Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 364

Volume 364

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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EDITOR

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science-fiction writers, literary and social critics, world authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews selected from hundreds of review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning an author's career from its inception to current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other works that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
1977-

(Also known as Amanda N. Adichie) Nigerian novelist, short-story writer, essayist, poet, and playwright.

INTRODUCTION

The author of three internationally best-selling novels, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is widely regarded as the leading voice of the so-called third generation of Anglophone writers from Nigeria. She is among the inheritors of the tradition in the African novel inaugurated by *Things Fall Apart,* Chinua Achebe's landmark 1958 work asserting the sophistication of Igbo society against colonial-era stereotypes of African backwardness. Adichie has quickly amassed an impressive list of major literary awards, beginning with the PEN, O. Henry, and BBC prizes for some of her earliest short stories. She won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for best first book for her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), a coming-of-age story about a teenage Nigerian girl torn between her Igbo heritage and the fanatical Catholicism of her Westernized father. Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), about the devastating effects of the 1967-70 Nigerian Civil War (or Biafran War) on the lives of ordinary people, earned the prestigious Orange Broadband Prize, awarded to the best English-language novel written by a woman. Adichie was the first African to receive that award. Her third novel, *Americanah* (2013), is a partially autobiographical account of a young Nigerian woman who develops a new awareness of race while studying on scholarship in the United States. *Americanah* won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize and was selected by the *New York Times* as one of the ten best books of 2013. Adichie's other publications include *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009), a collection of short stories that, like *Americanah,* explores the complexities of identity, race, and belonging in transnational settings.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The fifth of six children, Adichie was born on 15 September 1977, in Enugu, a city in southeastern Nigeria. The family eventually settled in nearby Nsukka, where Adichie's parents held positions at the University of Nigeria. Her father, James Nwoye Adichie, was a statistics professor and deputy vice-chancellor, and her mother, Grace Ifeoma Adichie, was the school's first female registrar. In a 2007 interview with Michael Ondaatje, Adichie said that she grew up reading books about English schoolchildren. It was not until she discovered Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* when she was about ten years old, Adichie remarked, that she realized black Africans could be the subject of books.

Adichie received a bilingual education in English and Igbo. She entered the University of Nigeria with plans to be a psychiatrist but dropped out of the medical program at age nineteen to accept a scholarship to Drexel University in Philadelphia. She later transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic, where she lived with her physician sister, Ifeoma. In 2001, Adichie earned a bachelor's degree from Eastern Connecticut with a major in political science and a minor in communications. During her senior year, she composed the bulk of *Purple Hibiscus.* She revised the manuscript while pursuing a master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Purple Hibiscus earned Adichie a fellowship at Princeton University for the 2005-06 academic year. More success followed with *Half of a Yellow Sun,* a novel Adichie had been researching since she was a teenager, when she began interviewing family members about the Nigerian Civil War as material for a volume of poems, *Decisions* (1997), and a play, *For Love of Biafra* (1998). In 2008, she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship and completed a master's program in African Studies at Yale University. The following year, she published *The Thing around Your Neck,* a collection of twelve stories previously printed in literary magazines such as the *New Yorker, Granta,* and *Zoetrope.* Adichie wrote her third novel, *Americanah,* during her 2011-12 fellowship at Harvard.

Adichie conducts writing workshops in both Nigeria and the United States, and she maintains separate residences in Lagos and Baltimore, where her husband practices medicine. She is currently at work on a novel of ideas about baseball. The film version of *Half of a Yellow Sun,* directed by Biyi Bandele and starring Chiwetel Ejiofor and Thandie Newton, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2013.

MAJOR WORKS

Purple Hibiscus is narrated by its fifteen-year-old protagonist, Kambili Achike. She and her older brother and mother live a regimented existence brutally enforced by her father, wealthy juice manufacturer Eugene Achike. Eugene's fundamentalist Catholicism amounts to an obsessive devotion to his British missionary schooling and the Western colonial order. He is a study in contradictions. A successful entrepreneur, he runs a pro-democracy newspaper and is

highly respected in the community for his many charitable contributions. At home, however, he subjects his wife and children to cruel beatings and other forms of torture when they do not live up to his impossibly high standards. The family drama mirrors the political strife in Nigeria in the early 1990s, when a repressive and corrupt military regime terrorized the people, using violence to silence its opponents. Adichie's focus is Kambili's development from a shy, acquiescent child into a self-assured woman, the result of her exposure to alternative models of behavior, reflection, and spirituality provided by her forward-thinking Aunty Ifeoma; her Igbo traditionalist paternal grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu; and the humanitarian Catholic priest Father Amadi. The Achike family eventually rebels against Eugene, and Kambili adopts an Africanized form of Catholicism symbolized by her aunt's hybrid purple hibiscus: "rare, fragrant with undertones of freedom."

The Nigerian Civil War, the subject of Adichie's second novel, arose out of long-standing ethnic rivalries that continued after Nigeria gained its independence from Britain in 1960 and was divided into a federation dominated by three tribes—the Hausa in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East. Civil war broke out in 1967 when the Igbos attempted to secede as the independent Republic of Biafra. Though the war erupted a decade before Adichie was born, her family—Igbos from the southeastern state of Anambra—was deeply involved. She dedicated *Half of a Yellow Sun* to her grandfathers, both of whom died in refugee camps during the conflict. In the novel, which takes its title from the emblem on the Biafran flag, Adichie focuses on the daily struggles of her characters, whose personal lives are inextricably bound up with the turmoil. As in *Purple Hibiscus,* Adichie attempts to reflect the diversity of the Nigerian experience accurately. The story, which concerns mainly Igbo characters, explores the barriers separating poor villagers from the middle class and the English-speaking elite, and the hostile divide that separates all of them from the Yoruba, the Hausa, and the British-backed Nigerian military. There are five main characters: wealthy, educated twin sisters Olanna and Kainene Ozobia; Odenigbo, a math professor at the university in Nsukka (and Olanna's lover); Richard, a young Englishman and would-be writer infatuated with Kainene; and Ugwu, Odenigbo's peasant houseboy, who is conscripted into the Biafran army.

In some respects, *Americanah* traces Adichie's own life history. The title of the novel is a slang word in Nigeria referring to natives with American pretensions. The novel tells the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who receives a fellowship to Princeton. After many years as a struggling, homesick student, Ifemelu begins to write a successful blog about issues of race and nationality and what it means to be black in America. Ifemelu's blog is both discomfiting and humorous. The social commentary is balanced by a love story that takes her back to Nigeria for a reunion with her high-school boyfriend, Obinze, who has returned to Lagos after a disastrous stay in London, a reversal of the more common East-to-West migration that characterizes postcolonial fiction.

Adichie takes a similar outsider's perspective in her short stories, most of which feature Igbo characters who settle in the United States or, less commonly, England. Among the best known of the stories are "Cell One," about Nigerian university students who get involved in American gang-style violence; "My Mother, the Crazy African," about an immigrant woman who struggles to instill in her daughter a sense of cultural pride; "The Headstrong Historian," about the cultural dislocation caused by colonization; and "Imitation," about a failed long-distance marriage and the fashion among Nigerian elites to have American-born children.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Adichie's three novels are already, after less than a decade, considered key works in the Nigerian novelistic tradition. She is often likened to Achebe for her exploration of religious bigotry and commitment to documenting the history and politics of Nigeria with a spirit of resistance against the lasting and damaging impact of colonialism. Adichie freely acknowledges her debt to Achebe, and her fiction makes explicit reference to his work, especially *Things Fall Apart.* While noting thematic parallels, critics regularly credit Adichie with revising Achebe for a twenty-first-century audience by bringing a diasporic perspective to bear on issues of nationhood and ethnic subjectivity. Adichie articulates the sensibility of Nigeria's so-called third generation, many of whom left their homeland in the 1990s to live and work outside the country. Although Adichie expresses the third generation's preoccupation with themes of exile and migration most overtly in *The Thing around Your Neck* and *Americanah,* critics emphasize that her transnational experience is equally important to *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus.* Daria Tunca (2010) described Adichie's "three-fold concern with ethnicity, colonization and migration" as a contemporary rendition of the search for self-definition that has long been at the heart of the Nigerian novel. Ayo Kehinde (2007; see Further Reading) argued that Adichie illuminates Igbo culture in *Purple Hibiscus* from the perspective of her experiences in the United States, globalizing both old traditions and new experiences in a process of cultural negotiation that reaches beyond the colonizer-colonized divide.

In her interview with Ondaatje, Adichie said that her reimagining of the historical novel includes a concerted effort to reverse the perception that the authentic Africa is synonymous with poverty and dependency. Critics have most often addressed this aspect of her art with respect to the sweeping cross section of society that she portrays in *Half of a Yellow Sun.* As John Marx (2008) noted, Adichie aimed in this novel to recover voices marginalized by ethnicity, class, and gender, and it is especially significant that she granted the child-soldier Ugwu, and not Richard or

another member of Odenigbo's privileged intellectual salon, the authority to write the eyewitness account of the war that forms the book within the book.

Much of the criticism on Adichie's work concerns her reassessment of the national imaginary (the set of symbols, values, and traditions common to a particular nation) in terms of the gendered legacy of colonialism. This aspect of her work connects it with an earlier feminist tradition in Nigerian letters represented by such authors as Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa. Scholars including Susan Strehle (2008), Julie Mullaney (2010), and Tanya Dalziell (2010) have studied *Purple Hibiscus* for its themes of violence against women, its female perspective on the unequal relations of power in postcolonial society, and its shift in focus from Kambili's brutal silencing to her liberating association with a powerful female role model, Aunty Ifeoma. Critics have emphasized Aunty Ifeoma's awareness of the patriarchal bias of both Eugene's fanatical Catholicism and Papa-Nnukwu's traditional religion and her efforts to instill in Kambili a democratic spirit open to the more forgiving aspects of both traditions. For Mullaney, Aunty Ifeoma represents a reformist vision of cross-cultural relations in her "development of an inclusive set of beliefs and values empowered not endangered by its encounters with other cultures." Christopher E. W. Ouma (2011) suggested that Kambili destabilizes the orthodox father-son genealogical line in African culture through her identification with the feminine attributes of her grandfather's spirituality. According to Ouma, Kambili offers the possibility of an "androgynous genealogy-in-the-making" in which daughters embody a patrilineal legacy.

Critics have studied Adichie's works for their participation in the language debate: the hotly contested question of whether an authentic African literature can be written in the language of the colonizer. Like many other African writers, Adichie believes the official language of English represents the only practical approach to reaching a wide audience in Nigeria, where hundreds of indigenous languages are spoken, as Brenda Cooper (see Further Reading) discussed in her 2009 essay. At the same time, however, language is an important site of cultural negotiation in Adichie's works. Such scholars as Faith O. Ibhawaegbele and J. N. Edokpayi (2012) have made detailed studies of the experimental strategies Adichie uses to produce an Igbo-infused English that contests the hegemony of European culture through its representation of local experience, concepts, and speech patterns.

Janet Mullane

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Decisions. As Amanda N. Adichie. London: Minerva, 1997. (Poetry)

For Love of Biafra. As Amanda N. Adichie. Ibadan: Spectrum, 1998. (Play)

Purple Hibiscus. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2003. (Novel)

Half of a Yellow Sun. New York: Knopf, 2006. (Novel)

"My Mother, the Crazy African." *One World: A Global Anthology of Short Stories.* Ed. Chris Brazier. Oxford: New Internationalist, 2009. 53-60. (Short story)

**The Thing around Your Neck.* New York: Knopf, 2009. (Short stories)

Americanah. New York: Knopf, 2013. (Novel)

*Includes "Cell One," "The Headstrong Historian," and "Imitation."

CRITICISM

Jonathan Highfield (essay date 2006)

SOURCE: Highfield, Jonathan. "Refusing to Be Fat Llamas: Resisting Violence through Food in *Sozaboy* and *Purple Hibiscus*." *Kunapipi* 28.2 (2006): 43-53. Print.

[*In the following essay, Highfield shows how food operates as an agent of cultural memory and cultural resistance in Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa's* Sozaboy *(1985) and Adichie's* Purple Hibiscus. *In Saro-Wiwa's novel, Highfield notes, starvation and disease represent the destruction of Nigerian society caused by the Nigerian Civil War, while in Adichie's work, food marks class divisions.*]

> I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control.
>
> (Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 200)

Food and foodways are among the most potent of cultural expressions. The food people eat and the way it is prepared speaks volumes about their relationship to their culture, their place in society, and their interaction with the environment. As with all artistic expressions of culture, cooking can be eminently practical or wondrously elaborate. On a most basic level, though, food has the ability to remember home, to reconstruct cultural memory from the integration of ingredients, seasonings, and preparations. As John Egerton writes in the introduction to *Cornbread Nation 1*: 'At the very least, the foods of our formative years linger in the mind more tenaciously—and favourably—than almost anything else' (5). The loss of those foods, or their prolonged absence, then, brings about a cultural displacement that emphasises the distance from home.

Two recent Nigerian novels use food to speak to the protagonists' distance from their community and culture, and, through that distance, to look at the health of Nigerian society. In *Sozaboy* (1995) by Ken Saro-Wiwa, the decay

of social norms is reflected by the changing eating patterns of the characters. The Biafran War alters what and how the title character eats, and his changing eating patterns become a metaphor for the cultural disintegration caused by the war. In ***Purple Hibiscus*** (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, food clearly represents class, and the more privileged a class is, the further its food is removed from traditional consumption and production patterns of the majority of Nigerians, both rural and urban. The main character's increasing comfort in her aunt's kitchen, cooking traditional Igbo ingredients, echoes her growing strength and resistance to her father's abuse of her.

Sozaboy begins with a description of the protagonist's village on the eve of the Nigerian civil war:

> Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first.
>
> All the nine villages were dancing and we were eating plenty maize with pear and knacking tory under the moon. Because the work on the farm have finished and the yams were growing well well. And because the old, bad government have dead, and the new government of soza and police have come.
>
> (1)

The happiness and normality in the nine villages of Dukana is very clearly reflected in the food the people consume and the consumption of that food is connected to conversation and the cyclical nature of agriculture. That this contentment is connected with the harvest and planting offers a real sense of foreboding to the beginning of the novel, because 'although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first' the 'new government of sozas and police' brings starvation with it. By the end of the Biafran War between 500,000 and 2 million people will have died of starvation and related illnesses (Biafran War).

Near the close of the novel, the protagonist, Sozaboy, travels from refugee camp to refugee camp looking for the Dukana people and especially his mother and wife. The description of people's ordinary lives again revolves around food, but the description is a horrific parody of the happy scene that opens the novel:

> So I will leave that camp and go to another. And again na soso the same thing. Plenty people without no dress or little dress walking round with small small bowl begging for food to eat: small small picken with big belly, eyes like pit for dem head, mosquito legs and crying for food, and small yarse and waiting for death, long line of people standing, waiting for food. And still I do not see the Dukana people much less, or rather, much more my mama and my beautiful wife with J. J. C. Nevertheless you must remember that as I was going from one camp to another, I was passing the villages of the Nugwa people and I must say that what I saw in those villages can make porson cry. Because all these people cannot find food to chop. There is no fish so the people are beginning to kill and chop lizard. Oh, God no gree bad thing. To see all these men and women who are children of God killing and chopping lizard because of can't help is something that I will be remembering all the days of my life for ever and ever, amen.
>
> (149)

The description of the 'small small picken with big belly' is a description of a child dying from kwashiorkor. This is a disease of malnutrition that affects young children. When it was first identified by the Western medical community in 1935, it had a mortality rate of 90%. A recent *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* article indicates that while the mortality rate has dropped slightly, it is still extremely high and that most children still die even after the onset of treatment (Kwawinkel 910). Kwashiorkor is often found following periods of civic unrest.

Kwashiorkor is the most extreme version of the way foodways have been changed by war. Before the protagonist has decided whether or not to enlist, he overhears a conversation in the Upwine Bar that will resonate throughout the novel:

> The tall man was sitting down again and singing and dancing and he was talking again as he was eating *okporoko* and drinking *tombo*. 'Everyday they hala about it. Many people have dead. Therefore some more people must to die again.'
>
> 'And you think it is good thing?' the short man was asking.
>
> 'Well, I don't think it is a good thing or bad thing. Even sef I don't want to think. What they talk, we must do. Myself, if they say fight, I fight. If they say no fight, I cannot fight. Finish.'
>
> 'But is it good thing to fight?' the short man was asking as he chopped *ngwongwo* from the plate.
>
> 'I like to fight. Yes. It is a good thing to fight. If somebody take your thing by force, if 'e want by force you to do something wey you no like to do, then you fit fight am.'
>
> 'Well, as for myself, I like to chop *ngwongwo* and drink *tombo*. Anything that will disturb me and stop enjoyment, I cannot like it.'
>
> That is what the short man said as he drank another glass of *tombo* and chopped *ngwongwo* and belched one big belch—etiee! I begin to think of what those two men were saying. I think I agree small with the short man. But I not too sure. I cannot too sure.
>
> (17)

The unnamed short man offers a vision of removal from the looming violence. Like most of the common people in the novel, he would rather eat goat soup than participate in war. His anonymity, however, signals that his desire for a simple life will soon vanish under the wave of violence and starvation the civil war will bring to Nigeria.

The other participant in the conversation, the tall man nicknamed Manmuswak, will appear to Sozaboy throughout the novel as a prescient figure representing the kind of person many surviving child soldiers will become. Though Manmuswak is a soldier and, as he states above, used to taking

orders, he has no loyalty and switches sides seemingly at will. Unlike the people of Dukana at the book's opening, he has no concern for anyone but himself. He is totally unsuited for life in a community. Unlike the short man, Manmuswak revels in both the order of the military and the chaos war will bring. He is perfectly adapted for life during wartime. He appears in the book as the ultimate survivor, and, unlike a contestant on Western reality shows, that designation does not make him worthy of admiration. Manmuswak survives by destroying others.

Through Sozaboy we see what may have driven Manmuswak to his individualist greed. Sozaboy's description of the life of a common soldier shows the depravity the young men are subjected to:

> And something was very bad for that place, you know. Water to drink no dey. Common well sef, you cannot get. So that all the time, it was the water in the swamp that we were drinking. And that is also the place that we are going to latrine. Na the same water that we are bathing and using to wash some of our clothes. And na the same water we were using for cooking. That is if we get something to cook like eba and soup. But as you know, not every time that we can cook soup and eba. Even when we cook, na sozaman cook we dey cook. Just throw water, salt, pepper and small fish for pot at the same time. Otherwise, always small biscuit and tea for inside mess pan without sugar or anything. Christ Jesus, man picken don suffer well well.
>
> (90-91)

This is before Sozaboy has seen the children dying of kwashiorkor, and he cannot imagine the starvation and disease the war will bring to his people. Prior to his enlistment, the older men of his village talk about the changes in food patterns the war has already brought to Dukana, and those changes bring back memories of a much-earlier conflict:

> 'Bom, I think it is time for us to die,' said Duzia.
>
> 'Why?' Bom asked.
>
> 'Buy one cup of salt for one shilling? Whasmatter?'
>
> 'It is very worse at all. How will porson begin to buy one cup of salt for one shilling?'
>
> 'Can porson marry or even chop if salt begin to cost money like that? . . . But why? Eh? Kole. Have you seen anything like this before?' Duzia was asking.
>
> 'In all my life this is the second time that this thing have happened.' Kole said. 'The first time na Hitla do am. Hitla very strong man, oh. If as he is fighting, they cut off his arm today, he must return tomorrow with another hand complete and new. Very tough man at all. He first hold up all ship bringing salt to Egwanga. No salt again. Everywhere. Man picken begin to suffer. Even by that time you cannot find salt to buy at all. Now again no salt for second time. Praps some strong men have hold up all the ships again.'
>
> (24)

Kole's connection of the Biafran War with the Second World War, where he was sent by the British to fight 'Hitla' in New Guinea, emphasises the similar nature of both conflicts: both wars were primarily about natural resources and in both it was the common people who suffered the most, who were displaced from their homes, deprived of everyday necessities, and killed in the millions. It is this desire to become one of those strong men or at least to challenge them that leads Sozaboy to leave Dukana and his 'Agnes sweet like tomato' (36) behind for the depravity of a soldier's life.

Sozaboy quickly learns, however, that wartime only makes the wealthy more powerful. As he is reduced to eating uncooked snails and raw cassava root in the forest and the rest of the Dukana people huddle in refugee camps starving, the army officers, his village chief and pastor stockpile food and liquor and tobacco becoming more sleek and rounded as everyone else's bones push out from their flesh. At the novel's opening, Sozaboy comments upon the simplicity of the Dukana people:

> The people of Dukana are fishermen and farmers. They no know anything more than fish and farm. Radio sef they no get. How can they know what is happening? Even myself who travel every day to Pitakwa, township with plenty brick house and running water and electric, I cannot understand what is happening well well, how much less all these simple people tapping palm wine and making fishermen, planting yam and cassava in Dukana?
>
> (5)

The one thing the people of Dukana have been able to count on is producing enough food for themselves. Now that ability has been taken from them, and they must rely on the Red Cross for their survival. As Sozaboy repeats, 'Water don pass gari' (104), meaning that everything has reversed. Again, he uses a food metaphor: gari, dried granulated cassava, usually eaten as thick porridge has been made useless by the addition of too much water.

Similarly, food comes to have different meanings during wartime. Alcohol, once used for community celebrations and the praising of the gods and ancestors becomes a tool to subvert the enemy, as Manmuswak causes the humiliation of Sozaboy and his mentor and friend, Bullet. Because Bullet steals liquor and tobacco from the captain at Manmuswak's urging, the captain deprives Bullet and his platoon of water and food, relenting only to make Bullet drink urine:

> Then the soza captain opened one bottle and give i to Bullet to drink. So Bullet who have thirsty quench just took that bottle for him hand put the drink for him mouth. Look, I am telling you that what I see that day, I can never forget it until I die. Because I was looking at Bullet face as he drank that drink. And his face was the face of porson who have already dead. And when he finished the bottle, the soza captain begin laugh and the san mazor laugh too. Then they asked us to get out. Bullet no fit walk by himself. Na we hold am. I think that he must die. God no gree bad thing.
>
> (102)