, she is just a widow with two children, however, in her religious role she is granted superiority among men as she embodies the will of the spirit. Her description and

behaviour considerably differ from the idea of the ‘wild woman’ of Africa. Indeed, it is her voice that men must obey, there are no gestures to interpret (Okafor 1988, 26). Nevertheless, the society Achebe introduces is distinctly based on masculine traditions and a patriarchal order, as exemplified by Okonkwo’s brutal treatment of his three wives. In Umofia, telling a man he was ‘womanly’ is a great insult. Achebe’s novel identifies power and authority with masculinity, to the extent that “*agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title” (TFA 17), someone, in other words, who was considered weak and lazy. Women can be present at trials but they are not usually allowed a voice in society and they mostly have to obey their husbands or fathers. Nonetheless, they are not silenced by the narrative as the text often introduces the conversations of its female characters. On the gender issue, Adichie resumes the narrative in 2009 with the aforementioned short-story, contributing to reserve more space in literature to the women of precolonial Nigeria.

While the theme of religion is absent from *Heart of Darkness*, the conversion of the Igbo constitutes a substantial part of the narrative of Achebe’s text. Once more, the exercise of discourse plays a fundamental role, not only in translation, but also in trying to peacefully understand and handle the two diverging perceptions. The first white missionary that arrives in Umofia, Mr Brown, gladly converses, through an interpreter, to Akunna, one of the great men of the village. They are both equally capable of explaining their religion and drawing comparisons between the two (Achebe 2011, 169-179). Moreover, Achebe explicitly describes how the Igbo simply accept that the missionaries have a different god and think that they should not betray him. They again show acceptance and restraint upon their anger towards the intruders (Singh 2011, 49). Conversely, the one character who is not interested in finding a peaceful resolution with the missionaries is Okonkwo, the main character. Singh examines how with the arrival of the white men and their ways, the protagonist who fiercely rejects yielding to the new colonial authority is not interested in talking and he finally acts. He murders a white messenger and then he hangs himself as he witnesses his fellow Igbos as they “had broken into tumult instead of action” (Achebe 2010, 194), meaning that they would surrender. Suicide is “an offense against the Earth” (TFA 198) but this is also an effort of self-representation in a social structure already altered (Singh 2011, 51). Okonkwo’s last act is therefore inscribed inside a colonial system where his words and behaviour are misunderstood. The reader is left with the interpretation of the protagonist by the figure of the District Commissioner whose thoughts end the novel. The white commissioner reduces the Igbo customs that the novel had been portraying as merely “primitive” (TFA 198), an opinion Conrad’s characters would have shared.

Therefore, Okonkwo's suicide is his answer to the white man, he can perform his resistance solely through the body, as Conrad's novella would have him. Finally, even though the Commissioner judges that "one of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words" (TFA 195), clearly recognising therefore the verbal nature of the Igbo, he nonetheless persists in considering them "primitive tribes" that need "pacification" (TFA 197).

1.2.5 Falling Apart

In the effort of restoring humanity to Africa in literature, Achebe stresses the fragility of the system of Umofia, in particular, as the previous paragraph introduced, when confronted with the religion of the white man. The first part of *Things Fall Apart* is devoted to describing the rise and then exile of the main character while presenting the customs of the Igbo clan. The second and third part witness the consequences of the coming of the white man and the approach to a new religion and government. Even if the Africa the author portrays is immersed in nature and guided by spirits of the Earth, it never appears 'wild'. Achebe draws attention to the different system that govern the Igbo villages with the lack of a monarch residing over all but instead the presence of "men of high title and the chief priests and the elders" (TFA 140). When the white man is given a plot of land on the "Evil Forest" to build his Church, none of the missionaries die because of the supposed spirits that haunt the place. This first breach in the religious system of the clans pushes some Igbos to join them. Christianity appeals to the socially marginal and excluded in Umofia, becoming a potent social leveller (Korang 2011, 23). Indeed, by showing the inner fragilities of the clan system, the novel convincingly portrays the gradual coming together of the two cultures and justifies the charm that Christianity had on the population. The new religion of the white man accepts as its first followers in foreign land the others that the Igbo rejected. Namely, Christianity includes the *osu* among themselves, a caste of no human status according to the Igbos, separate from first-class citizens (Korang 2011, 21). While Okonkwo reasons that it is cowardly to let the white man go unpunished, the council that prevails lacks determinate action and lets their clansman turn against them. The elders, who decide on matters of common interest in the village, never blame themselves as they witness the incessant downfall of their community.

In particular, through Nwoye, Achebe recreates the alienation of clan rules once they come into contact with this new promise of belonging (Korang 2011, 22). Nwoye is one of Okonkwo's sons but he is markedly different from his parent and seems to resemble his

grandfather who Okonkwo hates for his weakness. In order to display manliness the protagonist is ready to go to extreme lengths, even murdering a boy who had been living in his house for years, treated almost as a son. The execution of Ikemefuna, who had become like a brother to Nwoye, has repercussions in both characters. If Okonkwo tries to conceal his guilt from others and from himself, so as not to seem like “a shivering old woman” (TFA 60), Nwoye is enveloped in fear. It is in this crack of the system that the Christian religion of the missionaries operates. Achebe showcases different models of masculinity. When Ndulue, a man who “led Umuofia to war”, dies, his wife also passes the same day and Obierika remembers how in their youth “he could not do anything without telling her”. To this, Okonkwo answers “I did not know that (...) I thought he was a strong man in his youth” (TFA 64), implying that a man relying on a woman cannot possibly be highly considered according to his conception of Igbo society. Okonkwo embodies and is loyal to Umuofia’s values, but his strict, limited views are bound to come apart. On the other hand, change is shown to be already part of the clan as some characters reflect on how the punishment for breaking the Week of Peace had become mild during the years (McCarthy 1985, 250). Their customs are not absolute and even if change is accelerated by colonisation it is definitely longstanding.

Okonkwo refuses change and becomes in a way an emblem of precolonial Nigeria. Nevertheless, he cannot be simply considered a character representative of his clan, with his fall mirroring the fall of the village. All the other Igbo characters who better respond to change are employed by the author to show the complexity of the colonial process. If Conrad suggests oppositional distinctions between Europe and Africa, the reader of Achebe witnesses the indisputable binary opposition of Man/Woman, Strength/Weakness, Living Fire/Impotent Ash that Okonkwo embodies. His system though is also seen as clearly failing, like the one the elders support. He grimly reflects on the consequences of his son’s betrayal,

To abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye’s footsteps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his father crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man’s god (TFA 144).

Okonkwo’s suicide acquires meaning through the collapse of the old order. The coming of the white man stands for the annihilation of Umuofia. When the elders discuss the power that the

stranger already holds on their community, they state that “he put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (TFA 166). These words echo the epigraph of the novel, a citation from the poem, “The Second Coming” (1929), written by the modernist Irish poet W. B. Yeats in the aftermath of the First World War. Just as the known civilized world sank under the barbarity of European battlefields in the 1920s, the old order of Umuofia collapses under the coming of the missionaries (Eze 2011, 45). The weakness Okonkwo ascribes to his people is their inability to act. The elders adopt the posture of the innocent victim, being good by default against the morally evil missionaries and their government who killed, kidnapped and taunted their people (Eze 2011, 46). The wise Obierika blames Okonkwo’s death on the white man, he accuses the invaders, “that man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog.” (TFA 197). The wise man does not consider the actions of his own people who did not defend Okonkwo. By laying responsibility solely on the white men, the elders reconstruct the system of opposition of We/Them, a way of thinking that is doomed to fail (Eze 2011, 49). Consequently, things fall apart for the elders, the dominant class, the privileged, characters who did not recognise that internal decay was already underway for women, *osu* and *efulefus*. Again, while Marlow and his men feel “cut off from the comprehension of [their] surroundings” (HOD 68) as they delve deeper into the heart of darkness, that comprehension becomes difficult to interpret also in the weakened world of Umuofia and the villages because of all the changes they encompass. Okonkwo does not agree with the plan of the other leaders on how to handle the white man, namely, utter passivity. While the elders deem themselves innocent, the main hero would disagree. Therefore, the author exposes the inherent weakness implied in a narrative – as other postcolonial narratives did – mainly centred in seeing the African as good and the European as bad (Eze 2011, 43). Indeed, as the process is significantly more complex, in the narrative, unfortunately, both the elders’ approach and Okonkwo’s are unsuccessful.

Moreover, the style is another means employed to mark the massive change happening in Nigeria. By the time of the colonial arrival in Africa, the indigenous population had not developed writing beyond the early stages, their art was oral (Ashcroft 2002, 126). As in Adichie’s aforementioned piece of writing where she exposes in “The Headstrong Historian” how “primitive tribes did not have poetry” (Adichie 2017, 216) according to Western views, *The Empire Writes Back* recognises how the study of African oral performance had to be “rescued from such limiting labels as ‘traditional’ or even ‘primitive’, and given equal status as rich, sophisticated artistic tradition” (Ashcroft 2002, 126). This helped to give autonomy to the

status of postcolonial African literature. It has been argued that Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* with a style that seems to “reshape English in order to imitate the linguistic patterns of his mother tongue, Igbo” (McCarthy 1985, 244). The narrator repeats words and phrases, emphasising patterns with a technique belonging to the traditional oral storyteller. As McCarthy argues in his study of Achebe’s rhythms, oral expression is addictive and aggregative. Similarly Achebe’s narration introduces a name or event of the clan, moves forward, and then goes back to repeat and expand the previous term (McCarthy 1985, 245). Despite occasional key departures – such as not always attaching epithets – this narrative method appears imitative of the African oral tradition that adds a rhythmical quality to the prose. Conversely, the ending of the novel is left to the thoughts of the white District Commissioner. Such thoughts are expressed through subordinate sentences and appear “syntactically and philosophically different” (McCarthy 1985, 254). His speech and the clan’s speech are markedly different. Despite writing the novel in English, Achebe is able to draw particular attention within the language to the tension between traditional English prose and the oral quality of the Igbo.

Aside from the style used, the content of the message of the District Commissioner is also worth analysing. Indeed, one of the most explicit passages in *Things Fall Apart* that seems to speak directly to the white characters of *Heart of Darkness* is the ending, where the reader enters the thoughts of the Commissioner after Okonkwo’s suicide,

Every day brought him new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger (TFA 197).

After carefully displaying the Igbo’s conception of time measured by planting seasons and dry seasons, market days, negotiations, meaningful rituals, religion and hierarchies, Achebe finally overturns the narrative and lets the white coloniser define his people “Primitive Tribes”. Okonkwo, whose life and emotions the reader has been following for hundreds of pages, is purposely confined to a paragraph in the imagined report of the white man. The implied message of defiance attests how the muted, voiceless Africans of Conrad deserve more than the “reasonable paragraph” (TFA 196) the white Commissioner would allow them. Just like Kurtz’s last message regarding the population he had been living amongst is to “Exterminate all the brutes” (HOD 87), Achebe has his people require pacification. The Nigerian writer shows the

liminal space that history had reserved for Africa (Osei-Nyame 1999, 150). Additionally, by stating that “one must be firm in cutting out details”, the representation of the “ideologically real and fictional dimensions” of African and colonial history is expressed directly by the characters. Similarly, Adichie seems to deliberately answer to this passage in her short story. Indeed, in the story, “Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria” (Adichie 2017, 217) is the title of the novel that her female protagonist writes about the world of precolonial Nigeria – a world specific to Nigeria that her grandmother inhabited and Okonkwo inhabited – but also sarcastically referring to the vast world – only apparently ‘of darkness’ – Marlow and Kurtz encountered.

1.2.6 Universalism

Achebe’s main preoccupation in recounting precolonial Nigeria and the consequences of the advent of the white man lies in describing the whole community and not centring the narrative on the fate of one man only. *The Empire Writes Back* argues that one of the issues of African literature is that of balancing “the demand for a recognition of the Africanness of literature and the rejection of universal readings” (2002, 125). This is because in the 1950s, when Achebe starts writing, he regards universalism as a term “synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe” (Achebe 1975, 13 in Ashcroft 2002). For example, this concept can be seen as dealing with the way Marlow’s remarks on Africa went undisputed in the canon for decades. This interpretation, however, may run the risk of “going too far” if only “locally informed” readings of a piece of writing can be accepted (Ashcroft 2002, 126). Arguably, the meaning of universalism in literature is challenged in various postcolonial works. Given that *Things Fall Apart* is written in English, the Western audience in a way expresses part of the readership who can decide on the supposed –Eurocentric – universality of some scenes. For instance, the worry of Okonkwo and his second wife Ekwefi for their daughter Ezinma when she falls ill (TFA 72) is bound to move all kinds of audiences. Conversely, the Western reader withdraws from identifying with the Igbo characters when the narrative details the killing of twins as a normal practise in the village.

More than fifty years after Achebe’s considerations, the issue of universalism continues to be relevant for postcolonial authors. Indeed, talking about authenticity, Adichie writes “I feel very strongly that it is from the specific that universalism arises, that it is through anchoring one’s narrative in so-called parochial details that universalism becomes possible, and that it is

therefore counterintuitive to make a distinction between universalism and particularity” (Adichie 2008, 48). She goes on to argue that the universalism of American or Russian writers is not questioned whether they write about small, specific or distant communities. The surprise she receives from Western journalists who admit her work is ‘universal’ is intrinsically linked to her being from Africa (Adichie 2008, 48). However, she is also “weary of the idea of literature as anthropology” that causes generalisation from the particular and possibly limits the stories that can be told. Fixing on one single narrative of Africa can easily lead to “reduce Africa to a simple story” (Adichie 2008, 45) both because of how the continent is portrayed in the media and for the way it is presented in major literary works that tackle the issue. Indeed, it is also important to notice that the popularity of *Things Fall Apart* prompted a certain African aesthetic that is though more than a century old. The twenty-first century Nigerian writer often stated how indebted she is to the writings of Chinua Achebe. Against a Eurocentric narrative that has seen Africa as “a place of anarchic darkness until colonialism came”, she replied that “Achebe’s novel would serve as a gentle reprimand. What it said to me was: “Don’t you dare think that you did not have a complex past.” (Adichie 2013). To the writer, “[his] characters were familiar (...) in many ways, their world was also incredibly exotic because they lived without the things that I saw as the norm in my life: they did not have cars and electricity and telephones” (Adichie 2008, 42). In her refusal to consider African authenticity a monolithic issue, she reflects on how *Things Fall Apart* cannot be considered the main – or only – narrative about Africa, despite its popularity.

Adichie aims through her novels to share a fresh image of Nigeria and the current situation of its people. Despite thanking her African precursors in lectures or writings and often referencing the consequences of Conrad’s depiction of Africa, Adichie’s work shows a determination to move forward with the narrative and engage with the problems of the modern world that can be at the same time specific of Africa and recognisable by readers everywhere.

2 “My Name Will Not Be Lost”: Adichie’s Reconstruction of Igboland

2.1 Third Generation of Nigerian Writers: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a well-known writer who lives and writes both in the USA and in Nigeria. She belongs to the so-called third generation of Nigerian writers, a group whose narratives started to shape Nigeria’s literary landscape by the end of the 1980s. (Ogede 2023, 14). During the 1980s and 1990s, the country was marked by several economic and political events that negatively impacted the stability of the country and had a profound effect on its people. In those years, Nigeria suffered an oil bust, an economic collapse, the devaluation of its currency and the closing of many publishing houses and book markets, while many of its writers were imprisoned and tortured (Hewett 2005, 74). Even though such climate deeply affected the writers that were to become Nigeria’s third generation, a renewed energy and commitment sprang from this soil and marked a significant “literary renaissance” over the country, both in prose and poetry.

Thinking in terms of literary traditions can be problematic and many scholars and writers have contested a periodization of literature (Hewett 2005, 77). As in the literature of any nation, there never really are complete generational breaks, nevertheless, the process of “borrowing and carrying” – coined by the scholar Eldred Jones – highlights how there is a sort of “inescapability of influence” for all writers who are confronted with the past of their nation (Ogede 2023, 39). Additionally, feminist critics have observed that in the past, the exclusion of women writers contributed to creating a male-dominated canon because Nigerian female authors were either silenced or simply ignored. Therefore, the contribution that these potential “foremothers” had was completely discredited and downplayed (Hewett 2005, 77). Indeed, writers do influence one another and engage in dialogue through their works, for example – as this chapter shows – Adichie keeps an open dialogue with a writer from Nigeria’s so-called first generation both in her fiction and non-fiction writings, so much so that he becomes a sort of “hyper-precursor” for the younger author (Boehmer 2009, 142 in Tunca 2012, 232). Much scholarly attention has been given to this connection that bounds Achebe and Adichie, the latter often considered a sort of either successor or “literary daughter” of the former (Tunca 2012, 233) because of the similarities of their themes and their popularity in the Western world. Adichie herself has tried to explain why this connection is constantly emphasized by critics. For example, in 2011, Adichie suggested that she is “probably compared to him because people

don't know any other writers from Africa” (Umachadran 2011). As the end of the chapter shows, although Adichie’s statement is a simplification – and a sort of provocation – some truth of this can be found by looking at the way that the younger author has been often treated by critics.

As for the periodization of the country’s literature, scholars have observed that while the writers of the first generation published works before and directly after Nigeria’s independence and they mostly dealt with the impact of colonisation, the second generation included the works of authors writing after the Nigerian civil war (Hewett 2005, 76). Scholar Ogede has observed in his study on Nigeria’s Third Generation which elements characterize this group. Indeed, they seem to be engaged with the economic, historical, and socio political elements that have shaped their nation in the last forty years (2023, 35). Corruption, political repression, widespread violence, fear and uncertainties are the realities of the Nigerian nation often depicted in the prose fiction of third-generation writers. While they paint in a positive light those characters who try to reject this system, their storytelling often emphasizes how certain behaviours that feed ideologies of oppression are created and perpetrated. With a variety of narrative techniques and verisimilitude in characterization, character typology and linguistic mimicry, the voice of this generation aims at denouncing corruption, bigotry, inequity, unrest and insecurity, by allowing its readers to intrude into the lives of the victims of this system. In a way, third generation fiction seems to contribute to display a picture of “the immoralities committed by the military and political kingpins in their true constitutional outlines” (Ogede 2023, 36). Moreover, the decreased quality of life in Nigeria has caused many to emigrate, even at the cost of becoming the victims of prejudice and scorn from other nationalities abroad. Therefore, with no attempt at romanticising the situation, the experience of exile, migration and travel is often at the centre of the narrative. This recurrent defeat of optimism places this generation within the corpus of testimonial literature on the hardships of expatriation. Indeed, history itself comes to play a fundamental role and fiction is often used precisely to document and interpret the events of the past that shaped and still shape the country. These topics are tackled through round characters depicting the complexity of human nature in consistent, vibrant units corresponding to distinct genres. Although the third generation still adopts the themes of their predecessors, they also challenge the inherited forms and innovate them, thus gaining success.

An important element that characterises the third generation of Nigerian writers is the gender balance of its composition and representation, given that a more prominent role has been attributed to female authors (Ogede 2023, 40). Indeed, for decades, Nigerian literature has been

mostly dominated by the male writer's narrative. Although they did portray female characters, critics noted that these writers have run the risk of appropriating female experiences in literature, with the result of presenting "their [male] cultural reality as the cultural reality" (Zulfiqar 2016, 56). Many of such works often defined womanhood as motherhood, thus limiting women's role to a single sphere, the domestic one. On the whole, while the first and second generation had a small number of female writers – authors who were not as highly considered as their male counterparts anyway – and had under-represented female characters often regarded to an inferior status, the third generation has witnessed the flourishing of a high number of female authors. Regarding women, the themes that previous generations examined included childbearing, motherhood, polygyny, subordination to men and wars. However, in later decades this list has widened, embracing – among others – topics such as economic disempowerment, racism, sex abuse and prostitution, while polygyny still appears as an increasingly problematic institution in contemporary Nigeria (Ogede 2023, 41). It is worth observing how the writings of female authors show that "none can speak or act better than women on their own behalf". By taking control of their own narrative, at least in fiction writing, they can voice the inequities of a system still imbued with patriarchal cultural practices and a lack of female political representation. Throughout her career, Adichie herself has been vocal about gender disparities, underlying how narratives told by men and women are distinct. Indeed, the short-story here analysed mostly tackles the representation of women in pre-colonial Nigeria.

Moreover, aside from the written tradition, African writers have a rich oral tradition that women authors often choose to rely on (Hewett 2005, 88). For instance, second-generation author Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) has described her writerly identity by calling upon the figure of the Igbo story teller, a symbol that has inspired many female writers. Emecheta can be considered as one of the 'foremothers' that influenced Adichie's writing and themes, both regarding the author's understanding of the situation of women in Nigeria and when dealing with the depiction of the Biafran War and its consequences. In the 1990s, when asked about her "feminist" work, Emecheta strongly rejected the label (Zulfiqar 2016, 44). Apparently, feminism is not generally viewed in a positive light by readers and writers in Africa. As scholar Zulfiqar observes on the relation between feminism and Africa, African women's reluctance to accept the term seems to be due to the absence of race and imperial history discourse in the feminism of the West, at least in those first waves of the movement (2016, 45). Moreover, they claim there have been misinterpretations by feminist Western critics when analysing the works

of African female writers due to the inability of this label to embrace and understand the different cultural context in which the authors operated. Instead, a term employed in Africa to define a phenomenon supporting the survival of both men and women is ‘womanism’, first coined by the writer and activist Alice Walker in 1983 (Zulfiquar 2016, 51). This phenomenon includes not only the necessity to overcome sexist discriminations, but also discriminations based on class and gender. Adichie herself claims that she would probably sell more in her country if she did not insist on calling herself a feminist (Adichie 2017). In 2014 she published a now famous manifesto titled “We Should All Be Feminists”, first presented as a TED talk in 2013. In this monologue, she starts the conversation on gender by describing what a Nigerian journalist told her while she was promoting her first book in 2009, the journalist had said that “I should never call myself a feminist, since feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands” (Adichie 2014, at 2:48). Adichie’s popularity is high both in the United States and in Nigeria, therefore she has been extensively scrutinized by public debates and medias because of her ideas on both feminism and racism. So much so that because of the prominence of her public speeches and some brand collaborations she has made, Adichie herself has been questioned on the righteousness of her beliefs, leaving some critics wondering whether she is “too mainstream” to be taken seriously (Brockes 2017). To this she answered, “For me, feminism is a movement for which the end goal is to make itself no longer needed. I think academic feminism is interesting in that it can give a language to things, but I’m not terribly interested in debating terms.” (Adichie 2017). Ultimately, Adichie is part of many literary traditions, therefore positioning her in a black woman’s literary tradition or a feminist tradition can possibly limit all other transnational and discursive contexts that would enrich the kind of interpretations worth studying of her work (Hewett 2005, 87).

2.2 Writing With and Beyond

The collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* merges elements of the modern short-story tradition, signalled by its brevity, economy and unity of mood, and elements of didacticism and fantasy pertaining to the Igbo oral tradition (Ogede 2023, 283). Adichie’s themes are manifold, ranging from migration, racial discrimination, the feeling of alienation abroad and the diaspora, to the complexities of marriage, cross-cultural understandings, political oppression, police corruption and violence. This chapter analyses the different treatment that Achebe – in *Things Fall Apart* – and Adichie in “The Headstrong Historian” reserve to the description of women.

Several interpretations have been made to define the kind of relationship that the two texts have. Written more than fifty years later, according to scholar Tunca the short-story can be considered a “second-degree text”, a direct response to an earlier text (Tunca 2018, 88). Indeed, the short-story would not be an attempt to copy Achebe, nor to ‘write back’ to him, but rather to write “beyond Achebe” and express a message that is both original and filled with the echoes of their shared literary past (Tunca 2018, 247). Instead, scholar VanZanten defines this as a process of “writing with” the classic (VanZanten 2015, 85), suggesting that Adichie succeeds in completing the narrative started by the older writer (Ejikeme 2017, 311). Thus, the author ‘appropriates’ Achebe by referencing the well-known world of *Things Fall Apart*, however, she also spins the narrative for her own purposes, allowing a more feminist reading. The author herself explained that the inspiration “came from my attempt to imagine the life of my great-grandmother, a woman I am told was fierce, and who was considered stubborn because she wouldn’t shut up and she challenged people and all that sort of thing.” (Adichie 2009). By starting from a biographical element, the short-story allowed the author to delve further into the close relationship between education, power and religion in colonial Nigeria (Mustich 2009). First published on *The New York Times*, the short-story had the means to reach a large audience of readers who were not familiar with sociological or academic literature on the history of African women (Ejikeme 2017, 313). Ultimately, beyond the several interpretations on the text that can be made on its relationship with Achebe, the message that the author tries to communicate does not aim at ‘completing’ anyone else’s narrative, but aims at creating her own. Along with others, this author’s historical fiction contributes to challenge previous silencing of Igbo women in fiction.

2.3 Mother is Supreme?

Some critics have observed how Achebe’s work does not fairly give full representation to the role of Igbo women in pre-colonial Nigeria (VanZanten 2015, 87). Achebe’s desire to offer an alternative version of precolonial African life to the depiction given by Western authors is less cutting in his portrayal of female characters. Indeed, a recurrent trait pertaining to the women of *Things Fall Apart* is their silence as they never protest the inferiority they are subjected to, nor do they question the violence of their husbands. As the previous chapter has shown, Okonkwo is repeatedly described as the embodiment of masculinity, in a world where this trait means strength and femininity is synonym for weakness. Studies show that Igbo cultures did

not marginalize women and instead often granted them powerful roles. For example, Florence Stratton – one of the first scholars to delve into the effect of the politics of gender in Nigerian literature – defines Achebe’s female characters as “objects circulated among their menfolk (...) systematically excluded from the political, the economic, the judicial, and even the discursal [discursive] life of the community” (Stratton in VanZanten 2015, 87).

When analysing the text, there can be made various considerations on how gender is presented. In the second part of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is forced to move to his motherland in Mbanta after he is exiled from Umuofia. At the new village, one of his relatives offers a word of comfort to the hero by emphasizing the benefits of living among his mother’s relatives. So he asks him,

Why is it that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or “Mother is Supreme”? We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka (TFA 125).

The patriarchal system here exemplified is never openly contested in the novel. The rules and customs enforced are overtly in favour of men, while women’s role concerns the sphere of motherhood and the duties of a wife. There is a strong polarity throughout the novel where men are superior and dominant, while women are regarded as inferior and dominated (Umezurike 2021, 209). What is praised of a woman is her protective nature, bound to alleviate the difficulties and misfortunes men encounter, “when there is sorrow and bitterness [the child] finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you” (TFA 126). Okonkwo’s whole character is defined by his refusal to appear weak, to feel guilty and never show feelings because he understands that is what characterizes women and lazy men like his father (Umezurike 2021, 210). Implicitly, with the character’s downfall, his own convictions also come crumbling for the reader as they are clearly not sustainable for the survival of these people. Conversely, as women need to obey, every time a woman rebels, she is punished. Interestingly, the first time Okonkwo openly breaks the law happens because he is punishing his wife for not preparing his dinner, while the intervention of the elders to stop the beating occurs only as a consequence of the hero’s breaking the Week of Peace, a crime that might infuriate the earth goddess (TFA 29). Little to no defence is given to the women in the system Achebe portrays. Moreover, the reassuring role women are expected to embody is also related to the function of storytelling as women tell markedly different stories than those of violence attributed to men (TFA 50). It is through Nwoye – one of the characters who mostly exemplifies the changing

Igbo society with its fractures and weaknesses – that Achebe contrasts the narratives that men and women exemplify in that society. Nwoye is the one always questioning his father’s convictions (Umezurike 2021, 209) as both father and son display masculine performances. Indeed, in the first part of the novel, Nwoye complies with his father’s rules in order to be accepted. For instance, “Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his *obi* and he told stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell” (TFA 50). This dichotomy is constant, men talk about “tribal wars”, fighting and cutting off the heads of their enemies, while women are “foolish”, they sing songs and cook (TFA 50-51). However, as Nwoye only pretends not to care for women stories just to please his father, the marginal female characters, even if not equals, seem to subtly challenge male authority and shed some light on the degree of autonomy they are capable of. For instance, Ezinma, Okonkwo’s favourite daughter who he wishes was born a boy, is favoured despite her gender. In particular, scholar Osey-Nyame observes how Ezinma’s journey with the priestess of Agbala, followed by her mother Ekwefi, may represent an epic heroic adventure (1999, 158). Ekwefi’s pursuit of Chielo not only disregards the will of the god, but also the masculine traditions of the village and her husband’s authority. Okonkwo follows the priestess only hours after his wife but both wait together for their daughter’s return. It is a woman who braves the darkness alone and exposes herself to the risk of provoking the anger of the god. Moreover, Ezinma has an unconventionally equal relationship with her mother, the two share a special bond none of the other wives have with their children. Therefore, according to the interpretation of the scholar, “the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi episode evidently prefigures the displacement of Okonkwo and to a large degree masculine authority within the clan as a whole” (Osei-Nyame 1999, 159).

Additionally, careful attention is given to distribution of roles in agriculture. Indeed, the yam, the most important crop in the village, can further stress the importance of the work done by women. Early in the novel, the narrator explains many difficulties Okonkwo had to face as a child because of the laziness of his father. Apparently, “his mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (TFA 20). In a way, the text seems to highlight the little contribution that women can make to nourish their family and how they cannot really make a difference on their own. Conversely, Achebe himself states that female crops were served at all meals, while yam only once a day (Achebe in Osei-Nyame 1999, 160). Therefore, even if higher symbolic

value is attributed to man's work, there is an underlying importance given to women. Indeed, their rebellious and autonomous attitude can be perceived throughout the whole novel, but it is at the margins of the narrative.

2.4 “The Headstrong Historian”

Adichie argues for a greater and explicit emphasis on the importance of women, voicing her message in “The Headstrong Historian”. The author herself notices how “It is impossible, especially for the contemporary reader, not to be struck by the portrayal of gender in *Things Fall Apart*, and the equating of weakness and inability with femaleness” (Adichie xi, in VanZanten 2015, 88) while also recognising the potential embodied in Ezinma and in the meaning of the description of the elderly couple Ndulue and Ozoemena. Adichie's short-story repeatedly refers back to *Things Fall Apart*. Already among the first lines the name “Obierika” – the wise friend of Okonkwo – appears. His wife, whose name is not mentioned in Achebe's text, moves from the margin of one narrative right to centre of Adichie's story. Indeed, the short-story can be seen as a “re-evaluation”, where a secondary character is endowed with a more significant role than the one they had in the hypotext (VanZanten 2015, 90). There are various parallels embroidered in the narrative. The short-story starts with Nwamgba reminiscing about her courtship time, when she saw Obierika at a wrestling match, a recurrent setting of *Things Fall Apart*. Moreover, the text mentions “the young girl from the Okonkwo family” (HH 201) as a candidate to be Obierika's second wife, a clear reference to Ezinma. The people of Nwamgba's village laugh at the missionaries' story of a god with a son and no wife, who is one and three (HH 217), eliciting the same reaction produced in Umofia. However, the narrative places emphasis on the experience of women, headstrong girls who win matches against boys but cannot let this be known. It is again a woman who first brings news of the arrival of the white man in their areas. Adichie focuses on how the major changes brought by colonization to the Igbo community affected the female population, a population that regularly gathered at the Women's Council, had discussions, took decisions and supported one another, even in spite of the decisions of the elders. It is worth mentioning that the first god introduced in the short-story is *Oyi*, the goddess protector of women, “the reason women were not to be sold into slavery” (HH 200), thus immediately setting the tone of this new reworking. Throughout the text, there can be identified subtle comparisons between the treatment of women among colonisers and among natives. For example, as the Victorians considered

women's minds "not strong enough for appropriately masculine subjects" such as business and politics (Van Allen 1972, 180), with colonisation Igbo women as well were required to adhere to those same policies. Conversely, findings suggest that Igbo women used to trade at the market with their own crops and they gathered at *mikiri*, a self-ruling assembly of women. There they would lead discussions, make decisions on how to enforce their trade resolutions and protect their interests while freely expressing political opinions (Van Allen 1972, 169).

Second-degree texts tend to use repetitions to reference their origin, while variations and differences are introduced to create new meanings (VanZanten 2015, 91). Adichie uses Christian religion to suggest considerations on the theme of power, highlighting how closely linked power is to education and language. Indeed, while Nwoye abandons his Igbo customs to join Christianity because he finds faults in his traditions, Anikwenwa, Nwamgba's son, is forced to attend the missionaries' school in order to gain power over his relatives. The female character is quick to understand that siding with the mighty conqueror can unlock uncharted possibilities precluded to others. Adichie depicts both the Protestant and Catholic priests that came to the area, including historical figures, such as Father Shanahan (HH 208). Along with Nwamgba's father earlier in the novel, the missionary is the only other character who is allowed internal focalization by the third-person narrator, apart from the main character. Both these exceptions reveal negative male opinions on Nwamgba (VanZanten 2015, 94). Indeed, the Father is used to voice stereotypical assumptions of the Westerners on Africa's "confusingly muscular" black boys (HH 209), while also playing the double for the District Commissioner of *Things Fall Apart*. Adichie seems to give a nod to Achebe's readers, paraphrasing the thoughts of the white commissioner enraged by the "superfluous words" of the Igbo (TFA 195), as she writes the considerations of the Father, "It infuriated him, their overlong talk of circuitous proverbs, their never getting to the point" (HH 209).

While from the beginning Okonkwo purposely rejects as a betrayal anything related to the white man, Nwamgba – a woman inferior in the societal system of both cultures – decides to side with the white men so as to benefit from their power. As VanZanten observes, Nwamgba functions more "as a subject than an object in this aspect of the colonial encounter" (VanZanten 2015, 91). She acts rather than succumb to external influence. After she witnessed how the white men resolves disputes, as they favour who speaks English regardless of the truth of the case (HH 206), she decides to use their protection to gain her own interests and lets her son attend their schools. However, Anikwenwa's success in gaining power, respect and in recovering his father's land comes at a price. He becomes 'Michael', he stops eating his

mother's food because "it was sacrificed to idols", he considers her nakedness "sinful" and he rejects "heathen customs", while Nwamgba notices how "the curiosity in his eyes had diminished" (HH 210). Similarly to how Adichie describes Eugene in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*, where the religious theme is central, in this short-story the impact of colonialism is depicted through the change of mentality the colonised underwent. For the missionaries, they are indigenous people who had the "potential to be harnessed if their wilderness could be tamed" (HH 209). In the exchange between Nwamgba and the Father, Adichie shifts the perspective and reverses one of the main stereotypes white colonisers have about their innate superiority to others, so that when the Father tries to preach the Gospel to Nwamgba, "she looked at him as if he were a child who did not know any better" (HH 209). In one of the author's speeches about the danger of stereotypes, Adichie herself quotes the poet Rudyard Kipling as he famously described the population of Africa "half-devil and half-child" in his poem *The White Man's Burden* (1899) (Adichie 2009, at 7:30). Indeed, in various representations of the empire by the West up until half of the 20th century, the native is looked at like a child, unable to understand and in need of guidance. Here instead, far from feeling inferior, Nwamgba really is a subject, she never questions her own customs, language, nor religion, but she is never blinded by fate. This relates not only to Catholicism, but to religion in general. Indeed, though the oracle plays a paramount role in the works of both Adichie and Achebe, the authors also display the characters' doubts by having them subtly contest the beliefs of their villages. For instance, Achebe's marginal story of Obiako who refuses to sacrifice a goat to the Oracle for his dead father (TFA 25) signals a moment of disruption and resistance (Osei-Nyame 1999, 154). Moreover, at the ceremony with the *egwugwu* – the masks who should be the incarnation of the spirits – the narrator comments on how some of the spectators – the wives in particular – can recognise the men behind the masks, however, they are not allowed to talk about the matter because the celebration is sacred (TFA 85). Similarly, in the short-story, after the missionaries have settled on Igboland and Nwamgba consults the oracle, she "thought it ludicrous how even the gods had changed and no longer asked for palm wine but for gin", ironically wondering, "had they converted too?" (HH 215).

2.5 Women in the Igbo Narrative

Both Adichie and Achebe choose to depict marriage life among the Igbo. While Achebe includes small, apparently marginal passages on how either “the world is large” and in some places “titled men climb trees and pound foo-foo for their wives” (TFA 69), or how there are rare families in which man and wife “had one mind” (TFA 64), Adichie allows these sorts of stories to be at the centre (Ejikeme 2017, 325). Furthermore, Adichie works in a context where “many African stories have already been written but have not yet properly been read” (Tunca 2018, 111), therefore she can count on a completely different literary background for her first readers.

In both narratives, childbirth is a major concern discussed among families and in the village. However, while Okonkwo has three wives, Nwamgba’s marriage is monogamous. After years of infertility, Nwamgba herself decides that her husband should have another wife to increase their chances of having a child (HH 199). Her husband is reluctant and suggests marrying someone else only when they are old so that the new young wife could take care of them both (HH 200). Given that according to Igbo values, having a child was seen as the main purpose of marriage, Nwamgba reflects on the anomaly of their situation, “a prosperous man with only one wife” (HH 200) and she worries because she perceives her bareness as a personal failure. After many miscarriages, Nwamgba does succeed in safely delivering a son. Conversely, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo has many children and plans to have other wives as long as he prospers in his village. In both situations, there is a clear connection between having multiple wives and gaining a high status and in both representations, the responsibility of bearing children is entirely a female endeavour. The reader is given a realistic glimpse into the feelings of Okonkwo’s second wife – the most fierce and independent of the three – who births ten children but only has one daughter who survives the age of three. In a society where the division of gender roles is extremely marked and the single greatest achievement a woman can have is that of giving her husband a child, Ekwefi’s struggle is extremely painful, “the birth of children, which should be a woman’s crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony devoid of promise” (TFA 73). Moreover, she is forced to watch as Okonkwo’s other wives celebrate their children, for instance, after his first wife has three consecutive sons, “Ekwefi had nothing but good wishes for her. But she had grown so bitter about her own *chi* that she could not rejoice with others over their good fortune”, she had a “cloud on her brow” and “her husband’s wife took this for malevolence, as husband’s wives are wont to” (TFA 75).

Achebe dedicates a few pages to describe how the tribe deals with an *ogbanje*, a sort of living dead stuck in the middle between the human world and the world of spirits, a phenomenon of traditional Igbo life created as explanation for the high rate of infant mortality (Aji 1993, 171). It has been observed that the arrival of the Christian missionaries seems to force the inhabitants of Umofia into a liminal condition, they become like the living-dead, compelled to abandon their customs and yet not integrated into the new order. In this light, the *ogbanje* represents the change that Nigeria undergoes once Western culture is introduced (Aji 1993, 2004). Ezinma's survival grants her a superior position at the eyes of her father, who favours her among the other children. Indeed, as in "The Headstrong Historian" there is a feminist nod once Obierika's spirit 'comes back' through his niece, rather than his nephew – "odd, to have come in a girl, but who could predict the ways of the ancestors" (HH 214) – Ezinma is regarded as Okonkwo's true heir by her father. However, she can help only her family reclaim lost honour through a good marriage with a high-titled man. Given that in the Igbo community men prove their valour in war, women's relevance is only linked to childbearing, while their success or failure at a safe delivery reflects also on the wife's family reputation (Okereke 1994, 24-26). Under such circumstances, 'weak' women are those with infertility issues while barrenness is perceived as a curse, a tragedy and a real failure in life (Okereke 1994, 27). In the short-story, once Nwamgba's daughter-in-law suffers from miscarriages, Nwamgba herself goes against her son's precepts and consults the oracle because "this was a family misfortune" (HH 214), marking the link between the private sphere and the public sphere of families in a system where if a woman "emerges victorious in childbirth, she would be doing her husband proud; if not, she would be disgracing him" (Okereke 1994, 27). Several male and female African writers have written on the topic, from Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* to Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, the theme of childbearing is a constant worry of African heroines (Okereke 1994, 28). On the subject of motherhood, Adichie showcases a wide range of female characters who tackle the subject differently. In the short-story here examined, ritual cleansings and sacrifices are made to ensure the birth of a child, Anikwenwa. However, there appears to be common knowledge that the oracle is not the only solution and Adichie lets her female characters express practical advice on how to handle the matter, "Ayaiu said that perhaps Nwamgba should do what other women in her situation did – take a lover and get pregnant in order to continue Obierika's lineage" (HH 201).

However, the short-story portrays female characters who have more than one role or purpose. While fulfilling the function of wife, widow and mother, Nwamgba is characterized

by her wits, her grief, her struggles as a single parent and her fierce defence of Igbo customs despite her son's changed views. When Obierika dies, Nwambga is not left alone. As she suspects her husband's cousins might be implicated in his death, she has the possibility to seek justice by employing the *mmili ozu* custom and making them drink a blood potion that would uncover the truth. Even though she regrets not taking that chance, she receives support from the women participating at the Women's Council who help her punish the suspects, "[Nwambga] complained to the Women's Council, and twenty women went at night to Okafo's and Okoye's homes, brandishing pestles, warning them to leave Nwamgba alone" (HH 203). This passage is relevant because it seems to describe the practice of "sitting on a man", a common, legal and accepted method employed by women in precolonial Nigeria. Indeed, when researching for her novels, Adichie may have consulted the works of anthropologist Van Allen, one of the firsts to thoroughly study Igbo women (Ejikeme 2017, 311). According to her findings, public shaming was a way for women to voice their discontent and chastise the wrongdoing of anyone deemed guilty of a crime by the Council of women in each village (Van Allen 1972, 169). They would gather at the accused's compound dancing and voicing their grievances against him through songs, they would bang on his hut and even possibly demolish the estate. As *Things Fall Apart* focuses on the institutions of men and their rights in the Nigeria before colonisation, Adichie delineates what were women's rights at the time. She sheds light on the institutions and practises that regulated Igbo women's lives by uncovering the rules of a system that was not only neglected but also completely deprived of any authority under British rule (Van Allen 1972, 176). While women's influence relied "on the diffuseness of political power and authority within Igbo society", conversely the colonial system established new institutions by favouring individual achievement, leaving "no place for group solidarity" and branding as illegal the practice of "sitting on" (Van Allen 1972, 177-178). In the short-story, despite the protests, Nwamgba fears retaliation and she cannot risk being banished for punishing her late husband's relatives because exile means separation from her son. Indeed, as in Achebe's *Umofia*, the offspring belong to their father and his village. Okonkwo defines strange those tribes where a man's children belong to his wife and her family (TFA 69), however, by acknowledging their existence, Achebe allows a broader understanding of family relationships to enter the narrative.

"The Headstrong Historian" reveals how marriage customs change with the advent of colonialism. Indeed, if initially the reader encounters Nwagmba who is concerned with polygamy and who is planning to find another wife for her husband, by the end, her son faces completely different paths in a world that "increasingly made no sense" (HH 212) to his mother.

Michael “did not do as it was done, did not consult people to ask about the bride’s family” (HH 212), he chooses a wife who is a good Christian and who is most importantly approved by the missionaries. Unlike *Things Fall Apart*, where in the “confession ceremony” the wife-to-be swears in front of her female relatives that she has not laid with a man since her new husband had proposed – at the cost of having to “suffer or even die at child-birth” (TFA 124) – Adichie’s main male character reacts with disdain at the mentioning of this practice. He labels it as “sinful” because “Christian wives should not have been touched *at all*” (HH 212). Michael and Agnes’s marriage ceremony is held in Church, a place deemed “laughably strange” by Nwagmba. Spanning over three generations, Adichie’s narrative covers events long after the arrival of the white man, therefore, Nwagmba – along with the reader – witnesses how the villagers perceive the attitude of her son and daughter-in-law who “treated non-Christians as if they had the small pox” (HH 213) and she is ashamed of them.

On the matter of colonisation, *Things Fall Apart* does not include episodes where female characters encounter the coloniser, as if the invasion only concerned men and consequently was to be discussed only among them. Instead, in the short-story the arrival of white men is first recounted by a female character of slave descent who shares information about their guns, their laws and their slaughters (HH 204). Moreover, Adichie interrupts the narrative to describe how women’s daily life needed to adapt to the new customs of the converted. Mgbeke, or Agnes, is called “missus” by everyone, a status achieved through her husband’s role as a catechist who speaks English. Unlike the titled men that gain prestige because of their success and victories in the battlefield, Anikwenwa, or Michael, earns the respect of his peers through colonial education. When Mgbeke disrespects the *Oyi* stream goddess by refusing to remove her clothes, she is harassed by the other women of the clan for not following their rules, so much so that they ask for the intercession of one of the missionaries whose conciliatory approach is more highly regarded by the villagers than the superior tone adopted by their own converted men (HH 213). As Achebe’s main character is one of the representatives of pre-colonial Nigeria who thoroughly refuses the ways of the white man and immediately alienates his son once he joins them, Adichie’s protagonist is also firmly anchored in Nigerian pre-colonial customs. However, she insists that her son is educated in the white man’s school, even at the cost of not recognising him as if he was “a person diligently acting a bizarre pantomime” (HH 212), implying that all kinds of religion can be regarded as a pantomime when observed by outsiders. Furthermore, Adichie subtly stresses how much culture can be a decisive element in determining gender. For example, she describes how in the Anglian mission in Nigeria girls were separated at school

and were taught to sew, performing therefore a past-time considered only suitable for women in Victorian times. Instead, “Nwamgba found this silly; in her clan girls learned to make pottery and a man sewed cloth” (HH 209).

2.6 Changing Names and Changing the Narrative

Changing first names is another common aspect among the Igbo of colonial Nigeria that Adichie explores. The author weaves into the plot a decision made by many Nigerian – or in general postcolonial – writers to change the English name they were given and only be known by their native name. Even Adichie herself decided to stop writing under the Americanized “Amanda N. Adichie” to adopt the full Igbo version of her name, a name she coins herself (Tunca 2012, 245). The narrative here explains this practise. Nwamgba initially names her son Anikwenwa after the god Ani, however, the missionaries change his name into Michael “because it was not possible to be baptised with a heathen name” (HH 208), while the same process later applies to his wife and two children. The short-story ends with the decision of Nwamgba’s niece - baptised as Grace – to officially change her first name to Afamefuna, the name chosen for her by her grandmother, an emblematic name meaning “My Name Will Not Be Lost” (HH 244). Moreover, Grace works in the 1970s as a historian, her main aim in the field is that of addressing the historical imbalance of power in her region. She succeeds by publishing a book called “Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria” (HH 217), key here is the use of the article, recording “a” history means writing one possible version of the truth (Tunca 2012, 245). Guided by the same principle, Adichie chooses to include among Grace’s textbooks the publication written by the District Commissioner introduced by Achebe. This stresses the extent to which the colonisers’ point of view still influenced historical accounts of the region.

Though these self-reflexive elements expand upon Achebe’s project (Tunca 2012, 243), Adichie writes a more optimistic narrative and answers Achebe’s muted conclusion on the fate awaiting the Nigerians. Edward Said’s statement on the connection between literature and imperialism –“the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (Said in Tunca 2018, 44) – is consistent both with Achebe and Adichie’s work who explicitly challenge previous historical accounts, both implicitly referencing Conrad. In addition, Adichie’s feminist interventions reflect the developments in the study of Igbo women

that were significantly expanded in the last decades (Ejikeme 2017, 313). While highlighting that neither of the two writers ever aims to act as a historian or anthropologist, they both contribute to multiply perspectives on the kind of life these people had before colonisation, reaching a wide – as well as Western – audience.

2.7 Abandoning the Forefathers

Despite the many references Adichie herself has made to Achebe's writing and his influence on her decision to be a writer, over the years the author has repeatedly expressed her desire not to be overly connected to Achebe, as their writings share more differences than similarities in terms of style, background and themes covered. Despite these claims, scholarly reviews have made abundant connections between the two authors not only regarding "The Headstrong Historian" – that explicitly draws from the same world of *Things Fall Apart* – but also when referring to the first work Adichie published, *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel deals with the breakdown of an Igbo family under colonisation, Christian religion and a patriarchal system. Several studies on *Purple Hibiscus* tend to recognise the violence of the patriarch, Eugene, on his family as the violence of the military state to the Nigerian citizens (Tunca 2018, 115). In this narrative, particular attention is given to those characters who struggle to find their voice during the years of political instability that followed the country's independence (Hewett 2005, 79). As for the similarities between the two authors, the most quoted passage critics have analysed lies among the first lines of the novel: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère" (Adichie 2017, 3). In multiple interviews, Adichie has declared that the "explicit intertextuality" that many critics had found with the title of her 'forefather' was completely "unintentional" and "unconscious" (Adichie in Tunca 2018, 114). Although literary allusions do not have to be intentional to be meaningful, some commentators have noticed how a comparative discourse on Adichie solely based on her connection with Achebe is a potentially limiting course of analysis if no other interpretation is considered (Tunca 2018, 115). Both *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus* are centred around stubborn and violent men who are blinded by their beliefs and are feared by their own family (Tunca 2012, 234). However, labelling Adichie's work as an 'adaptation' or an 'appropriation' of Achebe can be quite problematic given that the two novels follow completely different storylines and are set in different times – pre and post-colonial Nigeria – that impact the narrative with entirely

distinct outcomes. Interestingly, the amount of scholarly attention on this comparison could further support Adichie's claim that there is no single story about Africa. Whether the story is told by a Western author or an African author, the ways to engage these topics are manifold and not necessarily interconnected.

Grappling with different realities that not necessarily need to address politics and colonisation is a need for Adichie. "Jumping Monkey Hills" is another short-story of the collection *The Thing around Your Neck* that explicitly reflects on the sort of stories that the world wants to read about Africa and juxtaposes this view with what African authors might really be driven to talk about. In other words, Adichie dwells on the meaning of 'African story', the expectations and limits that come with the nationality of the author. Clearly, the existence of the short-story is evidence enough to argue that indeed African writers can and do write about all topics, however, a scholarly prevalence of admiration for those works that do reflect political readings is undeniable (Tunca 2018, 73). In "Jumping Monkey Hills" gender issues are again at the forefront of the work as the text addresses gender roles in the work sphere, stereotypes, power imbalance and gender-related oppression.

In the short-story, through an intertextual joke, Adichie fictionalises what happened at a real workshop she attended (Adichie, 2009). She presents different writers from different areas of Africa, chaperoned by "Edward", an English man who leads the congress and examines the stories the authors are there invited to write. He is vulgar, he makes inappropriate jokes to the female guests and judges the 'authenticity' of the stories that the authors are invited to write. In a way, he is the real negative character of the short-story. Edward embodies a form of Western censorship that would like to reduce the African experience only to tragedies, wars, and stereotypes. There is a clear link between Edward's attitude towards his authors, who are treated like children needing enlightenment on their culture, and the colonizer-colonized relationship (Tunca 2018, 71). Moreover, it has been noted that the title of the short-story itself – which corresponds to the name of the resort where the fictional workshop is held - is meant to recall "racist perceptions of African people in colonial times", so that the jumping monkeys are indeed the African writers (Tunca 2018, 72). Adichie's message is not veiled, as the scholar Tunca observes, "such dehumanizing perspectives are far from being a thing of the past", but "openly hostile racism has morphed into a more subtle form of condescension" (Tunca 2018, 72). In her interactions with the British characters, the protagonist, Ujunwa, deliberately mocks her interlocutors' assumptions about her, playing with stereotypes by both consciously

portraying the ‘noble savage’ who has beautiful features because of royal descent and the ‘evil’ beast who cannot control her instincts.

This power imbalance between races and genders leads the plot. As noticed at the beginning of the chapter, while in “The Headstrong Historian” Nwamgba looks at the preaching missionary as if “he were a child who did not know any better” (HH 209), here Edward is the character who “looked at Ujunwa in the way one would look at a child who refused to keep still in church” (Adichie 2009, 108). Moreover, in “The Headstrong Historian” the coloniser’s fear of cannibalism in Africa, one that Conrad as well portrays, is reversed as the narrative briefly depicts a young Igbo man abducted by slaves and saved by a missionary (HH 207). There, as he first sees the white man rubbing his feet with oil, “he was terrified, certain that he was being prepared for the white man’s meal” (HH 207). The scene thus attributes anthropophagic intention to the white missionary while the sacred oil indicates how “Christian signifiers are culturally specific fabrications” (Tunca 2012, 241).

In “Jumping Monkey Hills”, the addition of stories-within-the-story resulting from the works the writers read is a *mise en abyme*. The metatextual elements of the text tie together the theme of gender, race and ‘authenticity’ of African narratives. In this metafiction, Adichie writes her own convictions about novel writing and what is expected of her, as a woman and as an African. According to the writer, her work primarily relates to the human condition as a whole, while matters of gender and politics, even if undeniably part of the narrative, should not limit the kind of considerations that can be made on it (Tunca 2018, 112). Moreover, in an exchange between the African participants, Conrad and Achebe are briefly mentioned, almost as a joke between the characters (JMH 102). In a way, this exchange ironically references the colonial and postcolonial approaches of Western literature to Africa by having African characters argue on whether Conrad was or was not on the side of the Africans and reflecting on the condescending tone some Western scholarship adopts in such matters. While these generalisations are unmistakably incorrect and simplify a much more complex matter, they can also be viewed as a way to mock African’s stereotypes about their own literature, canon and influences. Ultimately, as “The Headstrong Historian” portrays a different reading of Achebe’s or Conrad’s depiction of pre-colonial Africa, Adichie chooses fiction to express her message on the inevitable failure of the ‘single story’ of Africa.

3 Clash of Cultures, the Right to Speak and the Value of Representation

Gender, class and race significantly shape the characters that Adichie portrays in her novels, particularly in *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), a novel set in the 1990s, and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), set during the 1960s at the time of the Biafran war. In particular, when recording events about the Nigerian Civil war, the author declared she wanted to write about “the *grittiness* of being human (...) people who are fierce consumers of life” (Adichie 2007, 50). In Adichie’s attempt at telling stories that are inevitably political because of the context that frames them, she seems more interested in analysing how the domestic sphere, the mundane, ordinary aspects of life shift. Adichie observes how the socio-political transformations Nigeria underwent took a heavy toll on its citizens and highlights the importance that adopting a certain point of view of narration can make. Indeed, this chapter examines how the Nigerian author’s first two novels challenge gender assumptions about women’s role in the household and at war in a postcolonial country that, although autonomous, still grapples with the consequences of colonisation and the clashing of its cultures.

3.1 *Purple Hibiscus* and Infallible Gods

A major example of this ‘clashing of cultures’ is exhibited by the character of Eugene Achike, ‘Papa’, the violent father figure who dominates the household in Enugu at the centre of *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel is characterized by a dichotomous structure of opposites – Eugene and his sister Ifeoma, Papa-Nnukwu and his son, Father Benedict and Father Amadi, Beatrice and Ifeoma, Kambili and her cousin Amaka. Even if nuanced, the protagonists can be seen as mirroring one another. Thus, the unexplored possibilities of one character are developed in another. The differences mainly lie in their approach to religion, women’s bodies and how each family chose to navigate a postcolonial world still rooted in Eurocentric perspectives.

From the start of the narrative, the reader knows Ifeoma defines Eugene a “colonial product”, which means not only that he values the English language over Igbo so as to sound “civilized in public” but also that colonization is largely responsible for his categorical rejection of Igbo traditions (PH 13). Indeed, due to the education received by the missionaries, he is a very strict Catholic with distorted ideas of sin and punishment that cause him to become a religious fanatic. The oppression he exerts is a product both of religious intolerance and unchecked use of patriarchal power (Stobie 2010, 426). Because of his extensive wealth, his

authority rooted in male supremacy is publicly regarded legitimate among the community over which he holds power. His tyranny over his wife – Beatrice – and children – Jaja and Kambili – contrasts with his public figure as benefactor of his community and as the publisher of “the only paper that dares to tell the truth these days” (Adichie 2017, 136). Indeed, the *Standard* bravely denounces the corruption and injustices perpetrated by the Nigerian government. It is emblematic that when the main publisher of Papa’s news outlet comes to visit him at the village, Eugene praises Jaja and Kambili for their quiet behaviour, while the publisher wonders jokingly what would happen to their newspaper if the reporters were just as silent (PH 58). By hinting at this contradiction between proper behaviour in the house as dictated by Western norms and the humanist values of freedom of expression and liberty necessary for democracy displayed outside, the novel highlights the absurdity of a false democracy exclusive of the public domain whilst the domestic sphere is governed by tyranny (Sandwith 2016, 104). Moreover, another explicit example of this lies in Father Benedict’s praise of the paper because “Brother Eugene spoke out for freedom” (PH 5). Apparently, this freedom is possible only for the elected few.

Eugene’s 15-year-old daughter is the first-person narrator who recounts the sharp discrepancies between the private world of the house, silenced and subjugated, and the public role of Eugene as fighter for justice, designated to give a voice to the oppressed by the Nigerian political regime. Despite the abuses, the protagonist longs for her father’s approval so that the narrative of violence exhibited by blood on the floor, muffled screams and signs of beating are not openly revealed as directly linked with Eugene until Kambili herself starts understanding the anomaly of her situation after she visits her aunt’s house. Papa’s philanthropic role conceals his nature. While Eugene answers to the plea of the poor in his village and donates to those in need, he explains that “it’s all from God” (PH 259), thus betraying his own hubris – his power is already godly (Stobie 2010, 426). Indeed, Kambili observes that Father Benedict, the white priest most highly regarded by Eugene, “usually referred to the Pope, Papa and Jesus – in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the Gospel” (PH 4). Eugene’s understanding of religion is completely filtered by the white missionaries’ school where he was first educated, where the preachers brought a variant of colonial Catholicism with images exclusively of a white Christ and the conviction that speaking Igbo debases the liturgical functions in Church. Therefore, he does not accept Mass when preached with Igbo songs because he has internalized to reject his own Igbo roots and traditions as sinful. His hypocrisy is clear, for example, when the family visits the *Igwe* palace, Eugene tells his wife that bowing to another human being, an *Igwe*, as the traditional way would suggest, is sinful. However, when his daughter decides not to kneel

to kiss the ring of the bishop – for the same reason – Kambili is reprimanded because “the bishop was a man of God; the Igwe was merely a traditional ruler” (PH 94). Similarly to the short-story “The Headstrong Historian”, religious conflict results from the changed attitude of a new – supposedly superior – generation who rejects their forebearers by simply dismissing them as ‘heathens’. However, the novel shows two possible approaches, embodied by Eugene and his sister Ifeoma – who had the same upbringing – both to Eurocentric Catholicism and to traditional religion while also demonstrating the extent to which these rituals exercise patriarchal forms of power.

Eugene subverts the supposedly compassionate and forgiving dogmas of Catholic rituals by administering his own justice while believing that to be directly God’s will (Nabutanyi 2017, 75). His tears as he imparts harsh punishments – such as burning his daughter’s feet with hot water – betray vulnerability and guilt in the oppressor, as if he too was a victim guided by incomprehensible but exacting precepts (Stobie 2010, 427). He is both perpetrator and victim, as he is not entirely evil. Eugene’s background of poverty and cruel treatments at the hands of the missionaries (PH 196) help the reader understand the manipulation he has suffered and what made him so ruthless. Thus, Eugene’s adult behaviour transforms his former weaknesses into vicious sins that he feels compelled to chastise. Domestic violence is Papa’s only resource against the devil, a ghost he was taught to obsessively recognise in all details, from open transgressions to the natural needs of the female body. These teachings consider resembling white people the same as being ‘civilized’, pure and virtuous. Thus, Eugene can reveal his brutality – as if he transformed into those stereotypical black savages the missionaries had to tame – only in private, when he allows himself to speak Igbo and be his ‘African self’ (Da Silva 2012, 461). While Eugene as head of the family dictates the behaviour of the other family members with strict schedules and punishments justified by religious zeal, Eugene’s father, Papa-Nnukwu, represents, as Nwamgba does in the short-story, the pre-colonial order of Igbo traditions. Labelled as a “traditionalist” by his daughter (PH 81), Adichie does not easily offer an alternative to the patriarchal order of Catholicism given that traditional religion consistently privileges men as well. As in the short-story analysed in the second chapter, where the role of women only is that of mother, storyteller and nurturer, *Purple Hibiscus* recounts a version of a Nigerian folktale where during a famine, male talking animals decide that in order to survive they should kill and eat their mothers because “the mothers did not mind being sacrificed” (PH 158). Hence, father and son both practise a religion that honours the work of men and underestimates women. For instance, when Papa-Nnukwu hopes his spirit will bring “a good

man” to take care of his daughter and her children, Ifeoma answers she would prefer if the intercession was for a promotion (PH 83), while when they drive to see the *mmuo* and they pass in front of the masked men, Papa-Nnukwu shouts “Women cannot look at this one!” – as the masquerade is precluded to women – and Ifeoma replies “Don’t look, girls. Let’s humour your grandfather” (PH 86). These examples suggest the intention of the writer to underscore how the devaluation of women in Nigeria cannot be simply explained as the result of colonial practices (Wallace 2012, 472). However, Adichie successfully foregrounds a feminist perspective through Ifeoma. She does not feel obliged to choose, to be at a crossroad between Eurocentric Catholicism and Igbo traditions. She is allowed to merge the two ideals by practicing a revised Catholicism that includes indigenous forms, as represented by Father Amadi (Stobie 2010, 423). She employs this unifying attitude also to gender relations, Ifeoma’s outspokenness and fearlessness reveal she does not conform to society’s expectations of her sex (Ndula 2017, 38). She is the only one who dare talk in a “flippant” way to Eugene (PH 85). As with the characters of Olanna and Kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ifeoma’s free thinking and openness is explicitly interpreted as the product of her university education. She is a lecturer and she witnesses how with political instability and widespread poverty, girls “marry earlier and earlier” so that even those who study get lost as ultimately “the husbands own them and their degrees” (PH 75). This “university talk” (PH 75) is a conscientious step towards gender equality. In her ability to rationally merge extreme attitudes, Ifeoma offers a counternarrative both to Eugene and to Beatrice by expressing their untapped potential, balancing religion for the former and gender expression in the latter.

3.2 Speaking with Our Spirits

As in “The Headstrong Historian” set at the beginning of the 20th century, in the novel set eighty years later Adichie enacts a still broken postcolonial identity that feels compelled to decide between one path or the other. Conversely, the character of Ifeoma, as the author defines her, “represents the possibility of a middle ground” (Adichie 2010). Indeed, the protagonist’s awakening from the rigid and unforgiving views of her father happens only once she visits her aunt’s house. The time spent in Nsukka is a watershed moment for the siblings and the coming apart of silence and pretences is a direct consequence of this. If the opening scene with Beatrice’s *étagère*’s being broken by Eugene represents the crumbling down of the family’s staged existence tied by silences and lies, the noise of breaking signals the end of silence and

the unfolding of the meaning of Kambili's own name, "let me be" (Da Silva 2012, 459). Beatrice herself, who used to polish the figurines after her husband's beatings, suffers a transformation that eventually leads her to poison Eugene and kill him. With the first pages representing a flashforward in the narrative, the main themes the novel explores are already introduced. In particular, there is a glimpse into how religion and abuse restrict control on language and impose silence, but there are also signs of how these rules will be breached by each family member. For example, Kambili thinks "I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, "I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama." (PH 10). This first episode underscores the constant obstacle the protagonist has in giving a proper name to the acts of abuse she encounters. This also explain why the narrative is initially opaque in describing the real state of the family. Kambili is an unreliable narrator, the reader does not understand the Achike family's dynamics because the narrator blocks direct information on the abuses in the episodes prior to Nsukka. Eugene not only limits laughter and speech but also imposes restrictions on showing the body, showing hair and decides the sort of clothing to wear. Disciplining the native body is justified by his equation with sin so that female emancipation has to undergo a reevaluation of religion and Western polarizations of mind and body (Sandwith 2016, 98). The difference between the siblings is highlighted also by the language they use, while Ifeoma often speaks Igbo, Eugene markedly prefers answering her in English (PH 77). His silencing power encompasses all aspects of life and rebelling requires sacrifices. Indeed, Ifeoma, who has already freed herself, admits that in order to please her brother and obtain money, she would have to stop wearing lipstick, attend the Congregation he chose and send her daughter to convent school (PH 95). These are concessions she is not at all willing to make.

The novel is divided into sections, before and after Palm Sunday. As Eugene's wrath is infused with a godly aura of righteousness, it is significant that the first section set on Palm Sunday, when there is the breaking of Beatrice's figurines because of Papa's rage, the subtitle "Breaking Gods" alludes precisely to the imminent defeat of the patriarchal. The most substantial part of the narrative happens in the next chapter, "Before Palm Sunday", that has the descriptive title, "Speaking With Our Spirits", which refers to the non-spoken language shared among Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja to escape Eugene's control. "After Palm Sunday" follows directly after the time of the first section when "The Pieces of Gods" witness the last days of life of Papa. "The Present" finally brings "A Different Silence". These titles reflect the path towards maturity and freedom that the protagonist undergoes. Indeed, Kambili – as a narrator – grows more reliable as she reaches psychological maturity (Da Silva 2012, 463).

Kambili's struggle to speak lingers throughout the whole narrative until Eugene dies. Several episodes suggest how silence itself is one of the main characters, acting on Kambili's behalf and physically restraining her whether Eugene is present or not. For instance, when asked to visit Nsukka by her aunt in front of her father, Kambili feels stifled, "I mumbled to my plate, then started to cough as if real, sensible words would have come out of my mouth but for the coughing" (PH 97). This shows how Kambili's longing for freedom is a complex psychological process constantly severed by her desire to please and be accepted by her father, so much so that the reader recognises she feels in competition with Jaja for Eugene's approval every time her brother answers correctly, "Papa smiled at Jaja, and I wished I had said that" (Stobie 2010, 426). Kambili lowers her voice every time she speaks, but since she is also the narrator, the reader realises this only after Amaka, her cousin, mentions it (PH 117). Indeed, the internalised rules dictated by Eugene demand mutism in the family to conceal the abuse (Stobie 2010, 425), so much so that when the black, young, Father Amadi sings Igbo praise songs while praying at Ifeoma's house, Kambili presses her lips together, "biting my lower lip, so my mouth would not join in the singing on its own, so my mouth would not betray me" (PH 138-139) because she knows her father, even if absent, would not approve. When the novel starts, Kambili is already psychologically damaged (Ndula 2017, 35).

Silence in the Achike family is pictured as "the blue-black cloud in the middle of the rainy season" (PH 40), and when trying to speak freely, Kambili feels physically incapable, "bubbles of air in [the] throat, keeping the words back, letting out only a stutter at best" (PH 145). The only way to communicate for the siblings is through a "asusu anya, a language of the eyes" (PH 305), their only refuge. Kambili's gradual process of finding her voice allows a less opaque narration as her father's abuse starts being recognized in its entirety. After a significant episode of violence where Kambili is hospitalized, she spends a few days in Nsukka to recover and her friendship with Amaka grows as her cousin pushes her "to speak out more" in a climate where this is not only allowed but encouraged (PH 220). The first times Kambili allows herself the privilege to learn more about mere 'gossip' is when they talk about Father Amadi and how Kambili seems to be his "sweetheart" (PH 220). Indeed, the first time Kambili sings is in Nsukka after she has spent some time alone with Father Amadi (PH 270), Igbo songs come to signal moments of peace. Fragile and still looking for guidance, Kambili could potentially project the love she has for her father towards Father Amadi, but the narrative refrains from replacing a controlling male figure with another man who – albeit young, virtuous and loving – would inevitably hold a position of superiority. By the end of the novel, as she matures,

Kambili understands that in her relationship with the Father love does not need to be reciprocated nor be approved. Moreover, after Eugene is dead, a difference silence filters in the family, the now 18-year-old Kambili, defines it as a silence “that lets me breathe” (PH 270). Given that the last section is the present setting from where she recounts her experience, the narrative itself could be evidence of her healing (Wallace 2012, 478). Following her aunt’s example, Kambili is finally able to strike a balance and mature a healthy relationship with religion, the Church and even love.

3.3 Freedom and Rebellion

Freedom is connected to singing, speech and the purple hibiscus that gives the title to the novel. Indeed, purple is the colour of freedom and rebellion (Uko 2017, 60). The plant first grows in Ifeoma’s garden, then it is planted by Jaja at their own house. The hibiscus is in bloom right before Palm Sunday, when Jaja finally gathers the courage to confront his father, “Jaja’s defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma’s experimental purple hibiscuses: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do” (PH 16). This sentence expressing bold resistance ties together the political domain with the domestic sphere while also highlighting their differences. Indeed, the coup at the end of the novel is a moment of political disruption, a suspension of law that is neither going to last nor do the characters regard optimistically. Instead, the new order Jaja establishes in the house after his open defiance is one that allows freedom of mind and conduct. As Eugene publicly preaches for democracy but privately enforces a dictatorship, his son’s ‘coup’ finally starts the process that undermines Papa’s authority.

Choosing a child-narrator helps to elicit sympathy from the readers while also approaching the postcolonial issue of post-independence disillusionment and socio-historical fragmentation (Coker 2017, 107). In particular, even without explicit political insight into the situation, Kambili’s description of the University of Nsukka where her aunt works reveals the state of abandonment and neglect the whole institution suffers under the current political regime (PH 112). Kambili navigates a quest for self-actualization, battling within the domestic setting while a larger battle looms over the country to contest the regime (Coker 2017, 109). While Eugene is actively involved in fighting the corrupted government, he never discusses politics at home with his children, who discover his accomplishments from the papers. Ifeoma instead

encourages her children to express themselves freely and exchange ideas so that the kids can autonomously link the University's struggles with the regime. Unfortunately, the solution to the constant cuts of salaries and riots is to get a visa and flee to the United States. Ifeoma's legacy is ensured by her older daughter Amaka, both in Nigeria – where she refuses to take an English confirmation name for communion (PH 241) or as she advocates for images of a Black Jesus (PH 118) – and later when she is in the USA – defending the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Aokpe to those who would say she would not go to Nigeria because of “all that corruption and all that heat” (PH 300). Finally, by articulating a counternarrative to racist interpretations of religion, Amaka subverts Eugene's teachings, thus exposing his own internalized racism. Even though Eugene's newspaper boldly fights for democracy on the big scale – even at the expense of the death of its main publisher – Ifeoma is the character who teaches freedom of speech to Kambili and Jaja. After pages devoted to portray the understanding of the protagonist with Catholicism, one of the last mentioning of the theme is moved to the secular domain, just like when Jaja first refused to take communion – referring to it as “wafer” in the opening lines of “Palm Sunday” (PH 6).

Despite being the main receiver of Eugene's abuse and thus suffering two miscarriages, Beatrice is a marginal character from Kambili's perspective. Her daughter has an ambivalent relationship with Beatrice, she does not understand her and her narrative is mostly muted not only by her husband but also by Kambili herself, the narrator. Beatrice is mostly meek, obedient and silent, the traditional ideal of the African woman. Only after Eugene's death does she reveal she has been poisoning him for months – helped by Sisi, the housemaid whose name Eugene never bothered learning. Ironically, the humble wife uses poison sold by “a powerful witch doctor” (PH 290), against all her husband's contempt for Igbo traditions. Throughout the narration, Beatrice believes that “a husband crowns a woman's life” (PH 75). However, as she adds, “it is what they want”, an ambiguous layer of meaning emerges, suggesting that what men “want” according to a social construct they created is indeed markedly different than what is realistic (Ndula 2017, 39). After her son takes the blame for Eugene's murder, Beatrice's admission of guilt does not truly free her. Her revenge has not emancipated her. In the last section, Kambili describes how Beatrice

wrote letters to newspapers. But nobody listened to her; they still don't. They think grief and denial – that her husband is dead and that her son is in prison – have turned her into this vision of a painfully bony body, of skin speckled with blackheads the size of watermelon seeds. Perhaps it is why they forgive her for not wearing all black or all white for a year. Perhaps it is

why nobody criticised her for not attending the first- and second-year memorial Masses, for not cutting her hair (PH 296).

This description underscores Beatrice's trauma but also the misunderstanding the public has of her, still seen as the perfect African wife. Her plea is silenced by the same community that praised her husband and ignored the signs of beating on her body. The ghost of Eugene's influence still haunts her and controls how she is perceived. Even an 18-year-old boy is believed to have had more power than her. The newspapers, a significant component of her late husband's legacy, dismiss her and would rather believe she has gone mad from grief that acknowledge any legitimate cause for rebellion. As scholars observed, Beatrice is often "reduced to a suffering body" (Hillman 2019, 99) by Kambili's gaze. The absence of sympathy of her daughter could relate to the mother's utter passivity, her lack of resistance and the lack of protection offered to her children. Her trauma is evident in the way she carries herself after the murder, she is still oppressed as long as her son is in jail. One of the few times she speaks before being spoken to is to thank her daughter in the last lines of the novel, thus signalling a future slow appropriation of language and autonomy, free from external impositions.

Jaja's ultimate decision to protect his mother comes at a high price, as he has to await trial in jail for years. Here Adichie denounces the state of Nigerian prisons, their incompetent system of justice and corruption. Similarly, the issue is tackled in the short-story "Cell One" of the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* where Adichie explores the harsh realities of targeted attacks on universities and the judicial system. University strikes and riots are a recurrent theme in her writing. Indeed, not only does Ifeoma risk jail if she tells the truth about Nigeria's situation to her students, but in *Americanah* as well – set at least ten years later – the status of Nigerian Universities worsens to the point that there are more days of strike than days of lessons. In both contexts, for the lecturer in the former and for the student in the latter, the only solution is migrating to the USA, a move recognised as a failure for all. Even though the larger political context only frames the novel and is never explicitly placed at the centre, the last consideration written in a letter by Ifeoma to Kambili is dedicated to Nigeria's system,

There are people, she once wrote, who think that we cannot rule ourselves because the few times we tried, we failed, as if all others who rule themselves today got it right the first time. It is like telling a crawling baby who tries to walk, and then falls back on his buttocks, to stay there. As if the adults walking past him did not all crawl, once (PH 301).

There is clearly a strong love that Ifeoma and her family have for the country they were forced to leave, Amaka writes that in the USA there is hot water and no power outages "but we don't

laugh anymore (...) because we don't have the time to laugh, because we don't even see one another " (PH 301). This loss is voiced by characters that were outspoken about Nigeria's critical condition, but they also had a sincere appreciation of their roots. In their patriotism mingled by realistic bitterness lies the potential for indigenous music and TV programs or a more 'Africanized Christianity' to flourish among Nigerians despite their political authorities (PH 118). As Kambili and her family do not leave Nigeria, the ending of this Bildungsroman is optimistic and testifies the possibility for renewed identity with more balanced gender roles and long-awaited freedom.

3.4 Polyvocality and the Right to Narrate in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

While the political context fades in the background of *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* deliberately deals with the Biafran Civil War that directly affects all the characters. However, the novel navigates the conflict by looking closely at the domestic sphere. Both novels explore political events more or less explicitly while disillusionment with post-independence Nigeria is indeed a common theme of Third Generation Writers. Even though cultural assumptions would suggest that two generations should separate the subject matter from the time of writing before a novel can be historical, Adichie's account of the civil war refers to events prior to her birth, thus fitting into Atwood's requirements for historical writing (Dalley 2014, 122). The author's dramatization of the past stands on the side of the losing party in the war, recounting a story that for her is not just history, but also memory (Adichie 2008, 50). There are three internal narrators, Ugwu – a village boy that goes on to work for Odenigbo, a University lecturer in Nsukka – Olanna – a lecturer and Odenigbo's lover – and Richard – who has a relationship with Olanna's twin Kainene and is the only white British main character in the novel. *Half of a Yellow Sun* has a non-chronological structure and is divided into four sections, each pertaining to either "The Early Sixties" or "The Late Sixties". The narrative skips from one time frame to the other, leaving the reader with many gaps that unfold in the other second half.

The Biafran War was a bloody civil war that divided Nigeria from Biafra in the south of the country from 1967 to 1970 and caused millions of deaths. The writer confesses "unapologetic Biafran sympathies" (Adichie 2008, 50) in her retelling of a disastrous war for Biafrans. Inevitably, the novel published in 2006 spoke to the new generation who thus learned about the war, while those who lived in Biafra are those less likely to publicly speak about the conflict. Indeed, "many people are still not versed in what happened in Biafra", the novel "is

about how important it is to remember (...) it's a plea for the humanizing of history" (Adichie 2021). Talking about her writing process, Adichie admits that the first drafts were focused on the political events of Nigeria in the 1960s, but she then decided to maintain emotional truth at the core of the story (Adichie 2021). In her essay "African "Authenticity" and the Biafran Experience" the Nigerian author states her intention to avoid making Biafra an "utopia in retrospect", focusing instead on the civilians, the ordinary people, their hopes and disillusionments. She cites as sources *The Man Died* by Wole Soyinka and Achebe's *Girls at War*, among others such as Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* and Nwapa's *Never Again*. By tying together personal conflicts and larger geopolitical issues, Adichie allows her main and secondary characters to voice their emotions, whether they are from Biafra – as most of them are – or not, rejecting simplistic binary oppositions of a 'right' or 'wrong' side of the war.

At the end of eight different chapters there are brief fragments of *The Book*, titled "The World Was Silent When We Died", a metatextual inclusion whose authorship is revealed only in the last page. While the omniscient extradiegetic narrator of these passages supposedly provides a de-personalised point of view (Akpome 2013, 30), the rest of the novel describes the background of the author so that each reader is able to judge the author's reliability once they finished reading. Indeed, the question of authorship on a book-within-the-book about the civil war is particularly significant in the narrative. Not only does the reader witness the process of writing with a *mise-en-abyme*, but this also challenges assumptions on who has 'the right' to narrate. At the beginning, one of the first characteristics mentioned about the white journalist Richard is that he is a writer and has moved to Nigeria in order to write a book on Igbo art. However, as he falls in love with Kainene and the Biafran cause, he is asked to write journalistic pieces on the war to send to foreign news outlets and spread information on the war. Richard decides his novel will be on the conflict, not on Igbo pottery, and the majority of the excerpts of *The Book* appear at the end of the chapters where he is the focalizer. Therefore, the reader is led to believe that Richard is the author of *The Book* on the Biafran cause. However, the last fragment coming after the last chapter focused on Olanna finally reveals the real author, "Ugwu writes his dedication last: For Master, my good man." (Adichie 2007, 433).

Ugwu is a village-boy who moves to Nsukka to be the houseboy in Odenigbo's house. Before the war, Ugwu gradually becomes politically conscious thanks to the books that the "revolutionary" Odenigbo provides for him to study – remarking that "there are two answers to the things they teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass" (HYS 11). He also learns by listening to the intellectual soirées hosted by his master with

other lecturers of the University of Nigeria. After the conflict that forced him to conscript, Ugwu starts writing as a way to cope with the trauma of war. Emblematically, one of the last chapters shows Richard as he admits to Ugwu that he has decided to stop writing the book on Biafra, “The war isn’t my story to tell, really. (...) Ugwu nodded. He had never thought that it was” (HYS 425). Therefore, this is the first moment when Ugwu reclaims the story of Biafra from the white – albeit sympathetic – writer and becomes a new postcolonial historian. This exchange has been interpreted as a nod to Achebe’s ending of *Things Fall Apart* where the white District Commissioner appropriates Okonkwo’s story in “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger” (Leczna 2016, 126), as chapter one analysed. Actually, Richard’s right to write is contested from the beginning, for instance, after choosing the title “The World Was Silent When We Died”, Kainene is surprised by his use of “we”, as if even she could not fully include her lover in the Biafran struggle. To her surprise he responds “I’ll make sure to note that the Nigerian bombs carefully avoided anybody with a British passport” (HYS 374). By emphasizing the theme of authorial rights and appropriation, Adichie prompts reflection on why they matter, encouraging readers to question who has the power to interpret and record the narrative of a country and its people (Noringriis 2024, 44).

The three internal narrators showcase different experiences of the war. However, scholars, in particular Julie A. Noringriis, have wondered whether Ugwu really is the best narrator for the embedded metafictional narrative and what this means for the female characters he repeatedly ignores and objectifies when he is the focaliser (2024, 45). In other words, if Richard’s Western point of view gets challenged because of where he is from and how comparatively little time he has spent in Nigeria, then Ugwu as well may not be an overall perfect fit as spokesperson for the cause given his behaviour. Indeed, scarred by shame, Ugwu starts writing to atone and find solace after the crimes he committed as a soldier, in particular the rape of a nameless Biafran bar girl he and other soldiers participated in. Before that, however, Ugwu often had already sexualized most of the women he had encountered, such as his village crush Nnesinachi or his neighbour Eberechi, and he had always justified Odenigbo’s infidelities by directing the blame on the women, Amala and Alice (Noringriis 2024, 47). Through this character, Adichie exposes male gendered codes of Igbo society but she also subverts them. Ugwu’s tasks as a houseboy are bound to the feminine domain – strikingly, he plans to cook a meal his grandmother used to appease her husband and “soften a man’s heart” precisely in order to have an advantage over his master (HYS 15) – and even his role as storyteller would be traditionally reserved to women (Uwakweh 2012, 94). His final dedication

“For Master, my good man” (HYS 433) might echo the relationship between Friday and Robinson Crusoe of Defoe’s novel, subverting it as they are both Africans (Ngwira 2012, 47). In addition, while Friday and Ugwu identify Crusoe and Odenigbo respectively as ‘Master’ while being referred to as ‘my good man’, Ugwu decides to join together the two designations, thus confirming the changed power relationship between the two after years living together. This dedication can reveal both an internalization of Western education that Odenigbo had learnt while also conveying a ‘revolutionist’ response to those values. Furthermore, this postcolonial attitude is confirmed by the critical tone exhibited in the type of historical content reported in the first four fragments of *The Book*.

However, when analysing again the gender issue, it becomes evident that even though Ugwu is one of the characters who experiences the most significant growth during the narration, transitioning from an ignorant, superstitious village boy to a learned man who understands the political contours of Biafra, his views on women are often misogynistic. Thus, this interpretation offers a thought-provoking insight into how a narrative produced by Ugwu could potentially neglect and marginalize women if he was the chosen – and sole – author of Biafra’s conflict (Leczner 2016, 126). As Kambili mostly silences her mother’s struggles, because either she cannot truly understand her or sympathize with her passivity – so that Beatrice’s revenge plot is completely unpredictable – Ugwu silences the female characters he does not comprehend. For instance, he is not able to recognize Amala’s pain, not realising how her condition of servitude does not admit choices and he refuses to see her as a victim, “He wanted to ask why she had gone along with it if she did not want the baby. She had gone to Mater’s room by herself (...) But he did not ask” (HYS 240). Ugwu does not consider Amala’s version as deserving of attention, not only because she is a woman, but mostly because she is a plain village girl he sees as inferior to him. If Ugwu was the only narrator, Amala’s narrative would be entirely silenced and her condition lost to time, unknown. Similarly, Ugwu despises Miss Adebayo, who is educated and of a higher class but who is also “the loudest”, challenging and arguing with Odenigbo (HYS 19). Indeed, Ugwu generally disapproves of all women who contradict or displease his master and these examples alert the reader that they should view his writings critically, that he may be an unreliable narrator. Conversely, Ugwu esteems Olanna. Indeed her testimony is included in the first fragment, as also referenced in one of the last chapters by Richard who spies on Ugwu’s scattered papers before passing on to him the title for *The Book* (HYS 424). Particularly because of the emphasis on women’s resistance and struggle at war that transpires in the novel, choosing Ugwu as preferred storyteller might imply

that all views can be challenged. Moreover, the possibility of open-endedness of the novel is marked by the last fragment. Placing the opening of *The Book* as the ending of the real novel rejects absolute closure on the subject (Leczna 2016, 127).

Indeed, the real novel employs polyvocality to disrupt stereotypes and offer different – at times complementary, at times briefly conflicting – worldviews that render the plurality of Nigerian society in the 1960s. For example, as Odenigbo cheats on Olanna with Amala – the servant his mother brings from the village precisely to seduce him after getting him drunk – Olanna later suggests to Odenigbo how “Ugwu thinks this all happened because your mother went to a *dibia* and his medicine charmed you into sleeping with Amala” (HYS 253). Odenigbo replies, “I suppose it’s the only way he can make sense of it”. This episode is evidence that, were Ugwu the only focaliser, Olanna’s compassion and ultimately understanding for Amala would be completely absent (Noringriis 2024, 54). Moreover, Richard’s point of view offers insight into how the war is perceived from the outside. He sees how articles from British and American journalists described the violence in Nigeria as merely one of the many episodes of violence in Africa, thus purposely referencing the way *Heart of Darkness* still influenced the narrative on the continent (Novak 2008, 39). Through his perspective, the reader understands also the character of Susan, Richard’s first white girlfriend in Nigeria, who expresses the most common African stereotypes. As Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus* has become a tool for the missionaries’ propaganda after attending their school, here Susan is an example of the kind of precepts Eugene himself could have learnt about his ‘uncivilized’ country. Indeed, after comparing the Igbo’s accumulation of riches and their expertise in trade as something “very Jewish”, Susan’s reaction to their slaughters paraphrases common stereotypes only applicable to Africa, “It’s quite extraordinary, isn’t it, how these people can’t control their hatred of each other. Of course, we all hate somebody, but it’s about *control*. Civilization teaches you control.” (HYS 154). The double standard is striking. There is a clear will from the writer to acknowledge the hypocrisy of the West when covering the violence of the continent. As scholar Novak observed, despite Richard’s solidarity with the Biafran cause and his love for Kainene – who jokingly calls him “a modern day explorer of the Dark Continent” (HYS 62), a clear nod to Conrad – he also functions as a reminder of European colonial legacy (2008, 40). He inevitably sees Africa as an object of consumption given that his decision to travel to Nigeria is the “rococo, almost Fabergé-like virtuosity” of rope pots of Igbo-Ugwu art (HYS 114). Kainene herself could represent an embodiment of that type of art for Richard. However, she is the most active part of the couple and in order to save her relationship with him she decides to burn his

first manuscript on the war after discovering his infidelity (HYS 258). Ultimately, she is the one who disrupts his attempt at claiming ownership of Biafra. Explicit prejudiced assumptions on Nigeria are silenced in Richard because he is indeed a positive character. However, by not allowing him to write *The Book* and by having him display racist undertones, Adichie ultimately portrays some of the West's condescending assumptions on Africa through Richard.

The position of the reader as witness of the act of narration shifts into position of addressee in the seventh excerpt. Indeed, there, the external reaction to the conflict is described through a poem that Adichie admits was inspired by the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, killed in the conflict (Adichie 2008, 52). As the sixth excerpt explains the title of *The Book*, "He writes about the world that remained silent while Biafrans died" (HYS 258), this "world" – made of Britain, the USA, Canada, the Soviet Union, France, China and the other African countries who supported Nigeria for fear of further uprising – is the target audience of the poem, even if particular emphasis is put on its Anglo-American component. Indeed, the addressee of "Were you silent when we died?" cannot hear the dead whose "children with arms like toothpicks, / With footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin" are commodified in US glossy magazines (Novak 2008, 41). The Western journalist who takes the pictures of the children affected by kwashiorkor and then leaves embodies the Western gaze of an audience who feels unsettled but refuses identification with 'the other', so that they "feel sorry briefly" and then "turn around" (HYS 375). In poem or prose, these fragments have a political undertone. The causal manner with which 'Nigeria' is chosen as name of the country in 1914 is recounted in the second fragment (HYS 115), while the fourth one defines the country as a "brutal dictatorship designed to benefit Britain" (HYS 205) so that "at Independence in 1960 Nigeria was a collection of fragments held in a fragile clasp" (HYS 155). Emphatically, they reflect Odengibo's teachings. In addition, the fifth excerpt underscores how starvation (HYS 237), the kwashiorkor mentioned in the poem, attracted international attention to Biafra and finally stirred indignation in public opinions, even if the world still "remained silent" (HYS 258). Undeniably, in several instances of the novel the British are painted as complicit in kindling ant-Igbo sentiment in the area before the conflict, which serves to justify the underlying criticism aimed towards them in *The Book*.

3.5 Women and War

Male-constructed binaries of male warrior / female victim, male life takers / female life givers, male aggressors/ female peace makers portray accounts of war that are often male-authored and one-sided (Njoku 2017, 154). While this Nigerian myth of militarized masculinity boasts Igbo man as fighters and women as storytellers of male heroism, several Nigerian female authors have produced counter-narratives, such as Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975), *Wives at War and Other Stories* (1992) or Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982) among others. Adichie is part of this tradition as one of the main aims of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is to rebalance the narrative of war in favour of women, reclaiming the significance of women's effort in Biafra (Adichie 2023, at 15.55).

The trauma of colonial invasion still has effects on the newly independent country, its negative consequences are mainly voiced by Odenigbo but the chief status of Olanna's father, with his corruption and wealth, is evidence of a colonial legacy that confers privileges and still dictates frameworks of influence (De La Cruz-Guzmán 2012, 55). Even though Adichie's main characters are Igbo, there are minor characters who represent minority groups in Biafra and attest the multicultural nature of Nigerian society. Indeed, this social and religious fragmentation of the country hinders the awakening of a nationalist spirit so that post-independent Nigeria is fragile at the beginning of the novel. Contrary to her parents, Olanna's patriotism provides a counternarrative to their legacy. Another example of 'clashing of cultures' is given by Odenigbo's mother. As he poorly tries to justify her behaviour to Olanna, he merely states that his mother cannot be held accountable for calling her a witch because "she is a village woman" (HYS 101). He pretentiously explains that "the real tragedy of our postcolonial world is not that the majority of people had no say in whether or not they wanted this new world; rather it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world" (HYS 101). Ironically, Odenigbo perpetrates this same thinking by not bothering to explain the "new world" to his mother, therefore not giving her "the tools" as he believes her too limited to understand. While Eugene rejects communication with his father because he does not deny his pagan gods, Odenigbo – the complete opposite of Eugene in his relationship with traditions – also struggles to express his progressive views to his conservative mother. While theoretically both are knowledgeable, even if with opposite conclusions, neither can find the right, convincing way to approach pragmatically this shift in mentality with their parents. Indeed, Odenigbo's condescending attitude betrays his own patriarchal bias and his perfect aura of

righteousness starts shedding once it is revealed how his ‘high-mindedness’ is not necessarily a positive trait.

An allegorical reading highlights how the twin sisters Olanna and Kainene can represent Nigeria and Biafra, with the mysterious disappearance of the latter by the end of the novel. As Northern Nigeria is more willing to accept British influence, Olanna is more inclined to accept favours from her parents – the old order – than her sister who “did not try to please her parents” (HYS 45). She insists on her independence – much like Biafra – and she meddles with oil interests – Biafra’s richest resource (Coffey 2014, 72). According to this interpretation, it is interesting to note that even though Kainene’s lover is British, she is always the leader in the relationship and both Richard and Olanna often feel as if they needed her more than she would ever need them. Kainene is depicted with masculine traits, her father proudly declares she “is not just like a son, she is two” (HYS 31). She holds the most power in her companies and she is fundamental to the war effort as she builds and manages refugee camps for Biafran victims in the second half of the novel. Therefore, by portraying her as a ‘male daughter’, the novel resists traditional structures of male preference in families and in business (Njoku 2017, 163). In particular, all the main male characters – Richard, Odenigbo and Ugwu – have to rely on her for survival during the conflict, reversing gender roles thanks to the Western education and financial security she had acquired. As the difference between Ifeoma and Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* shows, by making Kainene and her twin examples of contemporary emancipated Igbo women Adichie highlights the stratification of social classes in Nigeria and the importance of education both in and outside contexts of war.

Olanna’s efforts towards the war are described in a different light than Kainene’s. Both for her physicality and for her choices in life and fashion, Olanna represents more traditional qualities of the African women. However, unlike Beatrice, Olanna’s education allows her to distance herself completely from a subordinated condition. As one of those women who “know too much Book” (HYS 41), as a University lecturer, Olanna stands out. Her beauty, her longing for motherhood and her hesitations on marriage – concerns that do not belong to her sister – make her narrative markedly different and influence the development of her character. One example of her maturity is how she deals with her mother-in-law. According to the older woman, “too much schooling ruins a woman” and Olanna must be a witch for entrapping her son in a relationship without promising marriage nor children (HYS 98). Moreover, even in Olanna’s relationship with her family, whom she loves, Adichie underscores the disparity between her and her uncle’s family who live in Kano and are not as wealthy. The class divide

is evident and indeed the number of choices available for her cousin are substantially inferior, especially on marriage. While Olanna does not particularly care for marriage, Arize worries that “if people like me who don’t know Book wait too long, we will expire” (HYS 41). The class system is presented in its complexity. Even though Arize’s family is less privileged and educated, they do not have a misogynistic stance, unlike Odenigbo’s mother. Indeed, after his infidelity – for which he refuses responsible, “I’ve been dropped into something I don’t entirely understand” (HYS 232) – the wise words of Olanna’s aunt urge her to remember that “you must never behave as if your life belongs to a man” (HYS 226). Therefore, she should not alter her life, change job or move away from Nsukka because of a man’s mistakes, nor stay with him rather than be alone. Conversely, not only does Odenigbo’s mother scheme to have her house help girl bear her son’s child, but she also rejects that same child because of her gender. Instead, Olanna is a new Igbo woman, by feeling sympathy for Amala, recognising she is just a victim and deciding to adopt the child, she follows her aunt’s advice about individuality but also conquers female antagonism imposed by patriarchal structures (Njoku 2017, 164). Moreover, despite her higher class status, once the war starts she easily identifies with the local women and joins their win-the-war efforts. While Kainene is one of the leaders of the mobilization, Olanna’s hardships to be a mother, a wife and a civilian at war are given significant attention in the narrative and are depicted as of equal importance than those of her ‘masculine’ sister.

Nevertheless, Olanna wishes she had Kainene’s strength and confidence. She believes her sister would complete her. They are distant, “nothing had happened – no momentous quarrel, no significant incident – rather, they had drifted apart, but it was Kainene who now anchored herself firmly in a distant place so that they could not drift back together” (HYS 37). There is a reconciliation during the war, but after Olanna’s betrayal with Richard, the relationship breaks again and is sewed together only in the last chapters when they all live together at Kainene’s refugee camp. The foreshadowing of Kainene’s disappearance already lays in the way this strained relationship affects Olanna, when her sister visits her for the second time after the cheating. Even if they are on better terms, “Olanna felt the slow sadness of missing a person who was still there” (HYS 345). The political context of Biafra is mostly framed by the speeches of Odenigbo – who Kainene calls Olanna’s “revolutionary lover” (HYS 36) – but Kainene is the character that acts the most in favour of Biafra. Instead, Odenigbo gradually loses his confidence, he starts drinking and becomes a shadow of his old self.

3.6 Recounting Trauma

If Kambili's healing is marked by the gradual re-appropriation of her words, through Olanna *Half of a Yellow Sun* also portrays how trauma affects speech. The emblematic image of a woman carrying the head of her daughter in a calabash while fleeing the pogrom is a moment that scars Olanna's narrative. The episode recurs in the novel and function as symbol of women's traumatic experiences (Novak 2008, 46). Indeed, Olanna's "Dark Swoops" start after the trauma generated by witnessing the massacre of her aunt's family in Kano. As scholar Williams observed on Olanna's trauma, her 'oral' testimony of the calabash episode to Ugwu—the writer is not made valid by *The Book* – where it appears as prologue – but it is legitimate on its own. The passage stands for Adichie's own oral sources that ultimately produced *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2017, 149). Olanna is the embodiment of a more traditional Africa, and as a synecdoche for Nigeria, her Dark Swoops are manifestations of the sickness that overwhelms the country in the 1960s. She becomes more inward as everyday gestures trigger painful memories of Kano. However, Adichie does not condemn Olanna to madness, she displays how life carries on and that there is always the potential to heal. Moreover, her testimony of what happened in Kano sheds light to the devastating consequences of war for civilians and gives voice to the victims who did not survive. Ugwu is the addressee who listens to Olanna and encourages questions and details of the event, so that her oral testimony is not devalued but equated with the same relevance as the written *Book*. Once Olanna decides "She had to matter. She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die" after surviving yet another bomber attack, she makes soap for the first time and decides to reintegrate herself in the community (HYS 280). She starts working again, teaching children about Biafra, and she feels "as if she had finally become an equal participant in the war effort" (HYS 281). As Olanna witnesses first-hand the rising costs and devaluation of the new Biafran currency, her thoughts signal the importance of her role as provider of food and medicine for her household, "she wondered why [Odenigbo] was not frightened by how little they had. Perhaps it was because he did not go to the market himself" (HYS 262). Thus, her testimony attests the hardships of day-to-day challenges in a way that her husband, who supposedly is more engaged in the war effort, could not do. By having Olanna recover thanks to her role as mother and as community organizer and not by assuming the typical role of storyteller of war, Adichie challenges patriarchal notions of women's agency (Williams 2017, 153). Whether one works inside the home and the other outside, Olanna and her husband's productivity are on the same level of importance.

Notably, Odenigbo is also psychologically affected by the war. Given that the reader observes him from the eyes of either Ugwu – who idolizes him – or Olanna – who is irrevocably in love with him at the start – this man seems the embodiment of an ideal both in terms of masculinity and of defiance. However, he gradually loses himself and after the war, with new power dynamics established, Ugwu observes “something so undignified, so unmasterly” in Odenigbo’s broken spirit (HYS 418). The decline starts once he receives news of his mother’s passing, while his first response is that of looking after her to bury her, there is then a vague desire to join the army, but on the long term, what he really does is getting drunk every day after work (HYS 323). From confident and eloquent thinker of the revolution, the war turns Odenigbo in the shadow of himself while he marvels at his wife’s resilience. Instead, Kainene sardonically calls Olanna’s teaching a “noble win-the-war effort”, ironically referring to the way high-ranking officials would label these attempts. Trauma touches Kainene as well, as she witnesses the decapitation of one of her stewards. This episode scars Kainene and start the process of reconciliation with her sister, “there are some things that are so unforgivable that they make other things easily forgivable” (HYS 347). In practical terms, Kainene’s own endeavours in Biafra make a difference for a significant number of refugees, more than either Olanna or Odenigbo could do. Moreover, the novel displays different levels of privilege among the Biafrans during the war. For example, in the narrative, the military chiefs still have big houses, food, domestic workers and the possibility to flee on relief planes, in stark contrast with the condition of the majority of civilians, housed in narrow compound with little to no food. These episodes account for the gradual disillusionment that the Biafrans themselves started to have with the war after three years, Olanna herself admits, “I want this war to end so that [Odenigbo] can come back. He has become somebody else.” (HYS 388). Exhausted by the war, the announcement of its end is merely interpreted by the protagonists as the possibility to safely look for Kainene after her departure. Indeed, the repercussions of Kainene’s disappearance on the other characters render the real tragedy that hit many Biafran families who never saw their relatives after the war. While Olanna’s dark swoops cease after her brief reconciliation with her twin and she is finally able to reclaim her narrative, Kainene’s unknown future transmits a sense of unfinished. This grief propels in her sister the need to cling to the idea of reincarnation, so that even consulting a *dibia* becomes a plausible solution (HYS 433). As the short-story “Ghosts” of *The Thing around Your Neck* also recounts, the conflict hunted the Biafrans for years, leaving those who stayed and fought scarred by trauma and those who fled for safety to be consumed by guilt.

The conflict significantly alters the characters, but the twin sisters find a way to become more resilient with the passing of time. Even Richard shows courage in navigating a conflict he could have easily abandoned. Instead, the reader is left to decide whether Ugwu's journey of atonement through *The Book* truly deserves redemption, particularly as in one of the last chapters he comes face to face with the impact of his crime through his sister Anulika, who was raped by five Nigerian soldiers (Hillamn 2019, 107). Anulika's appearance has changed, she looks to Ugwu like "an ugly stranger" (HYS 420) and the ghost of the bar girl looms large in all the chapters where Ugwu is the focaliser. Ultimately, polyvocality and the decision to include scenes of violence perpetrated by both sides aids the creation of an at least partially accurate account of the Biafran war without romanticizing the losing side. This highlights how there is no fine line between oppressor and oppressed. Adichie is careful to avoid stereotypes on the violence and 'savage' nature of Africa, so that the novel, and *The Book* in particular, draw parallels with wars fought both in Europe and Africa in order to convey a larger picture of the destructive nature of conflicts on the whole of humanity.

3.7 Writing Realist Fiction

As Kambili witnesses the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary or Ugwu believes in the power of the *dibia* to deceive his Master, Adichie sometimes includes symbolic episodes or transcendental moments in her narrative. However, the same text always accounts for more sensible interpretations so that, if considering only the events presented in her plots, the narrative pact Adichie establishes with her readers does not allow them to condemn her narratives as 'untrue' nor 'deceptive'. As an author, she consciously decides to cling to the real and plausible. At the Commonwealth Lecture in 2012 she states

Realist fiction is not merely the recording of the real, as it were, it is more than that, it seeks to infuse the real with meaning, which perhaps is why the artist works with a frown. As events unfold, we do not always know what they mean. But in telling the story of what happened, meaning emerges and we are able to make connections with emotive significance. Realist fiction is, above all, the process of turning fact into truth (Adichie 2012, at 18.52-19.26).

These truths are "in the human stories". *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set in a historical time often condemned to silence by Nigerian history books, a period forcefully forgotten by many Biafrans. As the anthropologist Ifi Amadiume has observed, this erasure was perceived at the time by the then Nigerian Head of State Yakubu Gowon as the only way for the population to

move forward and towards unity and prosperity as a nation, which did not account for the grief and anger of the surviving defeated Biafrans. Therefore, “this unvoiced suffering of trauma continues to surface” (Ifi Amadiume in Dogson-Katiyo 2017, 115). Three years after Adichie’s novel on the war was published, the Nigerian government banned history as an independent subject from school curricula, revoking the decision only ten years later. While collective historical memory cannot account for the voices of all, victors and vanquished, the narrative inevitably takes a side and here decides to privilege emotional truth and the imperative of remembering. As Adichie reiterates in the “Author’s Note” of her latest novel *Dream Count*, she “knew that a generation born after the war and raised in the silence of its aftermath would come to the novel as history as much as art”, therefore, she affirms she “did not temper with, or dilute any consequential narratives of that war” (Adichie 2025, 398). For her, when dealing with historical events, there is a responsibility from the author to address truthfully the past. However, this truth of art is also to move the reader and search for humanity. Quoting Diogenes, she affirms that “literature truly does instruct and delight – or at least it can. Literature keeps the faith and tells the story as reminder, as witness, as testament”. Imaginative retellings foster empathy and suggest perspectives that bridge the distance between characters and readers. Adichie’s own position as a realist writer asks for cosmopolitan understandings of her work, highlighting how both the Anglophone tradition – common to all countries affected by British colonialism, not only Africa – and a serious commitment to her own people and history hugely influence her writing (Dalley 2014, 121). Ultimately, the realist novel advances both specificity of time and place and multiplicity, so that “part of that magic of realist literature is to remind us of how similar we are in the midst of our differences” (Adichie 2012, at 26.15).

4 Diglossia, Igbo and English as a World Language

Attitudes to language in multilingual societies can offer insight into questions of social status, privilege, inequalities, education and creative writing. As local languages persist in influencing English, Anglophone literature production in Nigeria has been undergoing a process of institutionalization in the last seventy years where these interpolations of idioms have significantly shaped the narratives. This chapter examines Adichie's use of languages in *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah* and the short-story "The Arrangers of Marriage" included in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. As most of her main characters are bilingual, investigating the role language plays in constructing identity helps to highlight the importance and meaning of those passages where characters choose English over Igbo or Igbo over English. Contrasting claims have been made on whether English in creative writing aids or hinders the process of decolonisation.

4.1 Language as a Postcolonial Concern: Moving Beyond Sites of Conflict

Given that control over language has been a systematic element of imperial oppression, tension between English and local languages is a characteristic feature of postcolonial literatures (Ashcroft 2002, 7). In the postcolonial discourse, there can be monoglossic groups of societies using English as their native tongue, diglossic societies where two or more languages are spoken, and polyglossic societies with the coexistence of multiple dialects (Ashcroft 2002, 38). English thus becomes a world language subject to the influences of regional varieties. Its wide versatility constantly fosters change because of the large numbers of speakers that need English to communicate. In postcolonial texts, writing in the author's local language can be an implicit message to the audience and an attempt to undermine the privileged position English would traditionally claim (Ross 2023, 136). There are several ways to successfully introduce native languages in the texts, for instance, postcolonial writers may add untranslated words or reproduce the texture, rhythm and sound of the local language by adapting it to English, as occurs in Achebe (Ashcroft 2002, 51-52). Moreover, untranslated interpolations can help to disrupt "the Western reader's linguistic complacency, the assumption that her mother tongue (...) is normative, other types eccentric or somehow inferior" (Ross 2023, 138). When the author decides to adopt a major Western language as vehicle of narration – producing "extroverted novels" – or maintain the vernacular language – with "introverted novels" – the

implied readership changes. Moreover, matters relating to the economic interests of publishing houses and high production costs are still decisive elements in the literary marketplace in Africa and they hinder the circulation of novels, whether coming from outside or inside the country (Harter 2025). Indeed, for now, novels written by African authors still need to become global bestsellers before finding success in their own continent, therefore, writing in English already provides an advantage. Ideally, the new independent publishing houses that are emerging in the country and are ensuring better availability and affordability for literature might help to invert the current trend. In 2024 the British Council published a study that offers an overview of the current African publishing market. According to this research, Nigerian's publishing and literature sectors are increasingly acquiring global significance, with educational publishing becoming one of the most promising areas of growth and revenue of the country (Isong et al. 2024, 49). Trade publishing finds a thriving literary market in the country with eager readers. However, collaborating with other African countries is far more expensive than importing from Europe and the UK remains the largest trading partner for Nigerian publishing houses (Isong et al. 2024, 57). On indigenous languages, the study reports that while local titles get sold and there are increasingly new initiatives launched to promote this literature, the numbers are still considerably lower than those of non-local titles (Isong et al. 2024, 53). However, digital publishing outlets significantly help the production and consumption of Nigerian literature by providing greater access and exposure to all titles. Despite several efforts made in the right direction, the matter is still open. Adichie herself admits how importing books is extremely expensive and not affordable for most, so she tackles the problem by having a Nigerian publisher who can sell Nigerian versions of her novels at a reasonable price (Adichie 2025, at 7:18-8:26).

Technological advances have significantly eased the process of translation in diglossic texts, however, the interpolations hold meaning as they allow languages that are still marginal in the publishing sphere to be introduced to a wider audience. Diglossia pervades the literary works analysed in the previous chapters. Both Achebe and Adichie chose to reclaim and render their multilingual contexts by writing in English with vernacular interpolations. This use of multiple languages can be seen as aiding an ethnographic function, thus challenging preconceived representations of non-Western societies (Ross 2023, 139). Indeed, language can easily become a site of conflict. The first chapter examined how Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* portrayed a Congolese population who cannot speak any "understandable language" (HOD 82) and can only manage howls, yells and a couple of words of Pidgin English (HOD 112). Conrad

himself, a Polish author, privileged his second language over his own, as several other Western writers have done. However, in response to Conrad's narrative, Achebe's employment of English – the language of the coloniser – can be interpreted as a statement in itself, eliciting responses that distance his reasons from Conrad's.

Postcolonial African authors have expressed diverging opinions on how to best confront English and on whether English has become one of the languages of Africa. While Adichie fully takes ownership of English, debates on the threat English poses to 'colonise the mind' have deeper roots, with prominent postcolonial authors maintaining opposing views, as in the case of Chinua Achebe and the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Indeed, in 1986, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o wrote an essay entitled "Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature" where he stresses his disapproval of African authors who only write in English and asserts its inadequacy to truly reflect the African experience. Thus, after novels in English, he justifies his decision to switch and write in the Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, as part of "the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African people" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1981 in Ashcroft 1994, 290). According to the Kenyan writer, growing up in a school system where English was the "measure of intelligence and ability in (...) all the branches of learning" made him resent this language. Indeed, English apparently suppressed all other idioms and reinforced the dominant power of colonial education by distancing the Kenyan students further away from their own world. Conversely, as the author himself admits when quoting Achebe in his speech, the Nigerian writer disagrees. In a lecture in 1965, while acknowledging the complexity of defining African literature, Achebe reflects on the question of language and the reasons that prompt African writers to write in English (Achebe 1997, 342). He defends those writers who use English, French or Arab as the "by-products of the same process that made the new nation-states of Africa", namely colonialism, a process that however allowed communication among "big political units" and "gave them a language with which to talk to one another". Achebe voices his concerns,

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But, for me, there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it. I hope, though, that there always will be men (...) who will choose to write in their native tongue and ensure that our ethnic literature will flourish side by side with the national ones (Achebe 1997, 348).

Achebe's own employment of English in *Things Fall Apart* proves that this language can "carry the weight" of the African experience, but it necessarily has to be a "new English". Far from

being employed like a British person would, “the price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use” (Achebe 1997, 349). Therefore, English as a world language can be both an opportunity to render postcolonial narratives accessible to a wider readership but it also inevitably limits the usage of vernacular languages that are increasingly in decline.

Adichie sides with Achebe’s vision on language in Nigeria. However, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o claims as well, Adichie’s decision to write in English is admittedly not much of a choice, but the product of an education system that discouraged the use of Igbo and downplayed its importance (Adichie 2007, 147). English is the official language of Nigeria and the preferred medium for most sectors, from government and commerce to education. In 2012 UNESCO predicted that Igbo, the main Nigerian language in the southeast of the country, employed by both Achebe and Adichie in their novels, would become extinct by 2025 (Ahmed 2025). The estimation proved entirely erroneous but the risk and the worry of losing native languages persists. By now, the kind of English spoken in Anglophone African countries is a distinct variety from the Standard first introduced by British colonisers. The populations fully appropriated the language and claim it as their own, to the extent that Pidgin English – although still subject to social stigma – is the *lingua franca* adopted. In 2020, around 40 nouns, verbs and expressions of Nigerian English were added to the Oxford English Dictionary, prompting mixed opinions in the country. Indeed, the initiative was allegedly motivated by the desire to recognise Pidgin English and help it gain more respectability but the British effort has been received by some as a futile and unnecessary external attempt to validate and prescribe the use of terms that were already decades old (Orjinmo 2020). In Adichie’s novels there are a few of the expressions recognised by the Oxford Dictionary, such as “to eat money” – which means misappropriate, use money for personal interest – in *Purple Hibiscus*, mentioned during a sermon by a black priest in front of a disapproving Eugene (PH 89). Another example is depicted in *Americanah* where the Nigerian Pidgin adverb “sef” – an emphatic marker to express irritation or impatience – concludes a sentence in direct speech (Salazar 2020). This process of integration and acceptance of English is at odds with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o who, in an interview in 2018, still categorically rejects English as an African language. He insists that in modern colonialism, “the acquisition of the language of the colonizer was based on the death of the languages of the colonized” to the point that even if he admits that “It is OK to make English our own or French our own”, this though advances the capacity of English to the detriment of other vernacular languages (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 2018). Adichie’s background is

definitely distinct from the one of the Kenyan writer. Almost forty years separate their birth, her approach to language embraces rather than separates. Adichie's view does not allow to be "prescriptive about art" nor does she dictate what kind of languages should be used by African writers. Her novels reflect her experience – and that of her generation – who grew up with at least two languages, consequently, Igbo alone cannot fully comprise her identity (Adichie 2007, 147). Moreover, she rules out the possibility of her writing only in Igbo because of the lower level her narratives would have in that language and the much smaller audience she would reach (Adichie 2007). These reasons seem to justify the appropriateness of using a world language. In an interview in 2014, Adichie admits that because of her education, she cannot hold an intellectual argument in Igbo, "I can gossip and make fun and tease in Igbo", but not say anything "profound" (Adichie 2014, at 14.34). According to the writer, the gradual decline of Igbo is a result of globalization but also of the perceived social status assigned to the language by its own speakers who are not encouraged to pursue proficiency (Adichie 2007).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie seems to use the character of Odenigbo to voice Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concerns over the colonization of language. Indeed, as he masters the English language, the Biafran revolutionary asks Richard, "What do you think accounts for the success of the white man's mission in Africa?" (HYS 402). The use of the word "success" is justified as he explains "I think in English". Odenigbo's uncompromising critical stance on the exploitation of the white man in Africa includes language, politics and education. However, his view is not unanimously shared among the other main characters who consider language subject to appropriation and not inherently anchored to the coloniser's control. There are indeed several ways to challenge control over language. While writing in English, Adichie makes variance a primary characteristic of her work so that diglossia, polyvocality, code-switching, the use of Nigerian English and its contrast to either British or American accents are recurring elements her narrative explores.

4.2 Linguistic Variance in Adichie

Achebe and Adichie share several linguistic techniques. English in *Things Fall Apart* – as Achebe himself underlines in his speech on language – tends to mimic Igbo speech patterns with its substantial use of parataxis, thus conveying a "flatness" typical of oral storytelling (Ross 2023, 148). Achebe described how "instinct" and "judgement" led his appropriation of English (Achebe 1997, 348). In addition, through the British District Commissioner in the last

chapter, code-switching serves to highlight the divergence in content of the two cultures through a contrast in syntax. Moreover, Achebe's code mixing with his insertion of Igbo words helps to render a cultural experience and sense of identity that cannot be reproduced solely in English (Ashcroft 2002, 51-52). Untranslated words in the vernacular language can transmit a more direct understanding of daily experiences in the region but, as scholar Ross underlines, they do not necessarily convey positive messages about the Igbo world. For example, in *The Bride Price*, Emecheta's choice to add indigenous language in particularly violent passages tends to suggest criticism towards oppressive local customs rather than prove the possibility of coexistence of two languages (Ross 2019, 115). Adichie shows ownership of both English and Igbo and explains that her decision to have vernacular interpolations comes from a necessity to truthfully represent Nigerians, "I wanted to remind the reader that you're reading conversations between characters who are mostly not speaking English. If they are speaking English, they are also speaking in a mix of both, which is the reality for many languages in Nigeria today" (Adichie 2006 in Ross 2019, 115). Among the novels she published, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* offer many examples of untranslated Igbo, while in *Americanah* the protagonist lives in the U.S. for most of the novel and observes the role of accents.

As the previous chapter showed, tensions between Igbo and English fuel the antagonisms Eugene perceives between his two cultures in *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel sides with the cause of hybridity in language and its characters repeatedly challenge Anglo superiority with their inclusions of Igbo (Ross 2019, 117). This idiom is mostly understandable for the non-Igbo reader through contextual clues rather than translations. Papa-Nnukwu – who only speaks Igbo – is an emblematic character as his death symbolises the end of a pre-literate, animist culture. However, his world is kept from disappearing completely thanks to Ifeoma's preservation of the language and Igbo's tradition within a syncretic contemporary perspective (Ross 2023, 151). Conversely, Eugene's father-in-law is praised for his ability to learn English and therefore covert others 'the right way', again designating language as a marker of superiority held by white people and those who internalize their rules. This elevated rank is crucial, to the extent that it is "a bad sign" when Eugene speaks Igbo (PH 13). In a novel that deals primarily with the re-appropriation of words and consequently of identity, Igbo is associated not only with tradition, but also with the emotional sphere, reverence and solidarity. Conversely, English is mostly the language of power and displacement. Nevertheless, Kambili gains autonomy and independence only once she reclaims ownership of both her languages. In terms of linguistic structure, Adichie uses code-switching and code-mixing to "nativise" her

English, often introducing sentences half in Igbo. There is an example of code-switching in the sentence “My son sucked one litre from my husband’s car this morning, just so I can get to the market. *Ó di égwù*” (PH 133), the Igbo translates to “it is terrible” (Ononye 2018, 91). The whole sentence paints a dramatic time of fuel scarcity in the country so that when later Father Amadi declares “Sucking fuel is a skill you need these days” (PH 150), he expresses a Nigerian cultural-related expression (Aboh 2016, 8). In Adichie, code-mixing uses particles of Igbo within a sentence otherwise dominated by English, the addition may be deliberate or involve terms that cannot be translated, such as *chi*, *mmúo*, *ítu-nzu* (Ononye 2018, 90). For example, in Nsukka, Kambili hears a child screaming “Aku n’efe, aku is flying.” (PH 118) – *aku* is an edible termite – as he is referring to a game that the neighbours’ children play to trap the insect and then eat it. However, Ifeoma’s son uses the English “flying termite” to refer to the *aku*, thus conveying a pragmatic difference in class and customs between her family and the neighbours’ (Aboh et al 2016, 11). In addition, there are fixed Igbo expressions the characters employ that would lose meaning if translated, such as *nwunye m* (PH 73) used by Ifeoma to address her sister-in-law as “my wife”. The term challenges Eurocentric notions of family and religion, for Eugene *nwunye m* is “the remnants of ungodly traditions” where the whole family – not just the husband – married the wife, while for Beatrice the expression is important as it manifests Ifeoma’s approval of her. Lastly, transliteration reflects traditional Igbo life or culture habits in English, therefore, some expressions can be obscure to the non-Igbo reader. Some examples are “That soup smells like something Amaka washed her hand well to cook” (PH 155), which means the soup smells delicious, or “Our people say that after *aku* flies, it will still fall to the toad” (PH 221), a saying that corresponds to the English “what goes up must come down” (Ononye 2018, 88). Similarly, Eugene’s question to Jaja, “have you no words in your mouth?” (PH 19) translates a recurrent Igbo speech pattern in the narrative.

Half of a Yellow Sun’s employment of Igbo is slightly different. Given that the novel is more politically charged, native speech often appears in scenes of violence and patriotism with chants and songs. Still, Igbo words are commonly used in everyday conversation as in *Purple Hibiscus*. For example, Odenigbo always calls Olanna *nkem*, my own, to the extent that when he does call her by her name, the moment always coincides with dire situations or sharp divergences, as it happens after Kainene’s disappearance (HYS 410). Moreover, Olanna calls her sister *ejima m*, my twin, only in those few episodes when the two are close. Code switching occurs in this novel as well, even if less frequently. An example is given by the question “*I makwa* children were walking over their bones to go to the stream” (HYS 265) where the first

part, “do you know”, is in Igbo. At times this practise is employed to express a plea, “Gowon, *olee ihe m mere gi*” (HYS 280), while the songs of resistance (HYS 337, 283) stay untranslated. By the end of the novel, both Ugwu and Richard, with opposing background, find themselves at ease in a hybrid culture after having finally mastered the other language. Indeed, Ugwu starts as a “bush boy” with a very limited English vocabulary, he is entranced by the fluidity of his Master’s language – “the musical blend of English words in his Igbo sentences” (HYS 10) – his Igbo is “coloured by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English often” (HYS 5). The first conversation Ugwu has with Odenigbo is completely in Igbo but the narrator submits only the English version for the reader. Indeed, Odenigbo’s first question is in Igbo, “*Kedu afa gi?*” – immediately translated, “how old are you?” – but then “He said *thirteen* in English” (HYS 5) alerts the reader that English is the exception, especially when the interlocutor is a young boy who pronounces “sah” instead of “sir”. While Odengibo speaks “English-inflected Igbo” that sounds like music (HYS 21), Ugwu is later enchanted by Olanna’s perfect British accent, “her superior tongue”, like magic, that is however accompanied by an “equally perfect Igbo” (HYS23). Language is crucial not only in relation to the former invader, but especially among ethnic groups in times of conflict. When Olanna reveals her Igbo identity to a passenger who was criticising her ethnic group for their excessive influence and power, she mockingly corrects his pronunciation, “We say *kedu*, not *keda*” (HYS 227). The novel often comments on the different accents that the characters have, directly linking them with their upbringing, their social status and their birthplace, so that for example the pronunciation of the people from Abba sounds unfamiliar to those from Nsukka. However, as Adichie herself writes in English, in her novel what allows Ugwu to finally be a writer is full mastery of English. Conversely, Richard commits to learning to speak Igbo and thus truly belong to Biafra. For instance, when asked if he speaks the local language after pronouncing correctly his lover’s name, “making sure to drag out the second syllable fully”, Richard answers with an important marker of Igbo language, namely a proverb – “*nwanne di na mba*”, a brother in a strange land (HYS 151) – thus proving he can successfully shift into his Biafran identity. Indeed, as *Things Fall Apart* draws attention to the role of proverbs in Igbo culture, Olanna and Kainene are the characters who mention them in episodes of hardships to muster courage, which implies that Richard learned directly from his girlfriend. However, this assimilation is not without challenges, due to his skin colour, he is questioned on his alliances by Biafran soldiers. Richard proudly proclaims, “*Abu n onye Biafra*” (HYS 181). His linguistic competence not only pleases him but also allows him to carve out his own space.

Americanah is less focused on the acquisition of language because the protagonist, Ifemelu, like Ifeoma and Olanna, is already confident in both her English and her Igbo at the beginning of the novel. When Ifemelu and her boyfriend Obinze challenge their mutual knowledge of Igbo, remembering “basic” or “serious” proverbs is the designated criterion for victory (Adichie 2013, 61). These types of reflections on language encouraged various claims by scholars as some consider the inclusions merely ornamental (Ross 2019, 123), while for others they suggest a political concern in exposing the legacy of colonialism (Taylor 2019, 73). Indeed, while indigenous languages are made optional in the school curriculum, English is a prerequisite to advance to higher levels of education (Aboh et al 2022, 9). The episode underscores how the loss of Igbo, its decline in an increasingly globalised world at the beginning of the 21st century, is a tangible reality. This also applies to immigrants, when Dike, Ifemelu’s cousin, visits Nigeria for the first time since he was a toddler, he mourns his loss of Igbo, as if learning the language as an adult could never compare to being a native speaker (A 424). In *Americanah* there are several reflections on how different English variants can fuel prejudice and create divisions. Its multivocality invites further questions on the possibility of reconciliation of cultures but also on the different treatment reserved to both languages outside of the country.

Adichie’s approach to the interpolation of Igbo in English suggests that she has moved beyond language debates on the need to give prescriptive meanings or only portray dissenting voices through vernacular additions (Esplin 2018, 76). Her English is less a result of postcolonial practices and more a global language influenced by the English literary tradition as much as the Nigerian canon and the global literary tradition. If Achebe could speak of English as an “alien” language necessary to endure communication in an otherwise linguistically divided country, this claim no longer fits contemporary Nigeria (Achebe in Dawson 2010, 922). The right not to have to translate Igbo favours a normalization of the inclusion of African languages in English. In interviews, Adichie often observes how immigrant African parents are eager to have their children learning French as a second language, refusing instead to speak Igbo to them on the claim that “it will confuse them” (Adichie 2018). Through her writing, she campaigns for Igbo to be considered as on the same level as any other language in literature. When she first released *Purple Hibiscus*, she understood that “the value we give to languages” guides many choices in the publishing sphere and using an African idiom could be seen as a risk (Adichie 2022, at 1:10). Indeed, English in Nigeria is recognised as a tool for achieving socio-economic development, which correlates to the positive attitude its speakers

have in privileging English as the medium of education (Aboh et al. 2022, 13-14). Moreover, English provides access to trade in the global market and is therefore preferred to indigenous languages. More recently, in the field of creative writing, given the positive response from her readership, Adichie declared there are no “push backs” from publishers and the new generation of writers are becoming more and more confident in adding their native languages to their stories (Adichie 2022, at 0:45-1:37).

4.3 Language Varieties: Standard English, British, American and Nigerian English

In Nigeria, English is still primarily used to measure intelligence, success and status. Despite the novels’ embrace of language hybridity, fluency in British English is a clear marker of superiority for most characters. For example, in *Purple Hibiscus* Nigerian English is reserved to urban workers, students and rural lower classes, as they use colloquial utterances that can mix Pidgin English and Igbo patterns, for example, “Gudu morni. Did the people of your house rise well, oh ?” (Did your family sleep well?) (PH 58). Adichie is particularly interested in recording how different Nigerian accents sound and she adds an example of a man with a “Hausa-accented English that reversed P and F” (PH 103). In Enugu, the men who ask money to Eugene “spoke English with an Igbo accent so strong it decorated even the shortest words with extra vowels” (PH 104). Even Eugene speaks in English with a markedly Nigerian pattern when he is not talking to white people, “I want to give you a little something for the children [for Christmas]” (PH 60), the Igbo pattern communicates politeness by offering presents in a non-condescending way (Aboh et al. 2016, 10). Kambili observes how her father “liked it when the villagers made an effort to speak English around him. He said it showed they had good sense”, the villagers’ Nigerian English, even if inferior to British English, stands higher in Eugene’s linguistic hierarchy than Igbo. On the other hand, despite receiving the same Christian education as Eugene, Father Amadi’s “English-laced Igbo sentences” (PH 135) reveal his inclusive vision on religion and his openness to the multilingual country. Eugene’s policing of language comes at a high cost not only to the development of his children but also for himself. “Papa changed his accent when he spoke [to Sister Margaret], sounding British, just as he did when he spoke to Father Benedict”, the narrative implies that rather than Papa being in control of the language, English itself confines him, “He was gracious, in the eager-to-please way that he assumed with the religious, especially the white religious” (PH 46). When Eugene has violent outbursts, he speaks Igbo, as if English could not encapsulate negative, ‘savage’

emotions and was only reserved for virtuous, benevolent thoughts. This dualism not only expresses but also exacerbates Eugene's inner conflict and controlling tendencies. He lacks balance, he is caged in his convictions and his linguistic pretence. Therefore, his real, abusive nature surfaces only when he speaks Igbo. Conversely, Ifeoma's acceptance of both languages grants her freedom, "She spoke more Igbo than English, but all her English words came out with a consistent British accent, not like Papa's, which came out only when he was with white people and sometimes skipped a few words so that half a sentence sounded Nigerian and the other half British." (PH 243). In noticing this difference and drawing the comparison, Kambili alerts the reader that the non-hierarchical approach to language of her aunt does not lessen her proficiency, nor does it contradict with her Igbo roots. Thus, each characters' approach to language not only help portray the multilingual realities of Nigeria, but it is used by the author to convincingly convey how linguistic distinctions fit into the postcolonial world .

As Ifeoma's education is responsible for her British accent, Olanna's impeccable accent is the product of University lectures attended abroad. While perfect mastery of both languages is a given for Nigerian characters of the higher classes, Kambili is surprised by hearing for the first time her white tutor speaking both English and Igbo "so well" (PH 215). Conversely, despite only speaking English at school, in the U.S. Ifemelu is baffled when at her University registration she is talked to "so slowly, lips scrunching and puckering" because of her foreign accent (A 134). A recurrent pattern Adichie establishes highlights precisely how not just English, but British English is synonymous of high social status. Indeed, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, set in a closer period to colonisation than the other two novels, offers several examples where this accent turns into real, strategic advantage. English is a site of power. When Amala falls prey to Odenigbo's mother's scheme, Olanna explains the power dynamic by listing language as a possible tool of manipulation, "[Odenigbo] was the master, he spoke English, he had a car. It was the way it should be" (HYS 250). The revolutionary Odenigbo carries the colonial legacy and benefits from the higher social status English automatically provides. Olanna herself purposely uses her British accent to gain favours. When Baby is sick and Olanna asks for a doctor, she "kept her English accent crisp and her head held high" so that the nurses immediately let her through. Instead, the other women waiting in line curse to her in Igbo "We have been waiting since dawn! Is it because we don't talk through our nose like white people?" (HYS 263). Miss Adebayo mocks Olanna's accent at the beginning of the novel precisely for "mimicking-the-oppressor English accent" (HYS 51) while her husband campaigns for the decolonisation of Nigeria's education. Moreover, the first Igbo massacre described at Kano

airport tragically underscores how accents can be a marker of identity and a death sentence. Indeed, when a Northerner soldier asks in a derogatory manner “*Ina nyamiri!* Where are the Igbo people? (...) Where are the infidels?” and then he commands at gunpoint a customs officer to say “Allahu Akbar”, the man collapses and refuses to speak “because his accent would give him away” (HYS 153). Consequently, he is shot. Richard witnesses the scene and visits the family of the man to inform them of his passing, he “chose his Igbo words carefully” but he does not convey the right sentiment nor the customary mourning practices, failing to provide the family with yams or drinks as a condolence visit would require (HYS 165). Pragmatics, social norms and culture are inextricable from semantics. Nevertheless, Richard is effective in addressing how Western journalists distort the narrative of the pogrom, again involving language. When Time magazine titles its article “Men must whack”, as was written on the side of a Nigerian lorry, “the writer had taken *whack* literally and gone on to explain that Nigerians were so naturally prone to violence that they even wrote the necessity of it on their passage lorries” (HYS 166). Richard clarifies by sending a letter, “in Nigerian Pidgin English, he wrote, whack meant eat”.

Americanah provides several examples of Nigerian English. Once Ifemelu first arrives in the U.S., she encounters a former classmate, Ginika, who transferred years before the protagonist. While her physique, her hair and clothes are completely different, when talking “Ginika had lapsed into Nigerian English, a dated, overcooked version, eager to prove how unchanged she was” (A 123). Her immigrant experience has the potential to become Ifemelu’s own future. Interestingly, their first conversation on how to best approach America centres on English variants. While language, especially slang, changes rapidly, Ginika is unfortunately frozen in the past, stuck with the English her fellow Nigerians spoke in high school. She confidently says “shay you know”, as if to underline her ease in shifting from one variant to the other, but Ifemelu “did not have the heart to tell her that nobody said ‘shay’ anymore”. Ginika goes on to explain how words like “boning”, “half-caste”, even “thin” have a different meaning in American English. In particular, she advises the newly-arrived to be offended by the word “half-caste” and use “biracial” instead, immediately underscoring the peculiar link between language and racism Americans make (A 124). The whole novel dives into prejudiced America and the pervasiveness of race in the American discourse, underscoring the different implications the issue raises for African-Americans and Africans. Indeed, integration seems to come at a high cost for all immigrants, while Ginika pretends to be able to shift from one identity to the other, she sheds her old Nigerian self as soon as she is with other Americans. “Her American-

accented words” (A 124) betray her former claims, revealing her true nature primarily through language. The need to be accepted into a new community drives the characters to change, a teenage Ginika had the advantage of “the flexibility and fluidness of youth”, the process of assimilation is easier, “the cultural clues had seeped into her skin” (A 125), unlike Ifemelu’s Aunty Uju who fled as a grown woman with child and finds herself burdened by her own already formed and very Nigerian identity. Even Ifemelu adopts an American accent – and consequently an American identity – after the aforementioned episode at the University registration. Having spoken English her whole life, she is puzzled by the way Americans speak the language, admitting “these Americans cannot speak English” after hearing them constantly make – what she would define as – grammatical mistakes, such as “you shouldn’t of done that”, “there is three things”, “a couple days” (A 134). What strikes Ifemelu is how Americans feel entitled to alter their own language, often making it more informal, without fear of neither losing respect nor damaging their reputation at the eyes of others because their powerful, giving country –unlike Nigeria –automatically shields them from reprobation. Ifemelu practises using those idioms foreign to Nigerian and British English until she is rewarded with the compliment “you sound American” (A 175). This moment breaks a spell for the protagonist as she realises she never really had any interest in being perceived as American. Adichie describes how Ifemelu sounds after months abroad, how “she had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the t, the creamy roll of the r, the sentences starting with ‘so,’ and the sliding response of ‘oh really’”, but this process is a constant effort, “an act of will” (A 173). Ultimately, it is a pretence, “a pitch of voice, and a way of being that was not hers” (A 175). Her returned Nigerian accent with strong ‘t’ and unrolled ‘r’ finally makes Ifemelu feel that “this was truly her: this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake” (A 175). The episode marks the beginning of Ifemelu’s return home, as she eventually decides to move back to Nigeria. The Nigerian accent reappears in the aftermath of several struggles –lack of money, abuse and depression –that had taken the form of a long period of silence for the protagonist. As with Olanna and Kambili, trauma results in the loss of voice, a feeling of displacement and alienation. Ifemelu’s decision to reclaim her accent reveals she is recovering and regaining a sense of worth that she had previously lost. Adichie herself, like Ifemelu, refuses to change her Nigerian accent when abroad.

Conversely, Obinze’s struggles in the U.K. lead to another path of self-discovery. He is first an undocumented worker, then he takes part in a sham marriage to obtain a visa and finally he is expelled from the country once the scheme is discovered by the police. Back in Nigeria

he manages to step quickly into positions of power and become wealthy. Unlike the other two novels, *Americanah* displays how being “the other” in Anglophone countries urges a negotiation of self to fit into certain parameters, so that adapting to the status quo by speaking a different variant becomes the price to pay to ease the process of integration. In England, when Obinze visits his cousin’s family, who had moved there before him, he observes how his once defiant, bohemian cousin now “spoke to [his children] only in English, careful English, as though he thought that the Igbo he shared with their mother would infect them, perhaps make them lose their precious British accent” (A 239). Obinze also notes how the children with their “exaggerated British accent” were more likely to avoid reprimands at home simply because of their accent. He asks, “speaking of accents (...) would Nne get away with that [refusing to turn down the TV volume] if he didn’t have a foreign accent? (...) I really think that Nigerians here really forgive so much from their children because they have foreign accents. The rules are different” (A 242, 243). Even if the conversation then shifts to pedagogical models of upbringing based on fear or respect, there is an undeniable sense of pride in immigrants who perfectly master the dominant accent. Obinze will later confess to Ifemelu how he himself suffered from an experience of discrimination similar to hers, but in his case the mockery came from his own friend,

Once I was with [Emenike] in London and he was mocking this guy he worked with, a Nigerian guy, for not knowing how to pronounce F-e-a-t-h-e-r-s-t-o-n-e-h-a-u-g-h. He pronounced it phonetically like the guy had, which was obviously the wrong way, and he didn’t say it the right way. I didn’t know how to pronounce it either and he knew I didn’t know (...) He was laughing at me too.” (A 434).

The novel showcases the divide that successful or unsuccessful integration in an Anglophone country can create among former compatriots.

Ifemelu’s return to Nigeria is finalized only once she reunites with her former lover Obinze, who first notices her unchanged accent (A 432). In Ifemelu’s recollection of how it felt to come back to Nigeria after years abroad, once more, she mentions language, she explains how “there is a certain bombast in the way we speak that I had also forgotten. I started feeling truly at home again when I started being bombastic.” (A 430). She is unwillingly part of a group of Nigerian returnees in Lagos, a group of people “burred with foreign accents” complaining about all they miss from the U.S. in Nigeria (A 407). Doris – the editor of the Nigerian magazine Ifemelu joins on her return – “spoke with a teenage American accent”, with an upward intonation that turns all her sentences into questions (A 402). Adichie underscores how

ridiculous the accent must sound by adjusting her writing and adding a question mark at the end of all of Doris sentences. As a returnee then, Doris openly displays her Americanness as a badge of honour, her time abroad automatically marks her as superior from others, her foreign degree makes her distinct. However, when she talks to her mother, Ifemelu observes that Doris' "English took on a flat, stolid Nigerianness" (A 402). As with Ginika, this switch of accent corresponds to a switch of personality, but also betrays an unwillingness to fully return home, simulating a public identity that dissolves in private. The complex world of the returnees is encapsulated in the title. The author herself explained "*Americanah* is a word in Nigeria referring to people who pretend to be Americanized or have been Americanized." (Adichie 2014). The title is a Nigerian slang term referring to expatriates who struggle to reintegrate into the Nigerian way of living. The word is used with humour but mostly it underlines how Ifemelu, regardless of all her efforts, really becomes a changed person as she feels "guiltily grateful that she had a blue American passport in her bag" (A 390).

Abroad, a new levelling system emerges among immigrants. However, several comments made by Obinze's friends shows how even in the U.K. the different ethnic group's use of English still functions as a social marker and Nigerian-influenced phonological interferences automatically label its speakers as "local and uneducated" (Aboh et al. 2022, 10). Indeed, Adichie presents the new supposedly 'equal' class system in the U.K. by drawing attention to the way accents betray preconceived opinions on class. Therefore, a man who is "so bush" – he comes from Onitsha – and has a strong "bush accent", "mix[ing] up ch and sh", dares proposing to a woman who in Nigeria would have never even considered accepting a date from him (A 244). Studies show that in Nigeria women tend to pay closer attention to how they speak English, consciously reducing their accent, because they believe this can attract wealthier men. Consequently, as in the example presented, women "are often turned off by men who speak accented English" (Aboh et al. 2022, 11). While both Obinze and Ifemelu disagree with these forced changes, they really appear as the exception.

The short-story "The Arrangers of Marriage" from *The Thing Around Your Neck* also tackles the challenges Nigerian expatriates face. Unlike Ifemelu who is middle class and moves abroad to attend University, Chinaza moves to the U.S. after getting married to a man she had met only two weeks before the wedding. Her new married life is immersed in American English and the supposedly superior American system. While Chinaza is fluent in British English, her husband imposes the vocabulary of American English, "cookies" for "biscuits", "elevator" for "lift", "busy" for "engaged" line (TAOF 170-177). Her new husband, Ofodile, introduces her

to a new lifestyle, praising unquestioningly the country and, much like Obinze's cousin Nicholas in the U.K., he strives to conform. Language plays a fundamental role, instead of being called Ofodile, he lets Americans refer to him as "Dave", his surnames changes from "Udenwa" to Bell because Americans "have a hard time" pronouncing Nigerian terms and he imposes the same rule to his new wife, "you have to use your English name here" (TAOM 173). Dave has "overpronounced" 'r' and "underpronounced" 't' when he speaks to Americans (TAOG 176). Similarly, in *Americanah* Auntie Uju pronounces her own surname "you-joo" instead of "oo-joo", because "that's how they [Americans] call me" (A 104). Unlike Ginika, Ifemelu and Obinze, Nicholas, Chinaza and Auntie Uju are ready to make all the compromises necessary in order to be accepted, possibly because they cannot really afford to resist any external pressure as they aspire to a dream, an idyllic lifestyle abroad. The author implicitly sides with those characters that try to resist the assimilation, who fight against the homologation and who recognise the value of being bilingual regardless of where the second language is spoken, if in Nigeria or France. It is significant that Ifemelu's decision to keep her Nigerian accent comes after she has found stability in her new home, with a job and successful relationships. Only then does she allow herself the 'privilege' to reclaim in full her identity, once she does not feel the need to fulfil societal expectations because she already has stability. Therefore, Adichie displays both the emotions that fuel the need to please others in a foreign country when there is little financial security and she describes the reaction of uncompromising characters who try to counteract internalized rules on migration. Moreover, Ifemelu's academic setting gives a proper space for these ideas to be formed, accepted and shared. Her privilege is not necessarily financial, but it does stem from the choices she is allowed to make because she is a young student, she has people to validate her opinions and encourage her – apparently – unconventional stands.

4.4 Nigerian Languages Today

In Nigeria, a new policy introduced in 2023 dictates that courses in primary schools are to be taught in the children's mother tongue in order to ensure better neurological development, however, the following years of education are to be delivered in English. In a country that counts as many as 500 tongues but with most parents speaking English at home to their children, this new educational policy poses severe challenges. Indeed, teachers and students alike face obstacles not only in terms of new guidelines and teaching materials to create, but also in

determining who is adequately qualified to teach languages that have long been excluded from the academic world. Moreover, many parents claim “it’s too little, too late”, English is already the *lingua franca* and they are left wondering which of their idioms will be favoured in their local school and what kind of standardization will be introduced (Macaulay 2023). Indeed, with such linguistic variety, only English, as a common language, succeeded in unifying Africa and become part of the identity of all Nigerians. Consequently, the demand for proficiency or degrees in indigenous languages is still extremely limited in the labour market, which furthers the impression that English really is the sole option for students who want to succeed.

However, various initiatives might help local languages to obtain a more prominent role in the public domain. Among the three major idioms spoken in Nigeria, namely Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, it is Pidgin English, a linking language, that has grown to be the language of wider communication. For instance, Pidgin English is spoken daily in most media platforms. In 2017, the BBC launched a channel, known as “BBC News Pidgin” that broadcasts only in Pidgin English and aims to reach a wide audience in West Africa (Akpan 2023, 79). Starting in 2018, there have been established as well BBC channels completely in Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba to promote the culture and language of these three ethnic groups. Increasingly, the linguistic departments in some Nigerian Universities are trying to preserve their cultural identity and are fighting to promote a more dignified recognition of their languages (Aboh et al. 2022, 17).

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie through an analysis of postcolonial themes related to gender, class, identity and language. The analysis has offered an overview of the author's main novels starting from the influence Chinua Achebe has had in her writing. While Adichie tends to reject academic labels for her work, this dissertation has explored how her novels can be interpreted from multiple perspectives, not only postcolonial, but also historical, linguistic and feminist. Particular emphasis has been given to the way the author employs narrative perspective to express matters of representation as perceived both from the West and within the postcolonial world. As a popular author speaking to a wide readership, Adichie helps to spread awareness on the role of storytelling as she consistently questions dominant, often partial and biased, narratives. Starting with an investigation through the texts of the ways the Igbo and colonial societies addressed matters of gender, the analysis has moved towards a more comprehensive understanding of how women interact and find autonomy within a postcolonial context. Indeed, the first half of the dissertation has provided an overview of the importance of multiplying perspectives of narrative in the precolonial period, employing anthropological and historical approaches. The second half has focused on novels of post-independent Nigeria, the main themes introduced are affected by the abrupt changes recounted in the previous works, yet the narratives confidently move towards autonomous appropriation of topics regarding gender, conflict and society.

Starting from an example of recent mainstream public events in Europe regarding the legacy of colonialism, the first chapter has introduced the ongoing relevance of postcolonial studies. After broadly framing the meaning of postcolonial, a comparative analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has underscored the influence that these texts have in defining this phenomenon. Indeed, as Achebe's stance on Conrad's novella is clear from his lecture "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", comparisons can be drawn between the two authors who write fifty years apart. While Conrad's text was interpreted as a denunciation of the crimes committed by King Leopold, Achebe's interpretation focused on the lack of humanity conferred to the Africans by the text, paving the way for an altered understanding of the novella in postcolonial studies. Achebe's novel reclaims the right to a dignified indigenous identity and a rational and verbal community at the centre, not at the margin of the narrative. Touching on topics related to language, inner darkness and conferred or denied humanity, these works inform Adichie's own interpretation of precolonial Nigeria

and are necessary to understand part of the framework in which she operates as both are still studied and widely known. Her narrative contributions and her speeches highlight the importance of the circulation of contrasting stories about the continent. Indeed, the author emphasises the unattainability of referring to an “authentic” African experience, as there should not be a benchmark to define what can and cannot be termed ‘truly’ African.

Unlike the past, the so-called Third Generation of Nigerian Writers to which Adichie belongs has reached gender balance. This change is significant because it signals that finally more women can speak for themselves in literature. Following the process of expanding narratives started in the first chapter, the second section has explored how Adichie’s short-story “The Headstrong Historian” depicts precolonial Nigeria and the arrival of the missionaries from a predominantly female perspective, drawing observations on the oppression of both colonialism and the patriarchy. By primarily using the works of scholars Tunca, VanZanten and anthropologist Van Allen, the analysis has observed the intersection of religion, education, marriage and gender in the author’s reconstruction of Igboland. Unlike the majority of Achebe’s female characters, the roles attributed to Adichie’s protagonists are not limited to that of wife and mother. The author introduces a new outlook on the purposes and possibilities women were offered before colonisation. The chapter has highlighted how Adichie advances a narrative informed by historical and anthropological findings regarding the greater political and individual autonomy Igbo women were granted. Indeed, the colonial rule had imposed severe restrictions through education and religion. Metaphorically, the decision to depict a male spirit be reborn into female form symbolises the endurance of traditions resisting colonial interventions and the centrality of women to continue the narrative. Moreover, the short-story “Jumping Monkey Hill” has been introduced to reiterate the importance of multiple perspectives, but also to highlight the need for contemporary writers to be considered on their own and not necessarily as part of a given closed academic tradition.

Gender roles and female autonomy have also been addressed in the third chapter by observing the novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, set in independent Nigeria. While religious and political divisions left a lasting effect on the country, this analysis has explored how Adichie’s characters reflect the realities of the country in the 90s and during the Biafran War while navigating cultural conflicts steeped in the social fabric of the country. A close reading of *Purple Hibiscus* has addressed themes related to religion, domestic abuse and trauma within a context of political instability that brought detrimental effects on all characters. Moreover, following a feminist and narratological approach, the chapter has investigated how

Adichie's narrative on the civil war offers insight into the responsibilities of those who construct postcolonial narratives. Who has the right to narrate is a question that looms large in Adichie's fiction and non-fiction, her answer in *Half of a Yellow Sun* might not be definitive and her own decision to have three different focalisers could contest Ugwu's designated role of sole storyteller. While the context of war is secondary to the description of human emotions, through her characters Adichie challenges patriarchal notions of women's agency. Moreover, this segment has underlined the author's self-proclaimed aim to instruct and delight, fashioning a role for literature that also demands responsibility to the readership. Literature is a testament and it can promote empathy and help to bring readers closer to historical matters that may not always be well known both outside and inside a country.

The use of languages in all texts under consideration ensures the representation of bilingualism in Nigeria while further reinforces the socio-political themes depicted. After a brief overview of the status of English as a world language and by now in every respect one of the languages of Africa, the last chapter has analysed the diglossic nature of Adichie's texts. Indeed, her characters speak both Igbo and English and adopt different varieties. As this author no longer considers English a site of power, she confidently employs her own variety of the language. Moreover, in the novels analysed and in *Americanah*, Adichie uses code-switching and code-mixing to render the multilingual context of her characters. Variance shapes the identity of the protagonists both in Nigeria and abroad, in the U.S. and the U.K. The diaspora also stresses the importance of varieties of English and the consequences of adopting the most prestigious accent as an immigrant. Indeed, language is often a sign of social status. Despite the high number of local languages spoken in the country, Pidgin English is *de facto* the *lingua franca* of Nigerians. English is highly regarded in most sectors, from education to trade and government at the detriment of local languages, even if recent policies might be attempting to promote a more dignified recognition of these idioms.

As this dissertation focuses mainly on Adichie, a wider approach might benefit from exploring also other Nigerian contemporary authors' treatment of gender, thus examining and highlighting Nigeria's rich body of literary work. Moreover, although Adichie offers valuable insight on the precolonial history and customs of Igboland, this dissertation has mainly explored the relationship between Adichie's "The Headstrong Historian" and Achebe's work. However, further research might investigate how the young author's work engages with other contemporary texts dealing with that same precolonial period. In addition, Adichie's latest novels primarily deal with the diaspora while the current independent publishing market in

Nigeria seems to be increasingly interested in works focused on everyday life in the country. With technological advancements granting better and faster access to most languages, future studies could explore if the convergence of artificial intelligence and the growth of self-publishing in Nigeria might encourage the use of local languages in creative writing in the near future.

Through Adichie's texts, this dissertation has explored various possible meanings of African stories. As Anglophone literature is shaped by a range of literary works, labels of "authenticity" and universalism may no longer be suitable to analyse postcolonial writings. While grounded on specific historical contexts, this dissertation has tried to draw attention on how the themes analysed transcend geographical or cultural limitations and can reach a wide readership as they evoke emotional responses and offer new insights into how literature can frame, describe and contest the contemporary world.

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