



Domestic Diaspora, Tragedy and the Negotiation of Igbo Indigenous Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Over time, 'diaspora' has become polysemantic, appearing across transnationalism, globalization, migration, minority discourse, identity politics, and ethnic studies. This polysemy has led to calls for conceptual clarification and even metaphorical diasporas, problematizing its disciplinary jurisdiction. While African diaspora studies typically focus on Africans migrating to Western contexts and negotiating identities amid cultural and social differences, this paper narrows the scope to the 'domestic diaspora.' Focusing on the Igbo ethnic group's migration within Nigeria highlights internal dispersion driven by personal choice or situational urgency. Such movements occur against structural binaries—north/south, Igbo/Hausa, Christian/Muslim—underscoring complex power relations and identity tensions. Central to the diaspora concept is a triadic relationship among homeland, host society, and diasporic community. Employing a literary analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the study examines how Igbo migrants reconstruct and negotiate their identities in new Nigerian regions. Through close reading, it traces the tragic possibilities and resilience born from these negotiations. By refining the diaspora framework to include internal movements and engaging with theoretical debates, this paper contributes a nuanced understanding of belonging, displacement, and identity within national borders.

Keywords: Igbo, domestic diaspora, tragedy, identity negotiation, migration, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Introduction

Owing to the definitional ambiguities surrounding the term 'diaspora', there have been several conceptualizations of the term. However, at the nexus of these conceptualizations is often found the feature of dispersion, the presence of mobility, whether freely chosen or foisted upon a group, whether for an economic or religious cause, whether by forceful uprooting or willful movement. In any case, this movement from the homeland to the host society accounts for the opening move of the diasporic experience. However, it is not enough to surmise that the diaspora owes to a history of dispersion since it only begs the question as to how, then, diaspora migration may be told apart from the motley of migration groups in recent studies. It is on this basis that several other concepts of diaspora have arisen, ranging from the myths/memories of the homeland to alienation in the host society and so on. William Safran particularly provides certain criteria as a guiding framework for further research in Diaspora studies. He lists thus:

dispersal from a center to two or more peripheral or foreign regions; retention of collective memory, vision or myth; the belief that full acceptance by the host country is not possible, resulting in alienation and insult; regard for the ancestral homeland as the true or ideal home and place of final return; commitment to the maintenance or restoration of safety and prosperity in the homeland; and personal or vicarious relations to the homeland in an ethno-communal consciousness. (84)

While Safran's categorization provides the springboard for further investigations on diasporic groups, his grouping falls within what Robin Cohen calls the "classical" model of Diaspora theory, wherein much focus is placed essentially on certain paradigmatic cases as the Jewish, Armenian and Greek migrants, with the "victim tradition" being the core context for diasporas ("Solid, Ductile, Liquid 5). Cohen rather presents a typology for diasporas, occasioned by several circumstances, social contexts and mythologies, namely: "victim diasporas, labour and imperial diasporas, trade diasporas, cultural diasporas, global - deterritorialized diasporas" (Shuval 43). By virtue of this typological classification, the experience of each diasporic group is contextualized, given the ambience of social activity with a common umbrella of experience. This then transgresses the orthodox use of the term "diaspora", embracing a variety of new but interesting and suggestive contexts. At this rate, diaspora is now deployed as "a metaphorical designation" to describe different categories of people (6).

Further in the trajectory of diasporic discourse is what Gabriel Sheffer calls the "Modern diaspora" (3) and what Michele Reis classifies as the "Contemporary diaspora" (41). At this stage, scholars have begun to look beyond the corpus of work of the classical model, which stipulates certain defining criteria for a diaspora, namely: forced or traumatic dispersion, retention of historical and cultural memory of the ancestral homeland, alienation from host society and so

on. While these points remain valid to the discourse, scholars in recent times have geared critical lenses to other angles, striving to present an analytical framework to fully understand the phenomenon of diaspora as a social condition and societal process. Judith T. Shuval particularly points out that Diaspora migration differs from other types of migration in that “in many cases it is based on claims to a ‘natural right’ to return to an historic homeland” so that “an ascriptive, ethnic or religious criterion is used to claim the right of return to specific benefits, in some cases automatic citizenship” (45). For Kearney, it is just as much the same thing: that the diasporas are not always a result of exile, even though they are often initiated by processes of uprooting. What distinguishes them is their “ongoing or reawakened attachment and loyalty to their earlier culture and specifically to the homeland which they feel they have left” (Shuval 46).

With the postmodernist readings of diasporas also came the problematization of terms as “home” and “homeland” as these scholars strived to deconstruct the established notions of identity linking individuals to physical places of origin. Avtar Brah questions home thus:

What is home? On the one hand, home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings or the excitement of the first snowfall.... (192)

This interpretation then goes to counter the idea of an ancestral place of origin, a homeland which is particularly designated to the individual as his or hers so that home can be defined generally as any place of settlement, whether an “imagined virtual community” or “a matrix of known experiences and intimate social relations” (Cohen, “Solid, Ductile, Liquid” 3). Yasemin N. Soysal further critiques the concept of diaspora for not being inclusive enough as it “suspends immigrant experience between host and home countries, native and foreign lands, home-bound desires and losses – thus obscuring the new topography and practices of citizenship, which are multi-connected, multi-referential and postnational” (2-3). While these uprising questions and critiques on the concept of diaspora may be considered misplaced or reflecting certain political agenda, there is a need to take recourse to the origin of the word “diaspora” itself which is traceable to Deuteronomy (28: 25) instilling “a scattering to other lands” as punishment for people who had “forsaken the righteous paths and forgotten the old ways” (Cohen, “Diasporas” 507). The word then was easily recognizable in the Jewish tradition. Later found in the Greek translation of the Bible, “diaspora” would originate in the words “to sow widely” (Cohen 507). These meanings thus necessitate a dispersion, a movement across lands (for this paper within the national borders) and this is what we see as a common trait of the indigenous Igbo people of Nigeria.

The Igbo experience in Nigeria exemplifies the concept of domestic diaspora, shaped by historical migrations, economic mobility, and social adaptation within the country. For decades, Igbo people have moved across Nigeria, particularly to urban centres like Lagos, Abuja, and Kano, where they have established thriving business networks while maintaining strong cultural and regional affiliations. This dual existence – deeply connected to an ancestral homeland yet dispersed across the nation – reflects the key dynamics of a domestic diaspora, where identity is shaped by both voluntary and circumstantial internal migration. Despite periodic tensions and marginalization, the Igbo have sustained a distinct socioeconomic presence throughout Nigeria, reinforcing how diaspora can function within national borders while preserving cultural continuity.

Oludele A. Ajani and Onah Onodje particularly point out that the Igbo people are “the most migratory among the [over] 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria” being led to other locations in “the quest for economic opportunities” (137). This dispersal of the Igbo people across various lands has allowed for cultural diffusion as well as the assimilation and adaptation of other cultures by the Igbo people. Critics, such as Ejikemeuwa Ndubisi J. O., believe that “the rate of migration affects Igbo cultural identity inherited from ancestors and puts its future existence on the verge of going into extinction or loss of identity” (82). With this, he calls for a Cultural Renaissance which would then revive Igbo cultural identity. Ikechukwu A. Kanu further illustrates the gravity of the Igbo situation as he points out that the Igbos “migrate to other lands and consciously decide to settle, build homes and develop those lands” while some even go ahead to “assume traditional titles and begin to command influence in the Diaspora unlike other people who migrate to other lands and repatriate the wealth to develop their homeland” (34). This issue indeed has persisted overtime, with the Igbo people losing their identities in the face of cultural diffusion. One would notice, however, the attempt to negotiate identities, whether as hybrid subjects or as purely assimilated subjects in foreign lands. Yet, as Ajani and Onah have highlighted in their paper, the process of migration involves “cultural contact” which then accounts for “cultural diffusion, assimilation or adaptation” (137). Thus, while the Igbos in the Diaspora strive to retain cultural memories of their homeland, there is the unceasing confrontation of other cultures, especially with the host society, so they are left with the continuous chore of negotiating and renegotiating identities. Through *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie not only historicizes Igbo displacement but also underscores the continuing impact of internal migration on identity, memory, and belonging.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* has been widely analysed through variant lenses, one of which is post-colonialism, with scholars emphasizing its role in reclaiming Nigerian history and challenging Western narratives. Meera K.G. Nandanam’s analysis in “Voicing Silence” highlights how Adichie provides an insider’s perspective on the Biafran Civil War, countering colonial distortions through multiple narrative viewpoints. Nandanam observes that “Her manipulation point of view and time from the years and during the war adds depth and perspective to her timely novel as secessionist tensions in the forms of Biafra persist” (273). The novel’s protagonists – Ugwu, Olanna, and

Richard – offer a nuanced portrayal of the war's impact across different social classes, reinforcing the authenticity of the historical representation. Particularly significant is Adichie's decision to attribute authorship of the embedded book *The World Was Silent When We Died* to Ugwu, an Igbo character, rather than Richard, a British expatriate. This choice allows "Adichie to reclaim the past and the present in independent terms" (273).

Building upon this perspective, in "*Half of a Yellow Sun* as a Post-colonial Bildungsroman", Aisha O. Al-Harbi argues that Adichie reconfigures the traditional Western coming-of-age narrative as an act of anti-colonial resistance. According to Al-Harbi, the novel aligns individual development with national struggle, as "the moral growth of the individual protagonist is parallel to the collective development of his nation" (4). This interconnection becomes evident through Ugwu's journey from "a marginalized naïve village child to an ambitious and a disillusioned adult" (4) due to the Biafran war. The turbulent socio-economic and political conditions of post-independence Nigeria prevent Ugwu from achieving complete self-formation, a deviation that challenges Western literary paradigms. Al-Harbi further argues that Adichie's work serves to "revive the history of the African nation which is devalued and silenced by western hegemonic discourse" (14), positioning the novel as both a literary achievement and historical reclamation.

Beyond reading the text as a postcolonial critique of nationhood, scholars also focus on its depiction of the Nigerian-Biafran War, and its feminist perspectives. Many analyses highlight Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's use of multiple perspectives to humanize the war, particularly through the experiences of her Igbo characters. This paper takes the enquiry further by looking out for how the characters of Igbo extraction in Diaspora have to negotiate their identities in the face of several challenges and how it occasions tragic outcomes for them.

Negotiation of Igbo Indigenous Identities in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

One of the primary concerns which Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu raises in his paper is how "mobility and movement shape and fulfil the Igbo's life and story" (35). This is the main concern of this paper. Since it is the case that the Igbos are highly migratory, in what way do they confront life in the Diaspora? To what extent are their identities lost, diffused or mutated? How do the characters negotiate their identities in the face of the anti-Igbo rhetoric prominent in the foreign lands which they settle into?

Among some of the features of a diaspora, Cohen identifies "the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions" ("Diasporas" 515). This is primarily one of the reasons why the Igbo diasporic subjects migrate to other lands – to make economic travails, establish businesses and be successful in the long-run. This is why Nnesinachi's uncle in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (HYS) insists that she comes to Kano to learn a trade. The narrator agrees that "there was, after all, a fortune to be made in the North" (HYS 10). It is with this mindset that most of them choose to migrate. No

less, Uncle Mbaezi and his wife, Aunty Ifeka, are petty traders in Kano, navigating through life in their one-bedroom apartment.

Indeed, where the diasporic subject inhabits two locations and takes on internal divisions and doublings, one would only expect a sense of double consciousness. V. Y. Mudimbe and Sabine Engel agree that “members of Diaspora define themselves in terms of at least a double identity” (4). To take from Homi Bhabha, a third space of enunciation thus emerges, wherein the diasporic subjects belong neither fully to the host society nor to the homeland but as hybrid subjects, negotiating their identities. Hence, when Olanna arrives in Kano, she is quick to spot “how different it was from Lagos, from Nsukka, from her hometown Umuunnachi, how different the North as a whole was from the South” (HYS 38). This place of difference is important to note as it is essentially what shapes the lives of the migrant Igbos in the long run. In the text, one of the issues the Igbos in the diaspora face would be that of “the northern schools not admitting Igbo children” (HYS 39). However, their unwavering sense of community, motivated by persons like Uncle Mbaezi who insist that “we will build our own school!” (HYS 39), lead them to establish the Igbo Union Grammar School soon enough in Kano. Of course, one would commend the resilience of the people, in catering for their pride as a people, in ensuring that their children go to school, albeit in the diaspora. Yet, one wonders how long this sense of community would hold when the systems waged against them possess no small force. It is true that Uncle Mbaezi and his wife, Aunty Ifeka, try their best to integrate with their host society. There is the easy scene of Mbaezi and his Hausa friend, Abdumalik, gnawing off sugar cane, speaking Hausa and laughing. Yet, one is tempted to ask: how long before all of this gets eroded or tainted? As we would later discover in the text, it is the same Abdumalik who arranges for the massacre of Mbaezi and his family. He tells Mohammed: “We finished the whole family. It was Allah’s will” (HYS 150).

Certainly, Cohen also identifies a common feature of the diaspora group being that there is always “a troubled relationship with host societies suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group” (“Diasporas” 515). In other works, such as Adichie’s “A Private Experience”, one of the short stories in her collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the same lack of acceptance in the form of intolerance by the host society is definitely what cascades into a series of tragic events. In this short story, religious intolerance culminates in a heated conflict between the “Igbo Christians” and the “Hausa Muslims”. The narrator illustrates the event thus:

It had all started at the motor park, when a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran that lay on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian. The men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market, asking others to join in; the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book. (“A Private Experience 36)

The act would seem unpardonable then, not just because it was a desecration of the Holy Book but more because it had been done by an “infidel”. This is the status given to the Igbo Christians in the Muslim north. It is the same thing one spots in the flimsy relationship that thrives between Mohammed and Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Mohammed’s mother, Hajia, never accepts Olanna as a wife or fiancée for her son and Olanna knows this: “I am no longer the Igbo woman you wanted to marry who would taint the lineage with infidel blood... So I am a friend now” (HYS 47). This lack of acceptance of the Igbo people by the host society naturally keeps them at the fringe of society, at the mercy of fate. Hence, when faced with the option of having to live or leave, having to assert one’s identity or deny it, the characters negotiate their identities in the flash of the moment by choosing denial. This is what easily plays out with Arize and Olanna when a group of men at the market in Lagos begin counting the Igbo people: “Oya, come and identify yourself. You are Igbo?” (HYS 135). Immediately, Arize breaks into fluent, loud Yoruba in a bid to sheathe their identities and stall potential danger from coming their way. Later, the guilt stings Olanna as she mulls over the incident, “how easy it had been to deny who they were, to shrug off being Igbo” (HYS 136).

Where the diasporic subjects are able to integrate well enough with the host society, it is always at the cost of their indigenous identities. Cohen opines that where there is “a distinctive yet creative and enriching life in host countries”, it follows with “a tolerance for pluralism” (515). By this, if the diasporic subject must at least thrive in the host society, there must be certain twoness where the foreign identity takes precedence over the indigenous identity. This is typical of the character, Chief Ajuah. Olanna’s mother describes him thus:

You know Chief Ajuah, who owns the bottling company?
They are Igbo, but they are Western Igbo. I hear they are the ones who deny being Igbo. Who knows what they will say that we have done? Who knows? They will sell other Igbo people for a tarnished penny. A tarnished penny, I’m telling you. (HYS 138)

The likes of Chief Ajuah, then, are those who have fully given up their indigenous identities and assimilated another identity. What is more? Theirs is not borne of situational urgency but of a certain conscious decision to abstain from one’s own people and from one’s own indigenous identity. Yet, there are the likes of Madu who are left with no choice but to “dress[ing] as a Fulani nomad” (HYS 142) to escape the heat of crisis in the north, or even Olanna who puts on a hijab to blend in with the crowd. She pronounces, “I look like a proper Muslim woman” (HYS 149). And then there are the likes of Nnaemeka who attempt a denial of their identity, only to be betrayed by their staunch Igbo accent. When confronted with the fact that he is Igbo, Nnaemeka denies it at once, saying: “No, I come from Katsina! Katsina!” (HYS 155). When challenged to prove this identity he claims by saying “Allahu Akbar”, Nnaemeka falters with his accent and his identity as Igbo seeps into the open like a forbidden secret. Immediately, he is gunned down by the Hausa soldiers. Hence, one would note how the characters of Igbo extraction must constantly negotiate and renegotiate

their identities in the foreign space. Indeed, shortly before the Hausa soldiers approached Nnaemeka, questioning his identity, he had proudly told Richard: "I come from the Southeastern region, a town called Obosi" (HYS 154) and had gone on and on schooling Richard about his grandmother, Nwanyi Nkwelle, the renowned herbalist who "had the best cure for malaria" (HYS 154). In Nnaemeka's voice, one would easily identify pride and belief in his ancestry. Yet, all of this pride and belief waters down in tragedy as he is faced with the question of living or leaving. He must at once renegotiate his identity. His case is even more tragic as both options are unavailable to him – whether he accepts or denies his identity, he is no less condemned to death. This is just as A. N. Akwanya points out, wherein man is "trapped in his fate and cannot escape it no matter what" (50).

The tragedy of the diasporic experience for the Igbo is encapsulated in the agonizing negotiation of identity – a struggle was embracing the host society often means sacrificing one's indigenous heritage. In this internal conflict, the act of integration morphs into a painful choice: to adapt and blend in or to remain true to an ancestral identity that marks one as other. This constant tension, where every compromise on identity can lead to loss or even fatal consequences, underscores a broader narrative of cultural dislocation. The process of identity negotiation, therefore, is not merely a matter of social adaptation, but a profound and tragic battle for self-preservation in the face of overwhelming external pressures.

Conclusion

This study examines the tragic dimensions of identity negotiation among the Igbo, drawing on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a primary text. It reveals how the pressures of domestic diaspora force Igbo individuals to compromise their indigenous identity in order to integrate into the host society. The text provides vivid examples of this painful duality, with characters adopting external markers such as dressing as in the other tribes' cultural wears to blend into a society where their native identity is often devalued. Such duality highlight that the act of assimilation requires a deliberate shedding or suppression of ancestral traits, marking a profound internal conflict between cultural authenticity and the pragmatic need for survival.

Furthermore, the study underscores that this negotiation is not a transient adjustment but a deep-seated tragedy central to the Igbo diasporic experience. *Half of a Yellow Sun* offers poignant reflections on this dilemma to illustrate the enduring connection to an ancestral root that is inevitably compromised in the pursuit of acceptance. The narrative suggests that the act of identity transformation, necessary for adapting to new social realities, carries with it a significant loss. This analysis of Adichie's text ultimately reveals that the tragedy of domestic diaspora lies in the inescapable tension between embracing a host identity and preserving the intrinsic cultural legacy of the Igbo people.

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