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Marking the Contours: Colonial Cartography and Ethnic Identity in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract: The colonial history of Africa is inscribed not only in its political systems but also in its geography. Colonial cartography, rooted in imperial authority, reshaped the continent's landscapes and identities alike. This paper examines how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* interrogates the legacy of colonial border-making and its enduring impact on ethnic identity in postcolonial Nigeria. By reading the novel through the lenses of postcolonial and cultural theory, the paper argues that colonial mapping was not a neutral scientific act but a tool of domination that created fragmented nations and contested identities. Adichie reimagines the Biafran War not merely as an ethnic conflict but as a crisis born of imposed geography, displacement, and trauma. The analysis also considers how gender and memory shape resistance and survival, positioning women as custodians of historical truth. Ultimately, the novel reveals that national belonging is not determined by political boundaries but by shared histories and the courage to remember.

Keywords: Colonial cartography, Biafran War, Ethnic identity, Memory, Postcolonial Nigeria.

The history of Africa is deeply entangled with the legacy of colonialism, where boundaries were arbitrarily drawn and identities forcibly redefined. Among the most devastating consequences of European imperialism was the partitioning of Africa, a process that converted dynamic cultural continuities into rigid national borders. These acts of colonial cartography were not neutral exercises in geography but deliberate strategies of domination and control. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) offers a powerful literary re-examination of this process by portraying how colonial mapping and ethnographic divisions produced enduring patterns of ethnic conflict, particularly through the lens of the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War.

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The title of this paper, *Marking the Contours*, refers not only to physical boundary-drawing but also to the ideological delineation of cultural and psychological territories. Mapping becomes a metaphor for colonial authority, the power to define who belongs, who is excluded, and how people imagine their relationship to space and nationhood. Adichie's novel thus functions as both a narrative of war and an exploration of the deeper historical forces that shape belonging and alienation.

Postcolonial theory provides the critical foundation for analysing *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It interrogates the continuing effects of colonial domination, economic, cultural, and psychological, on formerly colonised societies. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* argues that colonial powers constructed the "Orient" as the inferior "Other" to legitimise domination. Said defines Orientalism as "a western conception about the eastern part of the world: a radical idea of realism whose assembly endorsed the variance between the accustomed (Europe, West, US) and the odd" (Muhammad 62). This hierarchical perception underpins much of European colonial discourse in Africa, where entire regions were mapped and categorised according to Western epistemologies.

Colonialism, as a representational system, positioned Europeans as superior while rendering colonised peoples as primitive and dependent. Güven observes that colonial narratives "transformed education, religion, and law to align with their own systems, reinforcing the perception of colonised peoples as beneath human" (Güven 80). Such acts of representation were not merely ideological—they had material consequences, shaping the way Africans viewed themselves and their place within the colonial order.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* illuminates the link between mapping and nationhood. Anderson contends that "the census, the map, and the museum illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain" (Anderson 200). The colonial map, by organising territory into bounded units, fostered new modes of imagining collective identity, often in artificial and divisive ways. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin echo this idea, stating that "maps and mapping are crucial to the way the colonial world was brought under control… The drawing of boundaries and the naming of places were not simply descriptive acts but assertions of authority" (Ashcroft et al. 31).

Through this theoretical lens, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be read as a narrative that exposes how colonial knowledge systems, particularly mapping, produced epistemological violence. By delineating the

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borders of Nigeria without regard to ethnic continuities, the British converted shared geographies into zones of contestation, thereby transforming identity itself into a political weapon.

Nigeria exemplifies the consequences of imperial mapping. The British amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 was a purely administrative manoeuvre, designed for ease of governance rather than cultural coherence. As Adichie's novel reveals, this colonial cartography forcibly merged over 300 ethnic and linguistic groups into one political unit, sowing seeds of disunity that would erupt into war decades later. Mullaney notes that such boundaries "ignored ethnic, cultural, and linguistic continuities" and later became "the foundation for ethnic struggles such as the Biafran War" (Mullaney 2010).

The British system of indirect rule further institutionalised inequality by empowering select ethnic groups, most notably the Hausa in the North, while marginalising others, particularly the Igbo in the Southeast. This unequal distribution of power and privilege entrenched divisions that persisted after independence. Adichie's narrative situates the Biafran War as a direct consequence of this colonial legacy, dramatising how geographical demarcations translated into political and psychological alienation.

The novel further depicts sharp divides between communities. The Hausa are often aligned with colonial authority, while the Igbo are marginalised. Through Said's framework of Orientalism, Adichie emphasises the destabilisation of identity under colonial hierarchies. Stripped of self-definition by both Europeans and local elites, characters endure suffering, loss, and death. As Karambiri notes, "Identity is not something that is stable; it calls for permanent re-structuration. That is, someone's identity is shaped by the world that surrounds him or her and collectivities as well as personal choices and personal experiences" (Karambiri 1).

Chinua Achebe's reflections on the Biafran War underscore its profound impact on Igbo society: "most of us who were raised during and for some time after the colonial era are sharply aware of the ways in which the colonisers were never as fully in control as our elders allowed them to appear" (Achebe 9). This observation highlights generational differences in perceptions of colonial authority and opens avenues for cultural and philosophical engagement. Achebe's insights align with Adichie's intent in writing *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is to revisit the Igbo past and understand how cultural identity was reshaped through the war (Strehle 652).

Colonialism also introduced epistemic violence through its representational practices. The British portrayed certain ethnic groups as loyal and disciplined while branding others as unruly or subversive. As Jian

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explains, the colonial "other" was often constructed as culturally deviant and intellectually inferior (Jian 119). These categorizations justified differential treatment and created hierarchies that outlived colonial rule. Adichie reflects this in her characterization of the Hausa and Igbo: the former aligned with British authority, while the latter became targets of suspicion and suppression.

Following independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited not unity but fragmentation. The arbitrary borders drawn by the British created a federation riddled with ethnic tension and political rivalry. The discovery of oil in the Igbo-dominated southeast exacerbated divisions, as economic interests deepened mistrust among ethnic groups. Adichie's narrative exposes how colonial and postcolonial governments perpetuated systems of exclusion, reflecting the "informal divide-and-rule policy of the British colonial exercise" (Adichie 178).

Adichie, as a black writer, voices her perspective through her characters: "I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity; I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white, but I was Igbo before the white man came" (Adichie 32). Her critique of hypocritical Western civilization emerges in these succinct statements, rooted in her self-identity. By highlighting the existential struggles of the "other" and exploring their avenues for resistance within colonial discourse, Adichie emphasizes the importance of maintaining racial, ethnic, and cultural confidence. As Professor Wang Ning observes in *Comparative Literature and Contemporary Cultural Criticism*:

> today we have clearly entered an era of cultural pluralism... We feel as if we are in a vast global village where there are many nationalities, varied cultures, and civilizations. All of us are aware of the cultural fit and unfit quality as well as its difference, therefore making communication with each other. Only with firm racial confidence, ethnic confidence, and cultural confidence can we achieve peaceful coexistence and cultural sharing. (Ning 4)

A number of postcolonial Nigerian writers have turned to literature as a means of engaging with the Biafran war. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who was born seven years after the conflict ended, grew up in a country still grappling with the task of rebuilding itself as an independent nation, its people and institutions deeply marked by the aftermath of war. In creating her novel, Adichie much like her character Ugwu—gathered accounts from relatives and acquaintances who had lived through the conflict. Her writing also serves as a

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tribute to those who did not survive; the losses are particularly intimate for her, as both of her grandfathers died during the war. Karin Barber in *Reading in African Popular Culture states that:*

> For all the while, in African cultures, there are those who will not see themselves as Other. Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease and political instability, African cultural productivity grows space: popular literature, oral narrative, poetry, dance, drama, music and visual art all thrive. The contemporary cultural production of many African societies and the many traditions whose evidence so vigorously remain - is an antidote to the vision of the postcolonial novelist (Barber 1).

Ella Shohat in "Notes on the Post-Colonial" mentions the historical and ideological shift in postcolonial terminology, highlighting the interplay between language, politics, and professional discourse:

> The "post-colonial" did not emerge to fill an empty space in the language of political-cultural analysis. On the contrary, its wide adaptation during the late eighties was coincident with and dependent on the eclipse of an older paradigm, that of the "Third World." The terminological shift indicates the professional prestige and theoretical aura the issues have acquired, in contrast to the more activist aura once enjoyed by "Third World" within progressive academic circles. (Shohat 100)

This observation illuminates the positioning of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* within postcolonial discourse. While Shohat traces the transition from politically charged "Third World" language to the more institutionalized "post-colonial," Adichie navigates both registers: her novel conveys the intimate and traumatic experiences of ordinary Nigerians during the Biafran War, yet it also situates these experiences within broader historical, political, and socio-economic frameworks. Characters such as Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard exemplify this duality through their personal narratives, readers witness both human suffering and the structural forces of colonial legacies, ethnic tension, and wartime displacement. By foregrounding these intersections, Adichie enacts a postcolonial critique that bridges activist consciousness and literary scholarship, echoing Shohat's insight about the evolving discursive field while retaining the ethical weight of lived experience.

The novel portrays Nigeria's descent into chaos through the experiences of its central characters Olanna, Odenigbo, Ugwu, Kainene, and Richard whose personal lives are inextricably bound to national events. When the military coup and subsequent pogroms erupt, the violence is not presented as sudden or senseless; rather, it

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is the logical culmination of decades of ethnopolitical manipulation. As Achebe insightfully remarks, "most of us who were raised during and for some time after the colonial era are sharply aware of the ways in which the colonisers were never as fully in control as our elders allowed them to appear" (Achebe 9). Adichie's text continues this reflection by showing how the illusion of independence masked deeper structural dependencies on colonial logic.

Nigeria's broader socio-political landscape deeply shapes the characters' identities in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The country, divided along ethnic and religious lines, with Muslims dominating the North and Christians in the South, descended into violent conflict after independence. Tensions escalated with the discovery of oil reserves in the Igbo-dominated Southeast, which intensified the federal government's hostility toward secession. Adichie notes that these divisions were worsened by "the informal divide-and-rule policy of the British colonial exercise" (Adichie 178). The massacres of Igbo civilians by Northern Hausa forces prompted Ojukwu to declare Biafra's independence, leading to full-scale civil war.

The novel depicts how individuals from diverse social classes within Igbo society responded to these crises. Odenigbo, representing intellectual revolutionaries, participated in propaganda efforts while documenting the lives of ordinary people. Olanna contributed by sewing uniforms and teaching displaced children, while her twin, Kainene, took on leadership in organising food distribution, cultivating crops, and providing training for refugees. Even in the face of famine and disease, Kainene personally buried the dead and maintained morale in the camps. These acts highlight the Igbo community's determination to assert their identity amid violence and oppression.

The Igbo's awareness of their identity largely arose in contrast to European colonisers. Before colonialism, identity was not a subject of debate because it was neither threatened nor rendered inferior. This idea is echoed in a dialogue from *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where a faculty member at the University of Nsukka asserts: "My point is that the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe," Master said. "I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came." Professor Ezeka then challenges this notion: "But you became aware that you were Igbo because of the white man. The pan-Igbo

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idea itself came only in the face of white domination. You must see that tribe as it is today is as colonial a product as nation and race" (Adichie 32).

Adichie situates these struggles within the broader framework of colonial influence. The term "nation" can refer broadly to a human community within a country or region based on geography, or narrowly to a group distinguished by culture, language, and history. Nigeria, a multi-ethnic country, comprises primarily the Hausa in the North (29% of the population), the Yoruba in the West (21%), and the Igbo in the East (18%). Britain, as Nigeria's former colonial power, "exercises various forms of control over the former colony" (Bill et al. 162). With British support, the Hausa dominate the central government and military, while the discovery of oil made the Igbo materially prosperous, rendering the Southeast the wealthiest region in the country.

In the novel, Susan comments on Nigeria's three main tribes: "the Hausa in the north were a dignified lot, the Igbo were surly and money-loving, and the Yoruba were rather jolly even if they were first-rate lickspittles" (Adichie 66). This observation reflects Western perceptions of Nigerian society, in which the Hausa are seen as authoritative rulers and the Igbo as "othered" minorities. The novel demonstrates how colonial constructs of authority and ethnicity contributed to internalized inferiority among marginalized groups while fostering a sense of superiority among favored ethnicities.

Cathy Caruth's framework of trauma illuminates the psychological aftermath of war depicted in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Caruth explains:

> For it is not just any event that creates a traumatic neurosis, but specifically those experiences that involve a profound threat to life. If the dreams and flashbacks of the traumatized thus engage Freud's interest, it is because they bear witness to a survival that exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it. (Caruth 60)

Adichie's characters Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard embody this principle. Their experiences of hunger, displacement, and witnessing extreme violence reverberate long after the events, shaping memory, perception, and social interaction. The narrative's multiple perspectives and temporal shifts mirror the fragmented and recursive nature of traumatic memory, showing how war transforms both individual subjectivity and collective consciousness.

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Olanna's struggle exemplifies the instability of identity under trauma. When escaping Igbo-targeted attacks in Kano, she is forced to conceal her ethnicity: "[not] raise her face" (Adichie 159) … she covers her head with a scarf and remarks that she "look[s] like a proper Muslim woman" (Adichie 158). Similarly, when confronted in a Lagos marketplace, Olanna abandons her Igbo identity and adopts "fluent, loud Yoruba" (Adichie 144). These instances reveal identity as fluid, situational, and shaped by survival imperatives, which is a product of both social and physical threats. Her earlier experiences in England, requiring constant adaptation, underscore this defensive malleability.

When Biafra is declared, Olanna remains emotionally detached. While Odenigbo and Baby celebrate, she recalls the traumatic death of her aunt: "…how awkwardly twisted Aunty Ifeka's arm had looked, as she lay on the ground, how her blood had pooled so thick that it looked like glue" (Adichie 175). Even at political rallies, she is distant from Igbo nationalism: "a sharp pain in her knee" (Adichie 289) diverts her attention. These moments underscore the tension between personal trauma and collective political identity. Anderson reminds us that: "Nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it" (Anderson 28). Adichie portrays this historical continuity, showing that the Biafran struggle drew upon older cultural solidarities, kinship networks, and shared colonial memories. Olanna's eventual transformation into an active participant in the war, teaching children, attending rallies, and asserting agency, mirrors the collective awakening of the Igbo people.

Adichie critiques Western representations of Africa through Richard's outsider perspective. Richard's fascination with Igbo-Ukwu bronzes: "He has been utterly fascinated by the bronzes since he had perfected the complicated art of lost-wax casting during the time of the Viking raids. There is such marvellous complexity in the bronzes, just marvellous" (Adichie 123) is simultaneously an appreciation and an exoticization. Odenigbo perceives Richard's awe as doubt in Igbo capabilities. As Ashis Nandy observes: "This colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies, and it releases forces within the colonised societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all" (Nandy 11). Through this, Adichie demonstrates how colonial mentalities persist, producing internalised inferiority even among educated Africans, while characters like Ugwu maintain cultural practices, illustrating resilience. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism resonates with this portrayal: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories

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and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). Richard's narrative reflects how Western media and expatriates exoticise and misrepresent Biafra, silencing African voices and reproducing epistemic violence. Adichie positions her characters as ethical agents negotiating identity, asserting dignity, and resisting both colonial and patriarchal pressures.

Thus, the paper reveals that colonial cartography and historical interventions profoundly shaped ethnic identities and social hierarchies in Nigeria, as depicted in Half of a Yellow Sun. The British colonial administration, by favouring certain ethnic groups such as the Hausa in the North, institutionalised political and economic inequalities that persisted long after independence, creating a framework in which some groups were positioned as "self" and others as "other." This hierarchical ordering facilitated the marginalisation of the Igbo and Yoruba, who, despite their wealth and cultural sophistication, were often rendered subordinate within both national and colonial discourses. The novel highlights how such imposed boundaries extended beyond geography into social, political, and cultural life, influencing perceptions of race, class, and gender.

Through characters such as Susan, Richard, Olana, and Anulika, Adichie demonstrates the pervasive effects of these boundaries: the "othering" of ethnic minorities manifests not only in overt discrimination and violence but also in subtle cultural and psychological marginalisation. Furthermore, the chapter finds that colonial constructs of authority and ethnicity contributed to the internalisation of inferiority among marginalised groups while fostering a sense of inherent superiority among the favoured. However, the text also emphasises resistance and negotiation of identity, as seen in the Igbo community's assertion during Biafra's independence and characters' personal acts of defiance against racial and cultural hierarchies. Overall, the findings suggest that colonial cartography and discourse did not merely map physical territories but also actively shaped the social and psychological boundaries that continue to influence identity formation, power relations, and the struggle for recognition and dignity in postcolonial Nigeria.

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