

# CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*: A SYMBOLIC PRESENTATION OF THE BRITISH FAILED MISSION IN BIAFRA

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## Abstract

Language is communication: whether verbal (oral), sign, kinesics, proxemics. Understanding anything displayed induces reactions arising there from. Chimamanda, making use of the British citizen, Richard Churchill, demonstrates with language how this national is conquered, naturalized and finally demolished: Richard abandoned his British girl friend, Susan, for an Igbo no-nonsense girl, Kainene; Richard moved to Kainene's apartment and subsequently affianced her in marriage to become a Biafran citizen; Richard at the end of the war lost everything: his writing, his fiancée and his physical energy as col. Madu punched him down. This paper therefore gleans these facts to tell Biafrans, the Igbo, Nigerians and the rest of the world about this sarcastic fiasco. Sir Winston Churchill, the one-time British Prime Minister, refused presiding over the liquidation of the British empire, Biafra included, but Biafra succeeded in making a mockery of British's social sublimity and alienation in the person of Richard Churchill, the symbol of British fall.

## Introduction

### Symbol, Richard and Britain

Symbol "is a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself" (M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpman, 394). Richard as a word and/or a name stands for his unique self, but as representing everything British. The sameness of his surname as that of Sir Winston Churchill, the then Prime Minister, who did everything possible to save the liquidation of British empire, but failed as independence was granted to the colonized, is not unintentional. Richard in *Half of a Yellow Sun* forgoes his British identity for Biafra, his British girl friend, Susan, is supplanted with a Biafran young girl; he throws his unconditional support for Biafra's

cause. In short, Richard is fully Biafranized as he eats Biafra's food, keeps company of Biafrans and goes about studying about Biafra and commiserating with the families of the victims of Biafra and of the counter coup.

Winston Churchill's unremorseful defence of the British Empire is afterward challenged by Harold Wilson, another British Prime Minister. Wilson declares that "a wind of change is blowing over Africa". This wind of change, the disintegration of the British Empire, is the regaining of lost independence of African States. Therefore Richard, losing his British aloofness, his supposedly enviable British culture imitated by non-British, "shallow buffoons" (Sugnet in Ihekweazu 91), as Mr. Johnson, and dazed and unable to charge at his vengeful assailant, demonstrates British government's incapacity to anglicize Biafrans in words, thought and action. Biafra, as Britain thinks she will humiliate just as Richard attempts to humble and intimidate Madu, is resurrecting as signaled by the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). British failure in her mission of servitude in Biafra is gleaned from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work to tell the unfulfilled dream of megalomaniac.

### **Background Context**

The British colonial administration failed dismally in the Igbo area which metamorphosed into Biafra during the Civil War championed by Britain. British colonialism was completely successful in Northern Nigeria; partially successful in Western Nigeria. The successes came through because of existing administrative apparatuses of Sultanate-Caliphate and Alafinate administrative organogram. This organizational chart of control was non-existent in Eastern Nigeria. The imposition of warrant chieftdom to bring the people under control was resisted, and culminated in the famous Aba Women Riot of 1929, and the subsequent modification of British rule in the East. Britain did not forgive the East for this stout resistance. A resistance further intensified by Igbo nationalists at the forefront of crying for their beloved country and telling Europe to let their people go.

The opportunity to hammer the Igbo came when the Civil War broke out. Britain with the United States of America, the Soviet Union and the Arab world led by Egypt threw her weight

behind Nigeria. (Emefiene Ezeani 2013; Alexander Madiebo 349; Chinua Achebe 99 – 101). In so doing, Nigeria overran Biafra, systematically “killed five percent of Nsukka academics (Adichie 422, paragraph 2), and brazenly has continually been marginalizing the Igbo in the governance of Nigeria. Nevertheless Britain with Nigeria appeared to have succeeded, but Richard Churchill’s moral and social traumas after the conflict which engulfed, remodeled him after Biafra and afterwards shattered his dreams are symbolic message of Britain’s uncivil mission and dismal fiasco in crushing a people’s industry, boldness and obedience to a just cause of fighting for survival.

### **Phenomenal Fall of Britain in Richard**

A tripartite consideration of this fall will run thus: Richard and Kainene in pre-war Nigeria; Richard and Kainene in wartime Biafra; Richard, Col Madu and failed Biafra (Kainene disappeared).

### **Richard and Kainene (Britain is Head over Heels with Biafra)**

Britain is regarded as a model of culture worthy of emulation. This consideration actually manifested by Britain becoming a leading industrial nation introduced by her industrial revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This breakthrough enabled Britain to engage voyages of discoveries and her subsequent colonizing missions in Africa, Asia, America and Australia. In these continents Britain destroyed peoples and languages (Millar 424 – 426) and successfully transplanted her cultures, language, education and tastes. Ever since then, the misguided rush, by non-British nationals, to be educated in Britain earned them the sobriquet, “being – tos” and were conspicuously depicted by how they speak the English language (Emecheta, 59). This political-social relations encapsulated by the commonwealth of Nations, i.e countries “once under British colonies” (Jowitt 351) constrained Richard Churchill and his likes to visit and settle in Nigeria.

Richard “did not have that familiar superiority of English people who taught they understood Africans better than Africans understood themselves and, instead, had an endearing uncertainty about himself – almost a shyness”. (Adichie 36). Britain arrogated to herself the civilizing missions of the world. This made her via Joseph Conrad describe Africa as spiritually, morally and physically

dark (Conrad 1902), and via Joyce Cary in Mr. Johnson, according to Michael Thelwell in Ihekweazu as “aspiring absurdly to European manners and identity” (II), as Africa’s culture, if any, is shallow and unbecoming. Chimamanda reversed the unfounded superiority of and prejudiced opinion of Britain against Africa, and Biafra in particular in the person of Richard. Richard abandoned his British girl friend, Susan. Susan, an embodiment of British superior culture, saw nothing edifying about the Igbo race. She warned Richard about befriending Igbo girls to avoid infesting himself with disease. Disregarding this scathing remark, Richard formally unburdened his heart to Susan: “Susan, I care very much about you”, he said in a rush. ‘But I’m not quite sure that things are going very well – that is, between us” (Adichie 66), and later on Richard announced to Kainene: “I’ve left Susan ....it’s never been a proper relationship, really, he said (69/70). Richard, thus, set aside British superiority of culture, British aloofness from other people’s interest and British prejudice against the Igbo race, and settled down with Kainene, an Igbo princess. Henceforth, Kainene became the guide of Richard: linking him to Nsukka, living with him in Port Harcourt, and in Orlu throughout the war period, because of love of Kainene and love of Biafra as she rhetorically quipped:

Is love this misguided need to have you beside me  
most of the time? Is love this safety I feel in our  
silence? Is this belonging, this completeness.

- Adichie 150

### **Richard in Wartime Biafra (Complete Assimilation of and Naturalization in Biafra)**

Richard, affianced to Kainene, found Biafra exhilarating and Biafran artifacts captivating. His interest in Biafra made him seek out the home town of Nnaemeka murdered in Kano airport and commiserate with the parents. He acted as a reporter and objectively reported the actual horrible sufferings of Biafran people. He was not comfortable with foreign journalists already prejudiced against Biafra before visiting Biafra. “Married” to Kainene and married to Biafra he accompanied Kainene to her refuge camps, ran errands for his indefatigable ‘wife’ to look for food and other necessities, ensured that Kainene and her twin sister, Olanna, came close as sisters,

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painstakingly waltzed back to Odenigbo, the epitome of Biafran nationalism and the arch critic of Britain, and pathetically condescended to look for Ugwu's heartthrob, Eberechi. At the end of the Biafra War, Richard opted to stay back in Nigeria, and work in the staff of the newly established Institute of African Studies of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This is naturalization exemplified.

To naturalize is government policy of making someone from another country a citizen of a country. Richard was accepted in pre-war Nigeria, accepted in wartime Biafra and in post-war Nigeria. Richard had a black fiancée, spoke Igbo fluently, worked on Igbo historical legacies, worked with the Igbo scholars. This complete swallow of Richard by Biafra is suggestive of British failure to erase Biafra, whose traits, similar to Zionism (Basden 11, 31, 185), are threat to the West.

### **Richard, Stillborn Biafra vis-à-vis Kainene's End**

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard fights with his pen and paper; helps Biafran wounded soldiers (Ugwu); cares for Biafran Refugees; expostulates with foreign reporters' biases about Biafra and writes to keep records for posterity of Biafra's archeological artifacts. Nonetheless his commitment to the survival of Biafra and his marriage to a Biafran woman failed.

His Excellency left Biafra "to secure peace and security for my people" (Adichie 407), Kainene left for an illicit trade mission, *ahia attack*, and never returned, Richard's writing on the roped pot had initially been burnt. These disappearances, resting on Richard, afterwards came down to one motif: the search for Kainene. At Port Harcourt Richard found out he had lost their house under the doctrine of abandoned property, at Onitsha he met a vagabond of a woman, and finally, in Lagos, Richard lost completely the hope of ever meeting Kainene. Gnawed by jealousy, and frustrated by the suspicion that Madu was in love with Kainene, Richard fought Madu and lost.

Madu's arm raised,.... Landed on his nose, and the pain exploded all over his face and his body felt very light as it sank down to the floor. When he touched his nose, there was blood on his fingers .... Richard dabbed at his nose. Darkness descended on

him, and when it lifted, he knew that he would never see Kainene again, and that his life would always be like a candlelit; he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses.

- Adichie 430

This excerpt demonstrates Richard's shattering, his demolition, his loss of everything he has preoccupied himself with possessing. It is instructive to note that Richard, a Briton, is beaten by a black Biafran, Madu. The picturesque description of this action in this penultimate chapter is a prognostication of the future of Biafrans. Darkness enveloping Richard is his befuddled brain caused by his failed dream of making Biafra his extension of his English surroundings; his life likened to a candlelit which gives shadow and therefore presents the illusion of reality shows his total frustration about existence. This reality of the futile nature of life recalls William Shakespeare's metaphor on life and candle:

Out, out brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing!

MacBeth 219

The glimpse Richard is constrained to approach life show that life is unworthy of muscle flexing, as it is "a walking shadow", ie. Unreal; as life is temporal (a poor player), i.e. one lives and goes (dies); as life is meaningless (a tale by an idiot). Kainene's disappearance fulfils these glimpses of Richard about "life, like the light of a candle, quickly goes out" (commentary on candle 218).

The expressions: darkness, candlelit, shadow and glimpses describing disappointment, powerlessness about, defencelessness in, hopelessness, formlessness and nothingness of life are evidence of dismal failure of Richard Churchill, and, by extension, evidence of the unreality, temporality, and meaninglessness of British contemptible policy for the then stillborn Biafra. "The idea of the light of life being a brief candle (portrays life as) small, lasting for a

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short time” (218). The life of Richard as candlelit is like British victory over Biafra, momentary. Britain, overwhelming Biafra behind Nigeria, would not laugh long, as the dry bones will rise again.

### **Conclusion**

Theo Vincent, a critic on the cover back of *Sozaboya* novel about the Civil War, by Ken Saro-Wiwa, comments that the hero, Mene, “bemoans the horrors of war and realizes the futility of soldiering and war”, and Helen Birch another critic, on the same book avers: “This is both a novel of self-discovery and an indictment of a corrupt and muddled war ....” Chimamanda, transliterating her father’s refrain “*agha ajọka*”- “war is ugly”, affirms the critics above. The ugliness of war, the horrors and futility of war, a corrupt and muddled war are reflections of Britain’s inordinate economic interest in survival of the fittest and the end justifying the means. The fittest, Britain with Nigeria, does not consider horrible whatever means she uses to subjugate Biafra. And thus, in destroying Biafra, Britain lost, the world lost another source of enriching the world economically and technologically, because in Biafra, Africa died, and the weapons of war will never perish in furtherance of further suppressions.

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