

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

1977-

(Also wrote under the pseudonym Amanda N. Adichie) Nigerian novelist, essayist, poet, playwright, and short story writer.

INTRODUCTION

Regarded as one of Nigeria's most talented young writers, Adichie is acknowledged for her well-crafted stories and novels that explore the political and personal repercussions of recent Nigerian history, particularly the strife of the Nigerian Civil War and the doomed Biafran secession in the late 1960s. Critics praise her thoughtful treatment of history and her sensitive and honest depiction of the effects of war and brutality on the individual. In recent literary works, Adichie addresses the challenges of the immigrant experience, focusing on issues of national identity and language.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Adichie was born in Enugu, Nigeria, on September 15, 1977. She was brought up in the university town of Nsukka, the location of the University of Nigeria, where her father worked as a deputy vice-chancellor and a professor of statistics and her mother was the university registrar. As a child she attended the university's primary and secondary schools. Growing up in a university environment nurtured her innate desire to write, and during these years she wrote a number of plays and poems that were performed at school. In 1995 she enrolled in the university to study medicine and pharmacy but left the following year to enroll at Drexel University in Philadelphia on scholarship. Two years later, she transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic, Connecticut, to study political science and communication. She continued to write during this period, and several of her short stories were published in literary journals, including *Granta*, *Other Voices*, *Calyx*, and *Iowa Review*. During her senior year, she began writing her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which was published in 2003. After graduation in 2003, she received a scholarship to pursue her master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University. That same year, her short story "Half of a Yellow Sun" won the PEN/David Wong short story award. She expanded the story into a novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which was published in 2006. She has won several important

honors and awards for her work, including Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in 2005 for *Purple Hibiscus* and the Orange Broadband Prize for fiction in 2007 for *Half a Yellow Sun*. In 2005 she was a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University, and in 2006 she began to work toward a graduate degree in African studies from Yale University.

MAJOR WORKS

Adichie's work incorporates themes of political and domestic violence, tolerance, loyalty, family, national identity, self-realization, and the effects of colonialism on the collective and on individuals. In her play, *For Love of Biafra* (1998), she chronicles the expectations and shattered hopes of a Nigerian family around the time of the Nigerian civil war in the late 1960s. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, explores the tension between Igbo and Western culture through the story of a fifteen-year-old girl named Kambili. Her industrialist father, Eugene, is known in the community as a pious and generous man that courageously stands against the rebel forces who overthrew the democratic regime; at home, however, he is an abusive tyrant who terrorizes Kambili, her mother, and her older brother, Jaja. Moreover, he forces his family to live by the strictures of a fundamentalist strain of Catholicism and reject the traditional African faith of his own father. As the political situation heats up, Jaja and Kambili are sent to stay with their Aunt Ifeoma, a respected university professor. Under her nurturing eye, Kambili embraces her independence and begins to blossom. Kambili and Jaja return home to find that the abuse has continued unabated; their mother, Mama Jaja, reaches her breaking point and poisons Eugene's tea. In an act of self-sacrifice, Jaja takes responsibility for the crime, hoping to save his mother from a certain death sentence. Critics have found the disintegration of Eugene's family symbolic of life under a military dictatorship. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie explores the effects of the doomed Biafran secession and subsequent civil war on several individuals. Forced to leave their privileged lives at the University of Nigeria, Olanna and her lover Odenigbo flee to the rural villages of Eastern Nigeria, where they must endure the horrors of war. As a result, their relationship as well as their own values and morality are challenged under incredibly trying circumstances. In several of her short stories, which have been published in various periodicals, Adichie depicts the

difficulties Nigerian immigrants experience in the United States and in England, focusing particularly on issues of identity and language.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Adichie's novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, have garnered much critical praise and have received a number of prestigious awards and honors, including the Orange Broadband Prize for fiction in 2007. Critics have examined her work within the context of the new generation of Nigerian writers who have addressed the brutality and horror of the Nigerian-Biafran war and have commended her intelligent and unflinching portrayal of the impact of war on communities and individuals. They have also praised her insight, compassion, compelling and nuanced characters, and her powerful storytelling. "We do not usually associate wisdom with beginners, but here is a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers," noted African author Chinua Achebe has declared. "She is fearless, or she would not have taken on the intimidating horror of Nigeria's civil war. Adichie came almost fully made."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Decisions [as Amanda N. Adichie] (poetry) 1998
For Love of Biafra [as Amanda N. Adichie] (play) 1998
Purple Hibiscus (novel) 2003
Half of a Yellow Sun (novel) 2006

CRITICISM

Kwame Dawes (review date January-April 2005)

SOURCE: Dawes, Kwame. Review of *Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *World Literature Today* 79, no. 1 (January-April 2005): 84.

[*In the following review, Dawes regards Purple Hibiscus as a remarkable literary debut, concluding that "it is a wonderful relief to discover Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fresh and compelling voice."*]

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's voice in her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, is a quiet one. She tells her story with something akin to the psychological disinterest of a

deeply traumatized person who has cultivated the skill to seem calm as a way of holding back the emotional collapse that appears on the verge of consuming her. This, of course, is no accident. The narrator, Kambili, is a teenage Nigerian girl whose father, a devout and tyrannical Catholic patriarch, has managed to abuse emotionally and physically his middle-class family in his attempt to wrestle with his own cultural, emotional, and ideological demons. His Catholicism amounts to a devotion to a Western colonial order that he has concluded to be far superior to the traditional belief system of his family. He is determined that his wife and children will adhere to Catholic ideas and teachings, even as he uses his notable wealth and power to repress those in his family who hold onto traditional values. On the surface, the novel could easily read as another salvo against colonialism and attendant patriarchy that has marked much West African fiction. Indeed, Adichie offers a hint that she is beginning, at least, with Achebe's monumental narrative of "a clash of cultures" in the first sentence 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*."

Indeed, things fall apart, but the edifice that falls is the rigid Catholicism of the father, which becomes a metaphor for abuse, hypocrisy, deep pathology, and something imposed and alien to the heart and spirit of the people. The son rebels against his father's tyranny; the father's sister, a beautifully drawn character—struggling university professor and practical mother figure—abets the rebellion; and Kambili falls in love with a young priest—an act that forces her to recognize her own maturation and need to break from her father's hold. Things fall apart on this personal level even though it is quite clear that what is being eroded is the edifice of colonialism and its attendant horrors. All this could make for a much too easy polemic of anticolonial angst, but Adichie proves too intelligent and honest an author for that. Her narrator/protagonist cannot bring herself to hate her father. Indeed, her pathology is as consuming and disturbing as that of her father, who brutally beats his wife, tortures his children with crude acts that are supposed to make them penitent, and completely alienates himself from his own father. Kambili wants to please her father and her maturation is a subtle narrative of deeply painful conflicts with loyalty and fear. It is her quiet voice, always teetering on the edge of emotional collapse, that haunts this work, allowing us to actually feel pity and some empathy for a monstrous father while drawing from us a certain outrage at the complete vulnerability of the narrator herself.

The family will rebel against the father. Eventually, he will die at their hands, and they will embrace this with quiet acceptance—the shell-shocked quality of people

who know that their own means of survival is to become as coldly violent as their oppressor. Nevertheless, as dark as the story seems, it is filled with humor, intimations of love, affection, and a sometimes nostalgic sense of modern Nigeria, especially the Nigeria of university campuses, ambitious middle-class people, and folks who live in that liminal space between modern life and traditional life. Adichie's prose is confident and charged with a certain emotional intelligence that draws us so fully into her story that we barely notice the craft: the literary sophistication of her use of symbols and metaphors, of her engagement with deeply political and ideological issues. In other words, we are never allowed to think that her work is anything but a fascinating story about how a family deals with its own demons. We would be mistaken, however, not to recognize in this work the larger ideological issues that remain central to the best writing from Africa.

After TsiTsi Dangaremba convinced us with her brilliant *Nervous Condition* that there is an urbane and complex woman's narrative to be told about contemporary Africa, we were left hungry for more. Dangaremba went silent and has remained so for too long. It is a wonderful relief to discover Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fresh and compelling voice. *Purple Hibiscus* is a remarkable debut by a writer whom I hope will not fall into the long silences that have haunted a few other notable brilliant first-book novelists: Dangaremba and Arundhati Roy. We want to read more from this writer; she is good—very, very good.

Heather Hewett (essay date 2005)

SOURCE: Hewett, Heather. "Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation." *English in Africa* 32, no. 1 (May 2005): 73-97.

[In the following essay, Hewett examines the revitalization of Nigerian poetry and fiction in the 1990s, focusing on Adichie's work because it "expands our understanding and characterizations of third-generation Nigerian writing."]

In Helon Habila's novel *Waiting for an Angel*, a young journalist and aspiring novelist named Lomba finds himself with few options. In a scene that dramatizes Lomba's process of political awakening, his newspaper editor forces him to face the harsh reality of being a writer in Nigeria in the 1990s:

"You won't find a publisher in this country because it'd be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel which nobody would buy, because the people are too poor, too illiterate, and too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and

the army to read. And of course you know why paper is scarce and expensive—because of the economic sanctions placed on our country. But forget all that. Say you found an indulgent publisher to publish your book, someone who believes in this great book as much as you do; and because you are sure your book is good, you'd want to enter it for a competition—and what is the most obvious competition for someone from a Commonwealth country? Of course, the Commonwealth Literary Prize. But you can't do that."

"And why not?" Lomba asks. He stands up and moves to the window, away from James, so that they stare at each other, the table between them, like antagonists.

"Because Nigeria was thrown out of the Commonwealth of Nations early this morning. It was on the BBC."

They return to their seats. Lomba avoids James's eyes as he passes him.

"You can't write with chains on your hands." James's voice is soft now, apologetic. "Sorry, I had to be brutal—but you needed it. We are all in this together."

(Habila 194-95)

Habila's story about a young writer's coming of age captures the plight facing an entire generation: just as they came of age, their country disintegrated around them.¹ During the 1980s and 90s, an oil bust, economic collapse, devaluation of the currency, the closing of Nigerian publishing houses and the evaporation of book markets exacerbated the country's political troubles and heightened the sense of isolation felt by many Nigerians (Griswold 69). Pius Adesanmi limns an all-too-familiar portrait of murderous dictators and corrupt politicians whose misrule, intimidation, and violence served to waste "a span of sixteen years in the lives of these young intellectuals" ("Re-Membering" 14). Some writers (such as Ogaga Ifowodo, Akin Adesokan, Kunle Ajibade, and Ken Saro Wiwa) were imprisoned and tortured, and their incarceration deeply affected writers throughout the country. The sum total of all these events—the political imbroglios, the collapse of the nation's infrastructure, and the attendant decline of opportunity—has led Adesanmi to coin the term "dismembered present" to describe postcolonial Nigeria (15).

Nonetheless, many critics have observed that it was during this time that a revitalization of Nigerian literature began, primarily in poetry, though also in fiction. In his 1988 introduction to *Voices from the Fringe*, the first of several anthologies published by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), editor Harry Garuba observes that "there is a significant literary renaissance taking place all over the country, especially in the genre of poetry" (xv). As younger writers began to publish, many of them talked about feeling a sense of renewed energy and commitment, and of identifying within themselves a collective identity that set them apart from older writers.² Many of them have also

chronicled the growing intellectual community that encouraged many writers to continue to write even when things were at their worst: ANA monthly readings, gatherings at literary salons, publication in ANA anthologies and literary journals, and appearances in the pages of *The Post Express Literary Supplement* and the *Vanguard*, which provided much-needed forums for literary debate and discussion.³

The emerging account of this generation is one of triumph over adversity, a story of courageous individuals refusing to be silenced and the greater community supporting them. It is a remarkable story, one that is still being written by critics and the writers themselves. In this article, I attempt to expand current understandings of this generation's voice(s) by focusing on the work of an emerging writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who until now has not been included in discussions about the third generation.

As one of the youngest members of this generation and as a writer whose career first began to unfold in the U.S., Adichie has thus far followed a trajectory slightly different from many of her peers, particularly those whose careers have developed primarily in Nigeria.⁴ These differences emanate from her decision to attend college and graduate school in the U.S., which has meant that she has followed a career path common for young American writers.⁵ Adichie has published her short stories in several literary magazines, including prestigious American journals such as *The Iowa Review* and *Zoetrope All-Story*; her stories have won several awards, including the O. Henry Prize; and her novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was published in 2003 by Algonquin, shortlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction, and longlisted for the Booker.⁶

Adichie's career is still developing, but her work warrants attention for several reasons. She is a talented writer who has already gained a measure of success that eludes many writers, both in Africa and the U.S. Furthermore, her work to date expands our understanding and characterizations of third-generation Nigerian writing. While her fiction reveals various influences on Nigerian writers, particularly from the first generation, it also resounds with a wide range of texts, from Nigeria, other African nations, and throughout the black Atlantic. This transnational intertextuality suggests the presence of a heterogeneous, diasporic dimension within contemporary Nigerian literature—a dimension present within many national literatures of the postmodern, globalized world.

THE THIRD GENERATION: REWRITING THE
NIGERIAN LITERARY TRADITION

Literary traditions are constantly being made and remade. Literature, after all, is continually evolving and changing; and the definitions that denote categories and

literary lineages are constantly debated by readers, critics, and the writers themselves. In Anglo-American criticism, for example, the notion of a dominant literary canon has been challenged from nearly every corner since the late 1960s, as scholars have excavated and defined alternative literary traditions that redress the omissions and exclusions of the main (white, male) canon.⁷ But as African American literary critic Hazel Carby observes, the project of establishing any tradition, no matter how desirable, can result in the repetition of the sins of the dominant canon:

I would argue that our project in African American Studies is like the construction of the dominant canon to the extent that it displays a desire to create unity out of disunity and to resolve, if not make invisible, the social contradictions or differences between texts. And, after all, the function of traditions is to create the illusion of unity. (242)

* * *

The danger of this illusion is that it blinds us to difference; and when we are too intent on defining unity, we run the risk of searching for cultural purity, dissolving historical difference and excluding texts because they do not fit into our categories.

Still, critics—myself included—continue to think in terms of literary traditions. As problematical as these may be, they provide us with a useful narrative of the literary changes, developments, and influences that take place over time. After all, writers *do* influence each other; they engage in dialogue through their work; and these intertextual relationships often provide the basis for generalizations about literary movements and groups of writers. There are also practical reasons for conceptualizing in terms of literary traditions, such as university curricula and disciplinary boundaries, which frequently have nothing to do with writers and writing, but which, nonetheless, can exert powerful institutional pressures. It is precisely these pressures and the attendant power struggles to which Carby calls attention in her essay. She advocates a more critical examination of all literary traditions, one that takes us away from the vexed question of who should or should not be included in any particular canon and instead strives to reconfigure all traditions in such a way that we can constantly “acknowledge cultural complexity” (242).

Struggle characterizes the formation of all canons, including Nigeria's. In Nigeria, as throughout Africa, writers and literary scholars have defined their literary tradition in opposition to colonialism and EuroAmerican literature. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's famous articulation of three “stages” within African literature—“the age of anti-colonial struggle; the age of independence; and the age of neo-colonialism” (92)—resonates with other

theories of the development of African literature.⁸ Kenneth Harrow, for example, divides it into periods (which he calls “thresholds of change”) that include the literatures of “*témoignage*,” “revolt,” and “oxymoron” (x). Likewise, many critics of Nigerian literature have periodized the Nigerian literary tradition into three generations.⁹ The first is defined as those writers whose work was published before and directly after independence (such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo), while the second includes writers whose work appeared after the Nigerian civil war (such as Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, and Tanure Ojaide).¹⁰ Following Djiboutian writer Abdourahman Waberi, who identified the new generation of Francophone African writers as the “children of the postcolony” (“les enfants de la postcolonie”) born after 1960, many critics have designated the third generation in Nigeria as those writers who published their first work in the mid-1980s (11).¹¹

However, this periodization has been contested from many corners. As with feminist critics in the U.S., feminist and womanist critics of Nigerian literature have challenged the Nigerian canon for its exclusion of women writers. One of the strongest criticisms has come from Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, who characterizes Nigerian literature as “phallic, dominated as it is by male writers and male critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience” (“Women” 60).¹² Third-generation writer Toyin Adewale makes a similar point in the introduction to *Breaking the Silence*, her anthology of short fiction, when she asks the question: “Where are my literary foremothers and sisters?” (vii). Her unanswered question contains several possibilities: that women writers have been excluded from the canon; that women have faced gender-specific obstacles—economic, cultural, psychological—making it difficult or impossible to write; or, finally, that a combination of both has excluded and silenced women.¹³ Adewale herself has attempted to remedy both issues by publishing her anthology, which has brought attention to many more female voices, and founding a supportive network for established and emerging authors, Women Writers of Nigeria (WRITA).

Women are not the only critics of the Nigerian literary canon; many third-generation writers have also faulted critics, teachers, and universities for being slow to include their work along with that of the first two generations.¹⁴ Some of them have voiced their frustration at stagnant concepts of “Nigerian literature” that do not include newer work, which, they argue, more accurately reflects and responds to contemporary Nigeria. For example, in an interview with *Poets & Writers*

magazine, Helon Habila distinguishes his fiction from the work of earlier writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri:

They made the way for us, for the younger generation to follow. But it doesn't necessarily mean that we have to continue writing in the same tradition that they wrote in. If you have read my book, you will see that it's totally different from [Achebe's] *Things Fall Apart*. I try to avoid that . . . I don't know what to call it—that exotic stuff. I want to write about the reality that is happening now. The use of myth and legend and history was very traditional. Times have changed.

(Bures 51)

Habila's rhetoric of difference surfaces in other statements made by young Nigerian writers when speaking of their generation.¹⁵ Likewise, in his article on trends in African poetry, second-generation writer Tanure Ojaide observes that new developments represent “a deliberate reaction against earlier trends, especially those associated with early Okigbo, Soyinka, and Clark.”¹⁶ These statements suggest that younger writers are not only setting themselves apart from earlier generations (most of all the first) but also attempting to redefine Nigerian literature through their craft, both in their choice of subject and style.

We would, of course, be remiss if we didn't ask the question: is the third generation really as new and different as it claims to be? Because we lack the perspective of history, it's probably too soon to say. However, there are enough writers whose work is fresh and different from what came before to suggest that yes, change is afoot; and collectively, the third generation does seem to be taking Nigerian literature in new directions. But we should also maintain a healthy skepticism regarding claims of absolute difference. Such statements are indicative of the greater struggle over the canon and, more generally, over the meanings of “Nigerian literature” and “Nigeria”—a struggle that manifested itself when no one was awarded the first NLNG Prize for Literature in 2004.¹⁷ Underneath assertions of difference may lie continuities.¹⁸ For example, when describing the “renaissance” of Nigerian writing in *Voices on the Fringe*, Garuba admits that “it will be an exaggeration to say that there has been a gulf [between the first generation and contemporary poets]. The poems here show that there has been a more dynamic intercourse than we are often prepared to admit” (xix).

FROM FIRST TO THIRD GENERATION: REPETITION,
REVISION, AND THINGS FALL APART

Unlike some of her peers, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has made no such assertions of difference about her writing. Yet a close examination of her work suggests

that Adichie, like her peers, is directly engaged with the Nigerian literary canon and is furthermore making a case for her inclusion in it. Consider, for example, the following three passages from her work, one from a short story and two from her novel:

“There was a sense of *things falling apart* that year, the year I was seventeen—things getting worse, slipping away to a place you could never reach out to bring them back, to put them back up.”

(“*Light Skin*” 59; my emphasis)

“*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.”

(*Purple Hibiscus* 3; my emphasis)

“*Everything came tumbling down.*”

(*Purple Hibiscus* 257; my emphasis)

The highlighted phrases constitute references to Chinua Achebe’s 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, which provides the opening line for *Purple Hibiscus* (passage #2). How better to alert the reader that familiar terrain—both the events and the Nigeria of Achebe’s novel—will be rewritten and remapped? Adichie’s rewriting pays homage to one of the forefathers of Nigerian literature (indeed, of Anglophone African literature) while it also challenges him.¹⁹ *Things Fall Apart*, after all, is sometimes treated as though it were an originary text.²⁰ At the same time, Adichie’s revisionary gesture emphasizes how pertinent the line “things fall apart” remains. Twenty-five years after the publication of his novel, Achebe’s observation resonates with a younger generation who may not have experienced colonialism but has instead lived through the “postcolonial mayhem” of the past two decades.²¹

Adichie revises Achebe’s novel in several ways. She takes one of his themes, the breakdown of family and community under the pressures of colonialism and religion, and recasts it in post-independent Nigeria, at a time when colonialism’s heirs—corruption, political strife, and religious dogmatism—strain family and community. Like her predecessor, Adichie weaves her story around the figure of a domineering father, and both novels explore how a father’s tragic flaw propels him to harm his family. Achebe’s proud protagonist, Okonkwo, rules his family with a “heavy hand” and is given to frequent bursts of a “fiery temper,” a symptom of his fear of weakness and failure (16). This fear “lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father,” a man who failed to secure a title within his clan, and died with debt (17). In Okonkwo’s judgment, his father is no better than *agbala*, a woman; and so he acts mercilessly toward those who demonstrate weakness in order to prove his own strength and manhood.

Within the first five chapters of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo beats two of his wives, moments in the narrative that pass by quickly. “I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story,” his second wife says to the priestess Chielo (48). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie tells the story that Okonkwo’s wife cannot tell. She begins the novel with another father’s act of rage, thus signalling the parallel with Okonkwo and the violence yet to come. Eugene Achike, the father of two children, is a strict Catholic who lives within the Manichean dictates of an intolerant faith.²² Like Okonkwo, he is a successful and important man: his factories and newspaper have earned him the title of *Omelora*, “The One Who Does for the Community,” and he reigns, God-like, over his family. Eugene is also an angry man who has constructed his self-identity around his rejection of his own father and all that he stands for. Eugene’s rebuff stems from his years at missionary school, which made him “too much of a colonial product,” as his sister remarks (13); and although we do not know the reasons for his religious conversion, we do see how his father’s traditional Igbo beliefs threaten the entire structure upon which he bases his identity and his power. His familial authority, we can conjecture, is made all the more important by his relative powerlessness in a postcolonial country in which military might trumps even the most successful and well-connected civilian.

Adichie’s exploration of the interconnectedness of Christianity and patriarchy both reflects and revises *Things Fall Apart*. While Achebe explored the links between religion and colonialism and their effects on traditional Nigeria, Adichie refocuses the inquiry by adding gender. Her feminist revisioning, to use Adrienne Rich’s term, occurs through an “appropriation” and an “inversion,” both strategies used by many African women writers (Stratton 173).²³ Indeed, as Florence Stratton argues, the first writer to revise Achebe was Flora Nwapa, who challenged her predecessor’s idealization of motherhood in *Things Fall Apart* by revealing its constraints and burdens in *Efuru*, published eight years later—and her challenge was taken up by second-generation writer Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood*.²⁴ *Purple Hibiscus*, then, can be understood within an intergenerational, intertextual revisioning of Achebe’s novel.²⁵

Adichie’s most powerful change, however, occurs in her displacement of Achebe’s omniscient narration for the first person, a point of view that recentres the story. Fifteen-year-old Kambili Achike provides our perspective on her authoritarian father, and her diminished life dramatizes the effects of a too-powerful father on a young girl. Her narration enables us to see what cannot be seen in Achebe’s text; as Deirdre Lashgiri observes, “Shifting the vantage point of the subject allows us to see forms of violence that had been invisible, or to see

in unfamiliar ways. When the gaze is redefined, what it encompasses changes, deconstructing the master narrative” (3). Through Kambili’s eyes, we come to see how an entire family has adapted to life under a rigid and unpredictable patriarch, and we understand how unbridled power can cause both physical and psychological destruction.

WOMEN WRITERS OF THE THIRD GENERATION:
VOICING THE BODY

In describing the work of the third generation, Adesanmi argues that many of these writers have evolved an “aesthetics of pain” in order to represent their “hopes and dreams tragically atrophied by the Nigerian system” (“Europhonism” 121-22). The phrase “aesthetics of pain” aptly describes the work of many women writers of this generation, including Adichie, who have explored women’s physical experiences in their poetry and fiction. Writers such as Titilola Shoneyin, Promise Okeke, Temilola Abioye, and Unoma Azuah claim “sexuality or sexual independence as a form of empowerment,” as Azuah herself writes in “The Emerging Lesbian Voice.” First published by Nigerian newspapers in the 1990s, their poetry and short stories claim previously taboo subjects and advocate a radical critique of patriarchal culture and its master narratives: Shoneyin, for example, unabashedly calls her verse “clitoranguish.”²⁶ Chika Unigwe’s aesthetics of pain has included writing about issues such as breast cancer and AIDS.²⁷

Adichie also writes about the embodied experiences of female characters in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora. Thus far, Adichie’s work has not explored lesbian sexuality; but many of her short stories do examine female sexuality in the context of romantic relationships with men. While some of these stories directly examine the position of women in formal patriarchal relationships such as marriage (“**Imitation**” and “**New Husband**”), many of them explore the complexity of romantic relationships that transgress various kinds of boundaries: in “**Transition to Glory**,” a young Nigerian woman has an affair with a married man; in “**Light Skin**,” a 16-year-old Nigerian girl crosses class barriers in order to seduce a friend’s boyfriend; in “**You In America**,” a recent Nigerian immigrant struggles with the insurmountable distance between her and her American boyfriend.²⁸ Similarly, one of the narrative threads of *Purple Hibiscus* touches on the budding romantic feelings of Kambili for Father Amadi, a young Nigerian priest; and while the relationship remains platonic, the possibility lingers for much of the story.

Purple Hibiscus, however, centres around another taboo topic: physical abuse. Through Kambili, the author introduces her readers to a family blessed with material wealth but cursed by violence. As the story unfolds, the

daily events of their troubled lives—their mother’s multiple miscarriages, Jaja’s deformed little finger—remain unspoken secrets. These “unspeakable things unspoken” are shared between Kambili and her brother through stolen glances.²⁹ At first we are only given hints. We know that Eugene exhibits a strange obsession with order in his children’s lives, that he dominates the dinner table with his religious pronouncements, and that his violent expressions of rage erupt unpredictably. We watch his family’s fearful acquiescence to his dictates and his children’s watchful veneration of him as they constantly seek his approval and love. We see how highly he is regarded in the community, how he uses his position as a newspaper publisher to advocate democratic change in Nigeria, and how he never mentions the human rights award given to him by *Amnesty World*. At the same time, we hear him beat his wife behind closed doors, and like Kambili, we struggle to reconcile his public persona with his private self.

Adichie represents Kambili’s experience of abuse in economical, straightforward prose. There are three episodes in which Eugene punishes his daughter, each one escalating what is at stake and heightening the reader’s empathetic response. The first time, as the enraged Eugene raises a belt, Kambili’s mind jumps to a scene she has witnessed many times:

Sometimes I watched the Fulani nomads, white jellabas flapping against their legs in the wind, making clucking sounds as they herded their cows across the roads in Enugu with a switch, each smack of the switch swift and precise. Papa was like a Fulani nomad—although he did not have their spare, tall body—as he swung the belt at Mama, Jaja, and me, muttering that the devil would not win.

(102)

The juxtaposition of peaceful, rural nomads with Eugene’s violent rage startles, but the image does more. By slowing down the moment, it increases the tension, enabling us to see through the eyes of a young narrator who possesses acute powers of observation.

The second time, Kambili is tortured by her father for spending time with her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu. Eugene pours boiling water on her feet in order to teach her that she should not “walk into sin” (194):

I wanted to say “Yes, Papa,” because he was right, but the burning on my feet was climbing up, in swift courses of excruciating pain, to my head and lips and eyes. Papa was holding me with one wide hand, pouring the water carefully with the other. I did not know that the sobbing voice—“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” was mine until the water stopped and I realized my mouth was moving and the words were still coming out.

(194-95)

The excruciating pain severs Kambili from her words, an experience shared by many victims of torture. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues that torture is

“world-destroying”: “in the most literal way possible, the created world of thought and feeling, all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one’s self and one’s world, and that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language, ceases to exist” (30). In the moment of torture, Kambili is barely conscious of her words or of herself; she is fully subjectified to her father’s power, a subject in all senses of the word. The effects of his abuse permeate her sense of herself and the world: she believes that she deserves to be punished, that her father tortures her “for [her] own good,” that he cannot be wrong because he is like God and unlike other mortals (196).³⁰

By the third time, however, Kambili has begun to change. After visiting her freethinking Auntie Ifeoma and her spirited cousins in Nsukka, she returns with a gift from her cousin Amaka, a portrait of her Papa-Nnukwu. The picture symbolizes the growth of Kambili’s world to include not only her forbidden grandfather but also her aunt, her cousins, and Father Amadi; and with the expansion of her world, she has begun to question her father’s omnipotence. Back at home, her father tears up the painting and attacks her. But this time, she will not give in. Her defiance takes the only form it can: she clutches at the pieces of the painting and refuses to obey his orders to get up off the floor. Even as his cruel kicks increase in force and momentum, “I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting” (211). She retreats to the stage of an infant, wordless and silent, which increases her vulnerability. At the same time, however, her retreat becomes a source of strength. Having withdrawn into her mind, she imagines her father’s kicks merging with her cousin’s “culturally conscious” Afrobeat music, itself a symbol of resistance against colonialism and an affirmation of traditional Nigerian culture (211). Her silence signals her refusal to forget what she has seen: a different way of living, a family life which she “had never had, would never have” (210). As I shall explore in the next section, in some ways her silence speaks louder than words.

Adichie’s clear-eyed portrayal of these moments of extreme bodily pain and psychic anguish echoes the work of Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera, an older member of the third generation of African writers. Vera exhibits similar courage in her representations of violence against women in postcolonial Zimbabwe. In her novels, she has taken on several taboo subjects: rape and infanticide (*Without a Name*), incest (*Under the Tongue*), abortion and suicide (*Butterfly Burning*), and rape and mutilation (*The Stone Virgins*). Vera’s highly elliptical and impressionistic style differs from Adichie’s, but the thematic impulse is similar. In contrast to the early work of Buchi Emecheta, for example, in which male characters tend to be one-dimensional, Vera explores the complexity of men who

harm and oppress women, particularly in *The Stone Virgins*.³¹ In this novel, Vera represents the psyche of a male rapist, thus moving beyond a simple “inversion of patriarchal manicheism” (Stratton 174). Similarly, Adichie hints at the complexity of Eugene’s character: after burning Kambili’s feet, he later tells her that as a boy, he himself had suffered a similar punishment at the hands of the priests who raised him. After he committed “a sin against my own body” (masturbation), the priest soaked his hands in boiling water (196). Eugene himself is trapped in a cycle of abuse emanating from colonialism and Christianity, yet he views the act of punishing his own children as compassionate. He is hurting them in order to save them from the fires of hell.

Purple Hibiscus also resonates with Vera’s *Under the Tongue*, a story of a father’s abuse of his young daughter and her struggle with voicelessness. Zhizha is raped by her father when he returns from war, and the young narrator loses her ability to speak. Vera represents her broken subjectivity with a disjointed narrative that captures the psychic violence and the resulting chaos that shatters Zhiza’s entire world. This violence ruptures the very act of representation, or as Vera puts it, “A word does not rot unless it is carried in the mouth for too long, under the tongue” (231). As a lyrical and haunting meditation on the relationship of language and trauma, *Under the Tongue* joins an intertextual tradition of stories written by black women exploring voicelessness and incest, which includes Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Sapphire’s *Push*.³² Although *Purple Hibiscus* is not an incest novel, it shares similar concerns. Like Maya and Precious, Kambili must move from voicelessness and silence toward voice and healing. To build on Adesanmi’s term, Kambili must literally “re-member” herself—she must end her alienation from her own voice and body—by putting together a coherent narrative of her past and present.

Many of these themes emerge in the work of third-generation writers in other locations in the black Atlantic. In particular, Adichie’s novel brings to mind the work of Edwidge Danticat, who has chronicled the experiences of Haitians at home and in the diaspora.³³ Danticat’s first novel, the coming-of-age story *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, explores a taboo subject—“testing” young women for their virginity—which generated a great deal of controversy among Haitian Americans.³⁴ Her second novel, *The Farming of Bones*, addresses another uncomfortable subject: the 1937 massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic. Like Kambili, the narrator of this story must come to terms with trauma and torture (in this case, of her fellow Haitians) in order to find the words with which to tell her story. If *The Farming of Bones* posits an embodied aesthetics of pain, Danticat’s most recent collection,

The Dew Breaker, takes this further. The author enters the mind of a torturer, probing deeply into the psychology of a man who harms others for a living and who befriends his victims before he torments them. Like Vera and Adichie, Danticat's critique of the patriarchal abuse of power includes an attempt to understand the men who carry out its most egregious violence; yet her primary purpose remains, as it does for the other authors, to heed the voice of the silent abused.

VOICELESSNESS, COMING TO VOICE, AND BEING
HEARD

Ever since Gayatri Spivak posed the question, critics in postcolonial studies have debated whether the subaltern woman can speak.³⁵ In contrast to Spivak's assertion that the subaltern woman is mute, Carole Boyce Davies has argued that the problem lies in the "selective hearing or mis-hearing" of her oppressors ("Hearing" 3).³⁶ Adichie's novel suggests a third alternative: that silence and voicelessness result from a combination of the problems about which Spivak and Davies write. The causes of silence and voicelessness are multiple, their meanings not only complex but also constantly changing.³⁷ One person can suffer both from being silenced and not being heard, especially as circumstances change and time passes. Kambili is a case in point. She suffers because she cannot articulate herself—her father's patriarchal rule has subsumed her individual identity almost entirely, and his abuse rends her from her own ability to speak. But at other moments she struggles to speak; and while fear often prevents her from speaking the truth, she does manage to talk. What she says, however, is often misunderstood by others. They do not really hear what she means, or they do not listen to her silences, which speak louder than her words. They do not comprehend the "gap" between her "utterance and [her] unconscious intention or feeling" (Elbow, "What Do We Mean . . ." 18). Instead, her classmates call her a "backyard snob" (49), and other adults believe that she is "quiet" and "shy" (57, 139). They do not hear the struggle taking place beneath her words.

Kambili's silences, then, are not absolute. They are full of mumbles, whispers, and coughs that reveal the symptoms of her physical struggle with fear, her "tongue-tiedness" (49). When she tries to speak, her throat tightens and words will not come; she fears her father's reprisals, his unspoken command that she not tell others their secrets. After she fails to come at the top of her class at school, she feels a "tough lump like poorly made fufu formed in my throat" each time she takes another test, lest her father punish her (52). Estranged from her own speech and the workings of her throat and tongue, Kambili's linguistic alienation underscores her personal isolation. Her brother and mother are also victims, their powerlessness enabling Eugene's violence.³⁸ Safely ensconced behind their high

compound walls, buffered not only from the political violence taking place outside but also from others who might help them, the Achike family has become trapped by Eugene's wealth and his position in the community.

Compounding the issue of not being heard, Kambili suffers from an inability to communicate what she truly feels. "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,'" she tells her mother, revealing her fear of implicating her father in his acts of violence (10). She does not say what she wants to say when talking with classmates or her cousins. Her father's hold on her is too great, the secrets too dark; there is too much that cannot be said. In this sense, then, Kambili is voiceless. The only person with whom she can truly communicate is her brother Jaja, and the two of them do not need words: they have an "asusu anya, a language of the eyes," which enables them to communicate what cannot be voiced (305). With other people, the narrator often struggles because she does not know what she would say, or how she would say it, if she could say anything. She does not know what she feels or who she is; her subjectivity is too wrapped up in pleasing her father. When she says something that wins his praise, she feels complete, and his approval affects her physically: when he holds her hand, she feels "as though my mouth were full of melting sugar" (26); when he gives her tea, she feels "the love burn my tongue" (31). Even thinking of his absence causes her throat to tighten in fear (108).

Yet when Kambili and her brother visit Auntie Ifeoma's family, Kambili begins to see another world. What her cousins lack in material wealth, they make up for in opinions. They all "seemed to simply speak and speak and speak," Kambili observes, wondering how it is that Amaka, also fifteen, "opened her mouth and had words flow easily out" (120, 99). The liberated voices of her cousins' household, symbolized by the rare purple hibiscus in her aunt's garden, opens up new possibilities to Kambili; to draw from Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, their polyvocal speech interrupts and contests the dominance of Eugene's monologue.³⁹ Their freewheeling discourse encourages the growth of Kambili's self-awareness. As a result, the binary structure under which she had grown up begins to unravel and she begins to question her father's rigid dogmatism. Kambili's delayed coming-of-age results in a kind of "crossing" to ground that is psychologically unfamiliar, to use Lashgiri's reading of Anzaldúa's concept of crossing, or "*travesía*."⁴⁰ Through transgressing the precepts of her father's moralistic universe, Kambili finds her way to voicing herself, thus becoming the author of her own story. She discovers what Peter Elbow calls "resonant voice," the voice that fully captures unconscious intentions and feelings ("What Do We Mean . . ." 17). According to Elbow, in order to do

speak in a resonant voice, the individual must first dismantle the “acceptable self,” that self which we construct in order to gain the approval of others (WWP 301). As Kambili discards the self she has constructed for her father, she begins to discover who she is without him.

As a bildungsroman, a sub-genre that centers around self-empowerment, self-development, and the pivotal act of claiming one’s voice, Adichie’s novel resonates with a wide range of coming-of-age stories, particularly ones written by African, African American, and Caribbean American women writers. For example, Kambili’s internal growth parallels that of another young protagonist, Tambu, in Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*. Like Kambili, Tambu is a product of a Christian missionary education, and it is through exposure to her cousin Nyasha’s struggles that Tambu matures. She realizes that the world is not defined by good and evil, but shades of gray; and at the end of the story, Tambu is able to voice her own experience.

I am arguing, then, that *Purple Hibiscus* holds many things in common with novels by a range of women writers—including Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, and Edwidge Danticat—and that these parallels furthermore suggest that Adichie belongs in multiple literary traditions, including a black women’s literary tradition that spans the globe. As critics such as Davies have argued, black women’s literature is inherently transgressive; and as a “series of boundary crossings,” it challenges fixed ideas and definitions about subjectivity and writing (Davies, *Black Women* 4).⁴¹ Positioning Adichie’s novel in a black woman’s literary tradition enables us to think about it comparatively, across transnational traditions and discursive contexts, and it enables us to see the intricacy of its intertextual connections. The strands of this web extend the parameters of what we think of as the third generation in Nigeria, stretching it out to encompass other writers in other countries—and as this web stretches, it reveals the complexity of trying to delineate pure literary traditions, with clearly demarcated generations, in any nation. No national literature, Nigeria’s included, is completely hermetic; at least it cannot remain so for very long. The act of imaginative creation enables the writer to transcend the boundaries of others’ making, to create connections where none existed before. Thus the orderly and hierarchical concepts of literary “generations,” “lineages,” and “genealogies,” with their implicit procreative metaphor, do not fully capture the non-familial, transgressive, and often surprising connections that writers can make.

SPEAKING OUT: THE POLITICS OF AUTHORITY AND
AUTHORSHIP

Within feminist studies, critics talk about giving voice to oneself as an act of self-creation, a claim to author-

ship and authority that enables the woman writer to define herself through the power of language. Claiming a voice is an internal act that results from tapping into the authority derived from an individual’s lived experience. It does not depend upon external sources of power, whether institutional, cultural, or discursive; to the contrary, it often challenges them. The obstacles preventing women from claiming their voice are many; they range from the task of challenging the patriarchal structures of one’s particular culture or society (a task made infinitely more difficult by the forces of colonialism and globalization) to the frequent absence of literary foremothers. It is this situation which led Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to postulate the existence of an “anxiety of authorship” for British and American women writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴² By contrast, African writers have a rich oral tradition to call upon, a tradition of storytelling that predates and continues to exist alongside written narrative. This oral tradition has played an important role for many African writers, particularly for women.⁴³ For example, Buchi Emecheta has used the figure of the Igbo storyteller to describe her own writerly identity.⁴⁴ And Emecheta is not alone; for many women writers throughout the African diaspora, including African American writers such as Paule Marshall and Alice Walker, the stories told by women—whether performed by professional storytellers or shared informally over the kitchen table—have provided inspiration.⁴⁵

This tradition notwithstanding, one can’t help but detect a certain anxiety of authorship underlying Toyin Adewale’s pointed question in *Breaking the Silence*. Where *are* her literary foremothers and sisters? It is a question that has haunted many contemporary Nigerian women writers who find insufficient numbers beyond pioneers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta. Adichie provides one answer in her portrayal of Kambili, who serves as a figure for the silenced woman writer. Kambili must challenge her father’s Manichean monologue and claim her own voice. She must cast off the chains on her hands, like Habila’s Lomba—only in her case it is a bit more like slipping out from under the hand at her throat. In the struggle to free herself from her father’s stranglehold, she finally comes to bear witness, through language, to her experience of the world. Only in escaping his grasp can she become the author of and witness to her own life; only in narrating her life story can she begin to heal the traumatic dismemberment between her voice and her consciousness; only in speaking out can she begin to exist as a whole person with a future as well as a past.

Another answer lies in Adichie’s own coming-of-age as a writer; for as I have suggested, Adichie has a wide range of literary forefathers, foremothers, and sisters that includes Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Maya Angelou, Sapphire,

and Edwidge Danticat. Perhaps this provides a more optimistic answer to Adewale's question: that sometimes, not all of one's family lives at home. I do not mean to suggest that women writers in Nigeria have not faced, and do not continue to face, significant hurdles in writing and finding an audience; nor do I wish to sideline the project of including more women writers in the Nigerian literary canon. What I do mean to suggest is that if an individual writer has exposure to a wide range of authors, she can sometimes find the fathers and mothers she needs. Though perhaps we need another term, because "fathers" and "mothers" aren't quite the words I want. We need, instead, a non-genealogical and non-gendered word that can suggest how literary traditions do not necessarily depend on family, nation, or geography alone.

I have suggested, then, that *Purple Hibiscus* is part of many literary traditions—African literature, African women's literature, black women's literature, American literature—but it is also very much a third-generation novel, a narrative that resounds with the work of other young Nigerian-born writers, male and female. For like many of these writers, Adichie reveals a recurring concern with the postcolonial mayhem that underlies the domestic world of her characters, and her observations about one family's private struggle extend into the realm of political metaphor. As a domestic tyrant, Eugene becomes a figure for the novel's unnamed political tyrant who stages a coup and takes over the country. This Abacha-like dictator shuts down the *Standard*, Eugene's newspaper, and has a letter bomb sent to kill its editor; his soldiers intimidate drivers on the roads and attack women in the market; and his iron grasp leads to student demonstrations, an absence of fuel, and the cessation of payment to Kambili's Auntie Ifeoma and the other university instructors in Nsukka. The irony of the story, of course, resides in Eugene's oppression of his own family while he fights for political freedom; but through staging this seemingly paradoxical predicament, *Purple Hibiscus* suggests the pervasiveness of despotism and the way it can ensnare even those who resist it.

As a meditation on the nature of dictatorship, Adichie's story continually suggests parallels between the public world and the private self. The narrator herself recognizes the political allegory manifest in her personal struggle, though she also alludes to differences between the two:

Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: 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.

(16)

Jaja's defiance, Kambili suggests, extends beyond the political struggle for democratic freedoms; it is the cry for the right to exist as a human being. But the differences between these two struggles, as too many people know, are not always so clear-cut; and this is particularly the case for writers, not just in Nigeria but in many totalitarian states, where words can be classified as political sedition and authors can find themselves in danger because of their work. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili is a silenced agent who must claim her voice; and in bearing witness to her own life, she tells a greater story about the nature of tyranny in postcolonial Nigeria. The challenge, at the end, is for Kambili to articulate the "different silence" of the present (293). Like the other writers of the third generation, and like Nigeria itself, she now must find her way forward—slowly, resolutely, indefatigably—into the future.

Notes

1. Helon's novel was originally published as a collection of short stories in Nigeria under the title *Prison Stories*. His original opening section won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2001, and the novel won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, Africa Region, in 2003.
2. See, for example, Frank Bures's interview with Helon Habila in *Poets & Writers* and Remi Raji's interview with Toyin Adewale, Maria Ajima, Lola Shoneyin, and Promise Okekwe in *Position*.
3. See Adesanmi's "Re-Membering," pp. 14-16, and "Europhonism," pp. 118-121. Also see Bures's interview with Helon Habila.
4. Born in Nigeria in 1977, Adichie was in school in Nsukka during the chaotic events of the 1980s and 90s; during this time, many of the other third generation writers were already making their way in the world. Most were in Nigeria, but several—including Chris Abani, Ike Oguine, Helon Habila, Okey Ndibe, and Chika Unigwe—have spent time in Europe or the U.S.
5. When she was 19 years old, Adichie left Nigeria to attend college in the U.S., first at Drexel University and then Eastern Connecticut State University. In 2004, she completed an MFA at Johns Hopkins University. In the U.S., increasing numbers of young writers aspire to follow a professionalized and institutionalized path that includes such things as creative writing programs, writing fellowships, publication in literary journals, literary awards, critical acclaim for debut novels, book tours, and university teaching.
6. "Half of a Yellow Sun" was published in *Zoetrope All-Story* and "New Husband" in *The Iowa Review*. "The American Embassy," originally published in *Prism International* in 2002, won the O. Henry

- Prize for Short Fiction in 2003. Adichie's short fiction has also won an International Pen Award and has been selected by the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association and the BBC Short Story Award; "You In America" was shortlisted for the 2002 Caine Prize for African Writing.
7. In the early twentieth century, the concept of an AngloAmerican tradition received one of its most influential proponents in the figure of T. S. Eliot, whose 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" defined how many English-speaking critics and teachers around the world approached the study of literature for decades. Eliot's definition of tradition emerged from his theory of a writer's "historical sense" (a perception "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence") that enables writers to understand their contemporary moment and attain in their art what Eliot termed "impersonality" (1093). Beginning in the late 1960s, poststructuralist critics began to attack the dominant AngloAmerican literary canon, and most critical schools since then—including feminist, African American, queer, and postcolonial theories—have issued challenges of their own.
 8. There is, of course, a wide range of approaches to African literature.
 9. For example, see Wendy Griswold, Pius Adesanmi, and Tanure Ojaide.
 10. Wendy Griswold, for example, dubs this first generation (who published their first novel before 1970) the "pioneers," and the second generation (whose first novel came out between 1970 and 1983) the "oil boomers." See Griswold, pp. 36-47. But as Adesanmi suggests in "Re-Membering the Present, Prophesying the Past," these generational boundaries are not always clear and distinct.
 11. See Adesanmi, "Re-Membering," p. 11 and Griswold, p. 48. Griswold calls this generation the "strugglers," in reference to the economic and political chaos that coincided with their authorial coming-of-age.
 12. For other feminist and womanist critiques of the African male canon, see Florence Stratton, Susan Andrade, and Carole Boyce Davies's and Elaine Savory Fido's "African Women Writers: Toward a Literary History." Many critics have suggested alternative ways of formulating an African women's literary tradition; see Davies and Fido in addition to Davies's and Graves's *Ngambika*. Also see Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's *African Woman Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*.
 13. One is reminded, of course, of Virginia Woolf's argument about Shakespeare's fictional sister. See *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 46-57. Charles Larson has chronicled the many obstacles facing African writers generally; see *The Ordeal of the African Writer*.
 14. See Adesanmi's "Europhonism, Universities and Other Stories."
 15. See Remi Raji's interview with third generation writers Toyin Adewale, Maria Ajima, Lola Shoneyin, and Promise Okekwe. Also see Okey Ndibe.
 16. Ojaide, p. 6. Ojaide's article examines trends dating from the mid-1970s, so that his observations are not solely about the "third generation" per se.
 17. Multiple controversies surrounded the award, which came out of a partnership between the ANA and the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas Company. Among other things, it excluded Nigerian writers living abroad. See Odia Ofeimun's article, "Not Yet the Nigerian Prize."
 18. Consider the many other literary movements when writers defined themselves as different, such as literary modernism in the early twentieth century. Although there was an explosion of American and British manifestos announcing a complete break from the past, there were also continuities, albeit repressed, underneath the rhetoric of rupture and change.
 19. In one of the ironies of history, Adichie grew up in the same house in which Chinua Achebe lived at the University of Nigeria's Nsukka campus.
 20. *Things Fall Apart* is often mentioned first in lineages of Nigerian and African literature, and it is routinely taught in classes on Nigerian literature, African literature, African history, and postcolonial literature. Abiola Irele calls *Things Fall Apart* a "classic text" for both the AngloAmerican and African literary traditions. See Irele's *The African Imagination*, p. 141.
 21. The term is Odia Ofeimun's. See Adesanmi's "Re-Membering," p. 14.
 22. See Frantz Fanon's description of the Manicheism of the colonial world in *The Wretched of the Earth*.
 23. In an e-mail correspondence, Adichie described her relationship to feminism as follows: "I am generally wary of labels because they are so constricting. [. . .] I like to call myself an African Feminist [. . .] My character Auntie Ifeoma may personify it. She has found that comfortable middle ground of taking what she wants of old and new."
 24. See Stratton, pp. 111-13, and Susan Andrade. Adichie's novel can furthermore be read in the

- context of Efurú's quest for her lost mother. Kambili's mother is not lost, but she is powerless and ineffectual, unable to protect her own children.
25. The repetition of this act of revision suggests the presence of continuity in the very moment of defining oneself as different.
 26. See Raji's "Among the Siren Sisters" and Adesansmi's "Re-Membering," p. 17.
 27. See Unigwe's "The Secret."
 28. In "The Scarf," a young woman crosses the boundaries of ethnicity, religion, and class in a non-romantic relationship.
 29. See Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken."
 30. Kambili's deification of her father brings to mind the work of psychoanalyst W. R. D. Fairbairn, who in his study of neglected and abused children observed how often they excused the abusive parent and blamed themselves. Metaphorically speaking, he writes, "it is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God [a good parent] than to live in the world ruled by the Devil [a bad parent]. A sinner in a world ruled by God may be bad, but there is always a certain sense of security to be derived from the fact that the world around is good" (66-7).
 31. I am thinking particularly of Emecheta's first two autobiographical novels, *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*.
 32. Other texts include Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Many other black women writers have written about incest but not necessarily voicelessness; these writers include Toni Morrison, Gayle Jones, Joan Riley, and Buchi Emecheta. The issues of abuse and voicelessness also appear in the work of a wide range of women, not all black, including the work of American writers such as Dorothy Allison (*Bastard Out of Carolina*) and Patricia Chao (*Monkey King*).
 33. Danticat also attended college and graduate school in the U.S., though she immigrated at the earlier age of 12.
 34. Danticat received hate mail for outing the custom of "testing." See Malloy Charters.
 35. Spivak writes that the postcolonial Indian intellectual cannot retrieve the subaltern consciousness because the "[subaltern] subject' implied by the texts of insurgency can only serve as a counterpossibility for the narrative sanctions granted to the colonial subject in the dominant groups." She goes on to argue that "if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (28).
 36. See Miriam Gyimah's helpful distinction between voicelessness and mishearing in "Speaking Texts Unheard."
 37. In "Hearing Black Women's Voices," Davies writes that "We can therefore make distinctions between the condition of silence, being silenced, silencing, on the one hand, and what has been referred to by some as voicelessness and coming to voice or talking back on the other" (5). Also see the discussions of silence and voicelessness in the introduction to *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature* and 'Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's introduction to *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*.
 38. The complicity of Kambili's mother is most disturbing of all. Unable to protect her children, she obsessively polishes the fragile figurines that Eugene symbolically breaks at the beginning of the novel.
 39. See Bakhtin's "Discourse and the Novel" and Lashgiri's reading of his concepts of heteroglossia and dialogics.
 40. Anzaldúa's definition of *travesía* expands on its usage as a term describing the physical act of crossing the U.S.-Mexican border. She writes, "Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. [. . .] I am no longer the same person I was before" (48). Lashgiri observes that "Travesía applies not only to the unknown ground of the Other; it also means questioning what had seemed familiar, the very ground under one's own feet" (4).
 41. See Carole Boyce Davies's *Black Women, Writing and Identity* and the first volume of *Moving Beyond Boundaries*. Also see Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*.
 42. Gilbert and Gubar appropriate and invert Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence" affecting the mostly male writers of the traditional EuroAmerican canon; see Gilbert and Gubar, p. 293.
 43. See, for example, the discussion of orality and literature in the editors' introduction to *Women Writing Africa*.
 44. Emecheta tells the story of her own authorship as being based on her desire to be an Igbo storyteller, a "Big Mama," emphasizing how she, as a writer, performs the same art; the only difference is that she uses a typewriter. See *Head Above Water*, pp. 59-60, and "Feminism with a small 'f'!", p. 175.
 45. Both Walker and Marshall discuss the importance of unwritten traditions for their own art; see "Poets in the Kitchen" and "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens."

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Joyce W. Nyairo (review date 4 August 2006)

SOURCE: Nyairo, Joyce W. “A Nation’s Memory.” *Times Literary Supplement* (4 August 2006): 21.

[In the following review, Nyairo praises Adichie’s ability to portray the political and personal consequences of Nigeria’s tumultuous political and cultural history in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*.]

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s first book, *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), did not follow the usual course of the African novel, the driving impetus of which remains an intense interrogation of what the Kenyan literary critic Simon Gikandi has termed “the problematic of [state] power”. Instead it used the sheltered life of its narrator, the fifteen-year-old daughter of an Enugu business magnate, to account for its subdued treatment of the politics of the time. It focused on the emotional flowering of its young heroine, and on the psychological effects her father’s religious fanaticism had on his wife and children. The disintegration of family the novel portrays, with its challenge to patriarchy, symbolizes the fragility engendered by political dictatorship and the anxieties and uncertainties generated by military rule.

In her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie squarely confronts Nigeria’s political history in order to explode presumably stable notions such as nationalism, race, ethnic identity, truth, heroism and betrayal. The title is a reference to the symbol on the Biafran flag, an ironic icon that asserted Biafran’s independence, while also suggesting its incompleteness and its indebtedness to some other half. Adichie’s bold title signals her interest in the idea that “Nigerian identity is burdensome”, as she has confirmed in an interview. She examines this burden, revisiting the theme of nationalist struggle in ways that are reminiscent of canonical African novels such as *A Grain of Wheat* (1964) by Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Her tone is as deceptively placid as that of Mtuzeli Nyoka in *I Speak to the Silent* (2004), a disquietingly calm novel about South Africa’s liberation struggle. As

with Ngugi and Nyoka, Adichie’s treatment of the complexities underpinning liberation avoids the shrill self-proclaimed righteousness that is heard, for example, in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973)—a catalogue of Africa’s myriad betrayals in slavery, colonialism and post-liberation disorder.

If *Half of a Yellow Sun* strikes one as a fresh examination of the ravages of war, it is because of Adichie’s poignant handling of human emotions, in a range of circumstances from romance to conflict. Her focus on life in Nigeria in the 1960s settles on the way in which war turns middle-class existence on its head. Like her countryman, Ike Oguine, the author of *A Squatter’s Tale* (2000), Adichie has a gift for capturing the rhythms of African middle-class life: not just its political awareness but the aspirations and cultural imperatives that lend it its varied character. Thrust by the war from the comforts of the campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to the villages in the interior of Eastern Nigeria, Olanna and her lover Odenigbo encounter some very trying realities. From the naked violence and brutality of air raids and invading Nigerian soldiers to the loss of social status, economic deprivation and the domestic upheavals that come with continually shrinking spaces and opportunities, Olanna and Odenigbo are forced to embrace change. The transformation their relationship undergoes, the shifts in their own personalities and that of their houseboy, Ugwu, remind us that violence and morality are processes rather than events.

The dominant theme of return in this novel illuminates political and cultural questions alike. It underpins the portrayal of Olanna’s twin sister, Kainene, and her lover Richard Churchill, a Briton who comes to Nigeria with vague ideas of writing a book on African art. Adichie’s return to the story of Biafra is deliberately coloured with many artistic liberties and transgressions of strict historical truth. These represent conscious interrogations of the ownership of social memory and of the structures and sites through which national memory is carried.

Regardless of any official version of a people’s history, private remembrance of the kind that fiction facilitates is key to the process of purging and bringing closure. Both Biafra and the burden of Nigerian identity must be seen for their individual and collective ability to bring about renewal. “It did not kill me, it made me knowledgeable”, says Kainene, reminding Olanna of their grandfather’s philosophy about hardships. Memory is ultimately about questioning the web of associations from the past, and seeking their connections and relevance to the present. For its portrayal of Nigeria’s political and cultural past; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a welcome addition to the corpus of African letters.

FURTHER READING

Criticism

Review of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimabanda Ngozi Adichie. *African Business*, no. 324 (October 2006): 65.

Laudatory assessment of *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Roberts, Michele. "Home Truths." *New Statesman* 17, no. 800 (29 March 2004): 54-55.

Finds *Purple Hibiscus* to be a well-crafted and suspenseful novel.

"Author Profile: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." *World Literature Today* 80, no. 2 (March-April 2006): 5-6.

Brief profile of and interview with Adichie.

Additional coverage of Adichie's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 231; and *Literature Resource Center*.